

R. & R. Clark Ltd

'FRIEND! You stand on sacred ground! This is a printing office!' These were the first words to catch the eye of a visitor who paused at the inquiry counter of the well-known firm of Edinburgh printers, R. & R. Clark, Ltd., of Brandon Street. 'Sacred ground', perhaps, is no exaggeration to use about any printing office, for printing has been called 'the art preservative, of all arts'.

Robert Clark, son of a Montrose solicitor, who started work in a law printer's office in Edinburgh at the age of 13, began it all. When he was 21 he took the plunge, borrowed £200, and moved into a workshop at No. 13 George Street. In November 1864 he set up with his own hands, and printed on a small machine, a circular which was sent out to those connected with the law in Edinburgh, 'soliciting their attention'. He pointed out that, after eight years experience in an extensive law establishment in the city and knowledge of the trade in some of the printing offices in London, he had now commenced business as a law printer.

It was a struggle at first for competition, even in those days, was severe. Then orders for Court of Session and other law work began to come in. The business grew, until more larger premises had to be taken over at 42 Hanover Street.

Robert Clark was ambitious, however, and did not remain satisfied with this. One day he packed his bag and, leaving the business in charge of his foreman, travelled down to London. With true Scots perspicacity and thoroughness, he eventually made contact with some of the biggest publishers, particularly Macmillan's, and on his return to Edinburgh with a number of book orders, he began a tradition from which the firm he founded never departed. Clarks prided themselves on never having a traveller in the whole of their hundred years existence: the 'traveller' had always been the head of the firm. It is recorded in Clark's diary that his ambition was to do work of the best possible quality, to give the most efficient service, and to charge the highest possible price.

That first trip to London of Robert Clark was the start of the 'printing of books' for which the firm was famous. When he died in March 1894 at the age of 69, he left a fortune and a business which was called upon by the biggest publishers in Britain. Almost until the end of his life he took a personal hand in the printing. Fair and friendly to his employees, he could be firm too. There was a long list of 'Office Rules' which Clark evolved in the early days. Fines from one penny to one shilling were imposed for various offences. If compositors left without correcting proofs or making provision for them being done, they incurred a fine of 3d. Rule 12 reads:— 'Anyone throwing types, furniture, or any other article, and all persons fighting or struggling in the office, shall be fined 6d. Making unnecessary noise, 3d each.' And the next rule was: 'No smoking allowed, under a fine of 1s for each offence'.

Robert Clark was had the reputation of being a man who kept his word. In 1871, when there was a major strike in the printing industry, he angrily demanded from his compositors if they had any complaints 'with him'. They replied that they had not, and when he asked if that was the case, why they were striking, he received the reply 'Because it is our Union'. Clark responded 'You will be sorry for it, because I will train women to set type'. He kept his word, and he himself trained Fanny MacPherson, who became the first woman compositor in Britain, possibly in the world. She passed on her knowledge to other women, and remained with the firm for over sixty years. She died at the age of 84.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century Robert Clark was producing books which are recognised in the trade as among the finest examples of printing. In 1883 the firm was responsible for printing *Don John of Austria*, two large volumes with beautiful illustrations from woodcuts and the elaborate chapter initials in red—a colour which is still referred to in the business as 'Don John red'. Clark himself stood over his workmen while this and another of his masterpieces, *The Royal House*

of Stuart, with forty plates in colour, came off the machines.

The firm printed the works of both Robert Louis Stevenson and Sir Walter Scott. It was at this period, for example, that Clark's began to print direct for Robert Louis Stevenson — including famous early works such as *Travels with a Donkey* and *Virginibus Puerisque*. R. L. S. used to write notes from his house in Heriot Row: one message read; 'I am back in my native Edinburgh. accompanied by my native catarrh. Will you please send some one round to take instructions about something I want printed,' and the letter was signed 'Yours and the catarrh's, R. L. S'. A great success was an edition known as *The Sixpenny Waverley*, which included all Scott's novels, each in an illustrated paper cover. They were in such demand that hundreds of thousands of copies were printed. Other important works printed by them have included the *Nonesuch Dickens* in twenty three volumes, with all the plates printed from the original illustrations. The valuable *Sussex Edition* of Kipling in thirty five volumes and the *Bombay Kipling* (thirty one volumes), all came off the Clark presses, along with a variety of other literature— fiction, scientific, and medical.

The 'distinguished visitors' ' book gives an indication of other famous authors whose works have been printed by Clark's—Bernard Shaw, Hugh Walpole, Thomas Hardy, H. G. Wells, W. B. Yeats, Osbert and Edith Sitwell, Eric Linklater, Naomi Royde Smith, Sir John Squire, Sean O'Casey, Compton Mackenzie, and Sir James Fraser, OM. The firm had printing Shaw's books for over forty five years. When G.B.S. was approached about the ten Shaw 'Penguins', published to celebrate his hundredth birthday, he made a stipulation that 'Clark's of Edinburgh must do the printing'. The firm turned out 100,000 copies of each volume in record time.

Eleven years before Robert Clark died, he bought the site at Brandon Street, where the present imposing building still stands, now occupied by Standard Life. Important reference books like *Who's Who* were, for fifty years, produced at Brandon Street, while the *Geographical Magazine* was planned in the office and printed there for many years. In the firm's centenary year of 1946, the ownership of the company was gifted to the University of Edinburgh. In 1962 it was taken over by the Thyne Group and then, after a management buy-out in 1979 became part of the ill-fated Clark-Constable merger which ceased trading a few years later.

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