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WILLIAM MAXWELL

AN ADDRESS TO
THE EDINBURGH
TYPOGRAPHIA

30 OCTOBER 1935

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DELIVERED TO THE

Edinburgh Typographia

WEDNESDAY 30th OCTOBER, 1935

by

WILLIAM MAXWELL

J.P., F.R.S.E.

EDINBURGH

HERIOT-WATT COLLEGE

1936

An Address

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I AM HONOURED BY THE INVITATION YOU HAVE GIVEN me to deliver the Inaugural Address at the opening of your Forty-Eighth Session.

The Edinburgh Typographia was instituted forty-eight years ago, and I believe its original purpose was to be purely educative—to devise ways and means of imparting to young printers a fuller knowledge of the technicalities of their craft than they could acquire by workshop training, practice, and experience, no matter how good these might be. This particular line of activity passed out of the control of the Typographia when these classes were taken over by the Heriot-Watt College some thirty years ago or thereby; but the passage of thirty years has only gone to show that the influence of the ideal so admirably conceived and so effectively executed becomes more and more virile with age increase; for there are many parts of the world in which still persist the teaching and the inspiration of your original classes. I am reminded of, and I interject here, an experience of 1919 which has no connection with printing, but which has an illustrative bearing upon persistence. I was travelling on the West Highland Railway, and got into conversation with a New Zealand soldier of about twenty-five years of age. He was on his final leave before repatriation, and wanted to visit Glenfinnan, the Lochaber home of his ancestors. I ascertained that not his father and mother, not his grandfather and grandmother, not even his great-grandparents, but those of a generation earlier had been the original emigrators. He was of the fifth generation removed from those who had given up the

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crofter's struggle. And yet his mother tongue was the Gaelic language, and I left him on the platform conversing fluently, in that wonderfully beautiful and wonderfully expressive tongue, with Angus Macpherson, who was another descendant from the original stock of 150 years earlier. He had told me during our conversation how nothing was spoken at his mother's fireside but Gaelic, and that when he married and had children they would also have Gaelic for their mother tongue. And I believe that those I have met in many printing offices in U.S.A. and Canada, who spoke to me of the Edinburgh Typographia, are passing on the influence that still remains with them from the inspiration of more than a generation ago, and that the name of Typographia will still pass on. It is three years since my last visit to the States, but I was vividly reminded of some of my meetings there when three weeks ago I spent a few hours in London with one whose name will forever be associated with the beginnings of Edinburgh's great reputation for technical training in the printing trade. I refer to George W. Jones, now seventy-five, and not to be blamed for being, at that age, somewhat less virile than he used to be. He spent quite a time telling me anecdotes of men, both employing and employed, whom he had met in New York, Philadelphia, Washington, Boston, Chicago, and right across the American continent to San Francisco, and who all paid a tribute of gratitude to Edinburgh Typographia (and its successors in the great task, the Heriot-Watt College) for the seeds that had been sown in them, and which had germinated and come to full fruition in love of their craft. It is said that no sound that is uttered is ever lost, but that its vibrations go on and on into infinity. Gentlemen, the good deeds that your society has performed are similarly perpetuating themselves, and no matter what changes take place in method or technique, the foundation that was so well and truly laid forty-eight years ago is sound enough to bear the superstructure that continues to be piled on top of it.

