

Hana Aach,
Impressions:
Stories of the Nation's Printer, Early Years to 1900

ELIZABETH HULSE

Aach, Hana. *Impressions: Stories of the Nation's Printer, Early Years to 1900*. Ottawa: Canadian Government Publishing Centre, Supply and Services Canada, 1990. iii, 178 pp., numerous ill. Paper \$25.95, ISBN 0-660-12110-7, DSS cat. no. P35-30/1-1990 E. (Disponible en français sous le titre *Impressions : la petite histoire de l'imprimeur national, de l'époque des pionniers à l'année 1900*.)

An act of the Canadian Parliament in 1886 established the Queen's Printer as a deputy minister at the head of a new department, responsible for all official printing, and paved the way for the Government Printing Bureau, opened three years later. This handsome volume celebrates the centennials of the two events.

Hana Aach traces the evolution of the office of Queen's Printer from the first government printers in Halifax, Quebec, and Upper Canada in the late eighteenth century to the civil service post of 1886. She tells a complex story, part political, part biographical, part technological, in which patronage and scandal frequently featured. An attempt to reform the system in 1869 was only partly successful. Printing was still contracted out under tender, and when a huge bid-rigging scheme was revealed some years later, a parliamentary committee recommended the establishment of a government printing facility. Controversy did not end with opening of the bureau in 1889, but by the turn of the century it was recognized as one of the finest establishments of its kind in the world.

Of particular interest to the readers of this journal is the chapter "Working in the New Printing Bureau." The plant boasted "everything that modern ingenuity has contributed to the printer's trade." Aach provides descriptions of equipment used in the printing, stereotyping, and binding operations and where it was purchased, based on contemporary sources. Early photographs of the composing and press rooms, and engravings of presses and other equipment, presumably taken from nineteenth-century trade catalogues, illustrate the text. Another chapter is devoted to typesetting machines, introduced at the bureau in 1891.

Impressions is a pleasure to look at. It is

well designed and lavishly illustrated. Photographs of wooden type form the initial letters of each chapter. Other printers' and binders' artifacts are scattered through the text. Original documents, such as a 1764 invoice from Brown and Gilmore of Quebec, are reproduced, as are contemporary mastheads, cartoons, and title pages of government publications. Margins are generous, and a dark red band frames each page at the top and bottom. Facing the chapter openings are quotations, beginning with John Graves Simcoe's famous statement that a printer was "indispensibly [sic] necessary" to the infant government of Upper Canada in 1791. Profiles of notable figures, such as the two Desbarats, George-Paschal and George Edward; William Augustus Leggo, inventor of the first half-tone process; and Brown Chamberlin and Samuel Edward Dawson, first holders of the position of Queen's Printer after 1886, are set off from the main narrative by a contrasting background.

Although written and presented for a popular audience, the book has been well researched from primary and secondary sources. Of importance for the period after 1886 have been the annual reports of the Department of Public Printing and Stationery, those of the parliamentary committees on printing, and the committee on public accounts which investigated the operation of the bureau in 1891, debates in the House of Commons, and personal correspondence. For the earlier period the author has relied to a greater extent on secondary sources, some more dependable than others. The biography of Samuel Thompson in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* is not cited as a source, but Aach repeats the incorrect date for Thompson's obtaining of the government printing contract (1858 rather than 1859) given there.

Despite the care that has gone into *Impressions*, the work suffers from several limitations. The most serious of these is the decision to end the story at 1900, only thirty-odd years after Confederation and a mere decade after the opening of the printing bureau. How did the facility adapt to accelerated technological change in the twentieth century? What political crises and scandals did it face? Employees

from the early half of this century who are still living might have provided interesting anecdotes about its more recent history.

Given that, as the author states, this is "not an academic history," the decision not to include detailed endnotes is understandable. Instead the sources are presented in narrative form in a section entitled "Further Reading." However, the lack of a general bibliography leaves the reader struggling to find the first, and

full, citation for a particular reference. For example, the explanation for "DPPS, 1889," cited as a source for the chapter "Working in the New Printing Bureau," first appears four pages earlier, and the date for the article in the *Inland Printer* in the middle of a paragraph two pages back. Finally, an index – if only to personal names – would have added greatly to the value of this book, even for the casual reader.

The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Montreal *The 1920s: Age of the Metropolis*

DIANNE REID

Chief Curator:

Jean Clair

Guest Curators:

Helen Adkins, Germany

Jean-Louis Cohen, Architecture and Urbanism

Romy Golan, France, United States

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Rosalind Repall, Decorative Arts

Christopher Phillips, Photography

Designers:

Exhibition, Michael Lerch

Catalogue, Jean-Pierre Rosier

Duration:

20 June to 10 November, 1991

Publications:

Catalogue, 638 pp., edited by Jean Clair

Somewhere in Paris in the early 1920s an unspecified *maison* "scrapes the sky with its nails/and the skyscraper is only its shadow/in a bathrobe." It is noticed by Dada prophet Tristan Tzara and recorded in *De nos oiseaux* (1923). Tzara's chimerical view of a city in the 1920s invites us into an era in somewhat the same manner as the enormous and exotic painting *Winter, or America* by José María Sert Y Badía, which dazzles the visitor at the head of the stairs leading into *The 1920s: Age of the Metropolis*. There we begin a journey into a decade that seems as determined, as it ever was, to elude us.

Jean Clair, director of the Musée Picasso in Paris, chose the theme "The Metropolis," and chaired the committee of internationally known arts professionals who spent three years assembling the show. Clair wrote the introductory essay to the catalogue, "