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And that brings me to the first thing I want to say to-night. You call yourselves *Typographia*. The term does not find a place in the dictionary, but it is obviously derived from typography. Typography is the art of handling types. A typographer is one who handles types, but he is also given a sub-title—A PRINTER. I want therefore to give *typographia* the fully extended connotation of one who has to do with any of the processes of putting print upon paper—typography, for my present purpose (although I reserve the right to reverse my argument as I have done before, and to claim for it its narrower meaning), includes the typesetter, the proof reader, the stereotyper, and the machine minder. But again I go back on all that to this extent, that type itself is the fundamental in all letterpress printing, and that without a knowledge of type and type faces, without a flair for a proper choice and for a proper arrangement of type, all the efforts of the craftsmen who follow, no matter what their skill, are as nothing—the job or the book can never be what it should be; and there is no reason in the world why it should not be and continue to be a thing of beauty and a constant joy, even with changing fashions in taste and ideas. And I suggest, ladies and gentlemen, that you are the custodians of a tradition: that to you and to your successors is committed the task—the spiritual as distinct from the active and the practical and the technical task—of maintaining and perpetuating the work of *Edinburgh Typographia*, a work begun humbly, but from which has developed the magnificent printing school we now have in this building, already grand, but to be of much greater grandeur when it is finished in 1930-something, when its distinguished Principal expects some relaxation from the excess of labour and reorganisation which has been his lot for the past few years, and will still be for some years to come. I am sure the Vice-Chairman of the Governors will permit me to join his name in this aspiration, for he also, although not so close to the actual job as Principal Smail, has devoted himself unsparingly and with

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ever-increasing enthusiasm to the great task ever since its inception.

I have charged the Edinburgh Typographia to be the custodians of a great tradition, and I must not shirk the task of telling you how I think you might be able to carry that responsibility. For many years you have provided a very delightful, very entertaining, and always, in greater or less degree, educative series of lectures. I know the difficulty of getting capable people to lecture upon set subjects, but I wonder whether when next you are framing your syllabus, you could achieve within that syllabus a few,—say three or four in your session,—a few lectures that are more definitely craft lectures, lectures on typography and typographers, keeping in mind that the real typographer was the man who not only printed but designed or had designed for him his own types, such as Baskerville, Cobden Sanderson, William Morris, or St John Hornby. In the study of these great men, their types and their printed books, there is wonderful fascination, and more wonderful inspiration. I have been looking at one of the delightful volumes issued by the Stationers' Company containing reprints of their series of craft lectures for the year, and find that these numbered six, comprising (1) The Craft of the Printer; (2) How Maps are made; (3) Printing Paper; (4) Bookbinding; (5) Advertising; and (6) Book Collecting. I commend this suggestion to the Typographia. I hope I am not casting any aspersions on their capacity if I make the further suggestion that if the task of serving such a bill of fare is too great for them, they might consider providing it jointly with the Heriot-Watt College. That is all I want to say on the subject of your society.

I have frequently used the word inspiration. I wonder if I may have the temerity to attempt to provide some of that measure of inspiration; for I feel that no matter how keen any of us may be on our jobs, we want our fires periodically rekindled. We want to get or to make new opportunities of seeing visions and dreaming dreams—we want to be 'gingered up.'

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I am saying nothing new when I remind you of the greatness of the printer's craft. This craft gave us the *Gutenberg 42-line Bible*, to which such patient ingenuity and forethought were devoted that in order to get spacing and colour approximating closely to the work of the best scribes of the fifteenth century, Gutenberg had to have in his lower case alphabet no fewer than about 240 letters, including ligatures, contractions, and abbreviations, to do the work that we have to do with thirty-one; but his super equipment enabled him to achieve the perfect spacing which the best printers of to-day try for, but, under our more mechanical limitations, fail to get. When Mr George Jones lectured here at the opening of one of our book exhibitions, he made reference to Gutenberg, as he never fails to do out of his reverence for that greatest of all printers. I think he explained that his reference to Gutenberg was rather lengthy because his Bible is the greatest fact in the history of our craft, and also the greatest source of inspiration and encouragement to craft mastery that the modern printer possesses. I do not altogether agree with our old friend. The difference between him and me lies in that he is steeped in the incunabula which he has been able to collect, while I more humbly have aspired to possess examples of the great modern productions, from which I have derived much education and intense pleasure. I am going to refer to some of my own possessions in the hope that I may stimulate book consciousness, type consciousness, and beauty consciousness, and I am hopeful that the members of the Typographia may soon have the opportunity of paying frequent visits to the library of fine printing which is gradually accumulating in the Heriot-Watt College. These books will well repay careful study. Many of them are very valuable, and can only be handled (if at all) with great care and reverence.

My first incursion into book-collecting was induced by the birth of the Nonesuch Press, and I can well recall the feeling of pleasure that ran through me when I acquired *The Poems of*

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Andrew Marvell published in 1923. The Nonesuch Press had begun two years earlier than that, and I set about a search for the earlier volumes, getting them after some difficulty, and then making a point of getting everything they published. I then began to fly at higher game, and my first really big thrill was in becoming the possessor of one of the Ashendene Press folios—the *Spenser Poems*, truly a magnificent volume in black and red with glossaries interspersed in light blue, printed on handmade paper, the binding being brown cowhide back and vellum sides, over I think oak boards quarter of an inch thick. The type is Mr St John Hornby's own, and was designed for him by Emery Walker and Sydney Cockerell on the basis of the type used by Sweynheim and Pannartz for the three books printed by them at Subiaco in 1465 before they moved to Rome. It may interest you to hear how the items in connection with the creation of this type by the firm of Walker and Cockerell were expressed in their account rendered to Mr Hornby in 1901. The account appears in facsimile in the last work to be issued from the Ashendene Press, and a copy of this volume is now in the printing library here. The first two items are quite prosaic and are abbreviated:—

Photographing in British Museum Subiaco

Lactantius	£30 0 0
Paid Mr Prince for cutting steel punches	56 11 6
Account from Miller and Richard for proportion of cost of making 108 matrices	13 10 0
To writing disagreeable letter to M. & R. on the above and paid stamp	0 0 1
To taking lunch with you many times and at great length	0 0 0
To various interviews, letters, consultations, messengers, cabs, and omnibuses	0 0 5
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	£100 2 0
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By the use of the 1d and the 5d the account came to £100, 2s., but Emery Walker had not yet got to the round figure of £100, which was apparently his object, so there is a facetious deduction of one-tenth per cent to bring out the net sum of £100; and apparently St John Hornby did not desire to give his friend Emery Walker any chance of repenting his 2s. deduction, for the account bears the date 9th November 1901 and the receipt is dated 11th November. It is interesting to note that this type was based upon printing done as I have already said in 1465, that Walker and Cockerell made the photographs, that the famous punch cutter Prince cut the steel punches, and that a fount cast on greatprimer body was cast by our own Miller and Richard in Edinburgh. In the Bibliography volume referred to I would draw your attention to the leaf of vellum inserted showing a collotype of the specimen types in the various stages of their making. In passing it is interesting to note that St John Hornby's pressman, H. Gage-Cole, served his apprenticeship with William Morris at the Kelmscott Press, and as a boy had a part in the printing of the *Kelmscott Chaucer*. He also worked at the Doves Press, for his name appears as the pressman of Cobden-Sanderson's famous tract *The Book Beautiful*.

It is a matter of great regret that the Ashendene Press with the issue of its *Bibliography* has closed down, and so disappears the last of the great presses. St John Hornby's work will go down to history as of the finest ever done in this country—even finer than William Morris's, as in the Ashendene there is nothing archaic, and the type is of the kind that he who runs may read. The printer, after paying a very high tribute to Bruce Rogers and Francis Meynell, ends his foreword with a modest reference to his consciousness of the fact that he has fallen far short of the ideal and adds

But the striving after an ideal, even if it does not meet with general acceptance, is an incentive and a help to those that come after. The last thing that a printer craftsman should desire is slavish

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imitation of his work. For of printing, as of every other craft, it may with truth be said that 'the letter killeth, but the spirit maketh alive.'

Various other books were gradually added to my collection, including such monumental works as Stanley Morison's folios, Bartlett's *Typographic Treasures of Europe*, and many more, until my library on books of printing became, for a private possessor, fairly comprehensive. I might have stopped there, for I had achieved the greater part of my original purpose. But in these books I read of other books, or saw reproductions of their pages or title pages, and my book cupidity increased and very soon was growing by what it fed upon. In short, to use a very effective Americanism, I had got the bug—the book-collecting bug—and I had it and still have it badly. There is no retreat from being a booklover. It matters not whether you can afford it. Edward Stone of Roanoke, Virginia, once wrote to an old friend of mine, W. E. Rudge of Mount Vernon, New York, a bonnie printer, alas no longer with us, to tell him of the troubles that had been his as a book collector, and he entitled his letter—*All Hope abandon, Ye who enter here*. I can endorse that title from my own experience, and I am utterly incapable of tossing away a catalogue of Maggs, or Dulau, or Quaritch without having a peep inside,—a peep which becomes a careful examination, while all the time I devoutly hope I shall find nothing to tempt me. And as the drunkard cannot resist the public-house, neither can I conquer the temptation to invade my favourite bookshops in London, where I always get an extraordinarily friendly reception. My first remark is generally, 'Please note, I am here only to shake hands—I am not buying anything.' Instead of being suspicious of the ready acceptance of these words, I innocently proceed to general talk. But very soon I hear 'Oh, by the way, I'd like you to look at this lovely Walt Whitman,' and there is thrust into my hand a beautiful

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small folio, 18 point type, hand-made paper, bound in oak boards with red niger morocco back, one of only 400 copies printed by Grabhorn of San Francisco, with wood cuts by Valenti Angelo. But I am brave. My resistance is perfect. In short I am adamant. But I think of it every day, and when in London the following week I buy it; and instead of being ashamed of my weakness I am intensely happy. And then comes down from the shelf a perfectly beautiful copy of *Salustio* in Spanish, one of the most splendid productions of the Spanish press, Madrid 1772, with wonderfully fascinating engraved headpieces, initials, tailpieces, maps, plans, and ancient implements and coins. 'But I know no Spanish—I can't read the book;' to which comes the reply, 'You don't have to read it; just look at this map, or at these engravings of different types of lance heads;' and, to make a long story short, I fall once more and am again perfectly happy. And just about this time arrives the Nonesuch Press edition of Dante's *La Divina Comedia*, printed in Italian and English in parallel columns, in the italics of Antonio Blado, with Poliphilus roman capitals, with reproductions of forty-two of the exquisite drawings of Sandro Botticelli, printed by Daniel Jacomet, the whole bound in full vellum stained flame colour. But I do not regard this as any fall from grace, for was it not ordered long ago—had I not indeed years before placed a definite order with the Nonesuch Press for a copy of everything they issue? Talking of Nonesuch, here is their latest opus just arrived, size 11 $\frac{3}{8}$ by 7 by 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches thick—800 pages, sundour sides, vellum back stained light blue—*The History of Herodotus of Halicarnassus*, with 170,000 words of notes by A. W. Lawrence, wood engravings by le Campion and maps by Tom Poulton, text type Nonesuch Plantin, 11 on 14 point, Perpetua with Felicity italics. This book is an extraordinary achievement, and I wish I could take you over it page by page to show you the delightful ingenuity displayed in planning every unit opening. Here is a page whose text is only 18 ems wide by 30 deep, with six columns

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of notes set on 6 point and perfectly readable, a column on left of verso 50 ems deep by 9 ems wide, and a similar to the right of recto, and between the ends of the two side columns, four 9 em columns of a depth of 10 ems each, two together equalling the width of the text above. Then we have an opening where the text is 19 wide by 22 deep, the rest of the full measure being completed by the notes. And so on throughout, the notes being accommodated down the sides and below in different measure, or down the sides only or along the foot only, a perfect triumph of the overcoming of the almost infinite difficulties of composition and upmake.

Excuse this long digression—I am just rambling along, and these irrelevancies persist in coming into my mind. But they are not irrelevancies. I want in so far as I can to infect you with the same virus as inflicts itself upon me for good or ill—I say good, my wife with a pretended knowledge of the bearing power of the floors of our house, says ill. I remember a friend who had the same bug as I have, though perhaps in less degree, telling me of his wife's attitude to his books, and how on one occasion when she was more than usually critical, he remarked to her rather acidly but I fear very truthfully, 'You take care of what you say, and understand that I *could* live without a wife—I could *not* live without books.' Ah well, he is dead these 15 years and she is still alive, and is very proud of her well-stocked library.

But I must really get back to my books. Among these there is the *Nonesuch Bible* with Stephen Gooden's copper line engravings; but that was only a foretaste of the Bible I really wanted and for some years I toyed with the idea of acquiring the *Doves Bible*, inspecting or finding out about each copy that came on the market. Here I was deliberately courting temptation for I wanted the book. The slump, which we all regret, gave me my opportunity, and a copy came along in 1931 at a price which I could not afford but was willing to pay. I will not weary you with the story

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of Cobden Sanderson and Emery Walker and the Doves Press, or the final tragedy by which the type, the punches, and the matrices were forever lost; but I will say this, that that type, even eliminating the sentiment induced by the tragedy, produced a book that ranks as one of the most beautiful books of all time. Its arrangement in the pages of the *Doves Bible* in five volumes adds a physical joy to the reading of the word of God.

But I had a still greater ambition, and that was to be possessor of the *Kelmscott Chaucer*. It happened in this year of grace, and I have brought it with me to-night. I am leaving it in the personal charge of Principal Smail, and should like him to display it in a glass case; but if any of you would like to come forward and have a reverent and careful inspection of its glorious pages, with the Morris borders and the Burne-Jones drawings engraved by Hooper, you are welcome. We are all indebted to William Morris for the impetus given to the private press movement in the nineteenth century, and continuing into the twentieth. Much of his work was anachronous, resulting from his interest in medievalism; but the *Kelmscott Chaucer* is a superb monument to this medievalism, and stands alone in its combination of magnificence and archaism. And now comes another Bible, the *Lectern Bible*, designed by Bruce Rogers and printed by the Oxford University Press. The type used is 22 point Centaur, cast on 19 point body, the designs of many of the individual characters being modified to ensure perfect spacing, and it is machine set on the Monotype. Here is no medievalism—it is entirely modern and it is made for reading. It is only a few weeks since it was published. I have brought my copy with me, and if Principal Smail will agree to keep it for a period, I shall be very happy to lend it also for exhibition—again in a glass case, Principal. The contrast between the Chaucer and this Bible—the one only readable with difficulty, and the other both legible and readable—reminds me of an address by Francis Meynell to the Royal Institution. He then

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produced an argument (which was both ingenious and sound) in favour of creating a slight difficulty in the reading of anything that has to be read with care for an intelligent grasp of the matter. He said he often printed poetry in italics, not only because they have a lighter and perhaps a more poetical and ornamental allusion or suggestiveness, but because the very slight difficulty there is in reading italics line after line has a beneficent slowing up effect. He argued that Morris realised that his prose romances read better in his own types than they do in reprints, because his undoubtedly difficult letter forms give something of the slow rhythm, something of the decoration of his prose. I think that expression of Francis Meynell, 'ornamental allusion or suggestiveness,' is the key to the door of success that has attended the Nonesuch Press productions. His aim was legibility and readableness—he insisted that readableness does not require 'period' printing, but it does involve allusive or suggestive design.

I could carry on talking of my books until you were wearied—perhaps you are already;—I am not, because the whole world of books is to me so intensely absorbing—but I want you to realise or to appreciate why it is that I deal to such an extent with what you may regard as the exotic in printing. Quite a number of the private press people began as amateurs, and continued to call themselves amateurs; but it was they who lifted printing out of the deadly dull rut into which it had fallen. It was their departure from the orthodox, and what was the traditional of 100 years ago, that kindled a brilliant torch to light the way and guide the feet of all printers into a path that led up the hill of ambition, until to-day when even in the low-priced elementary school book or in the ordinary novel you get books whose typographic design is worthy to rank with some of the typographic triumphs of bygone days. The machine age imposes limitations. Our types are set by machine, but the influence of technical training stands as a buffer against operators becoming completely tame and dependent upon

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their overseers. Someone has said that it would be an unhappy fate if apart from their desire to get an honest living they all became merely conscientious machine minders, more interested in the mechanical efficiency of their machines than in the fact that they are creating something that is to have an influence upon the intellect of the school child or the most distinguished professor. When the Monotype was introduced into the office which I have the privilege to control, I exercised all the influence I had, and some I did not have, that as far as was humanly possible, machine setting was to be as good as hand setting. As a matter of fact it is better, and I see no reason why the quest of the perfect book should be in any way hindered by the fact of the machine. An examination of the *Lectern Bible* will prove my assertion. The introduction of the machine marks a definite advance in civilization. Similarly the revival of an interest in typography has given us during the last half century books of such an outstanding beauty that in the creation of the typographical monument there has also been created something that is a barometer of civilization. Orcutt asserts that by a discovery of the economic or political conditions which combined to make a great book stand out from other products of its period, we can learn contemporaneous history and become acquainted with the personalities of the people and the manners and customs of its times. Only a few months ago I gave details here of a striking instance of the personality that may be enshrined in a book. I told you of how I had at once identified the printer of a book of which I had never before heard. The fact shone out of the pages that it was printed by Robert Clark, and it bore a date which was twenty-four years before I was born and forty-three years before I entered the printing trade, and I was looking upon the book for the first time at an interval of eighty-one years from the date of its printing. Orcutt goes on to show how the curve of supremacy in printing, beginning of course with Gutenberg, which gave Germany a

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brief triumph, passed successively through Italy, France, the Netherlands, England, France, and back to England, and argues that the typographical monuments of the world are not accidental, but the natural results of cause and effect. In certain cases the production of fine books made the city of their origin a centre of culture, and brought lustre to the country; in others the great master printers were attracted to a city because of its literary atmosphere, and by their labours added to the reputation it had already attained. This latter idea is well demonstrated in our own great city, for it is undoubtedly due to its early reputation as a literary and cultural centre that printing in Edinburgh has reached the pinnacle to which it has climbed as the result of persistent effort during the last century and a half.

But I find I have digressed. A few minutes ago I was trying to connect my references to the fine private press books with our own years of grace. It is definitely because of the impetus given to us by the work of these so called amateurs that there are being produced to-day with only a comparatively small degree of conscious effort, books that are worthy to rank with these typographic monuments. Sad to relate, much of the present day product on machine made and so called antique paper will have mouldered to dust centuries before the older masterpieces on vellum or on practically permanent hand-made paper show any signs of deterioration; but for this generation and a few more there will still remain for their inspiration (and let us hope for their education to something still better) printing examples which we leave behind us with a not unjustifiable measure of pride.

And let us not be afraid of the machine. Listen to this quotation from Eric Gill's delightful little book *Printing and Piety*—

The man of business who is also the man of taste, and he of taste who is also man of business will, in their blameless efforts to

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earn a living (for using one's wits is blameless, and earning a living is necessary) find many ways of giving a humane look to machine-made things or of using the machinery and the factory to turn out, more quickly and cheaply, things whose proper nature is derived from human labour.

On that note I close. It is a message to us of to-day. It is a text that should never be forgotten in the future. It is a challenge to the present and future members of Edinburgh Typographia, of which I am so proud to be Honorary President, and which office, as I once before said, I hope to hold for as long as it was adorned by my greatly distinguished predecessor, Walter B. Blaikie, of deeply cherished memory.

COMPOSED AND PRINTED BY THE
STUDENTS OF THE DEPARTMENT OF PRINTING
IN THE HERIOT-WATT COLLEGE, EDINBURGH

THE TEXT IS SET ON TWELVE POINT 'MONOTYPE' FOURNIER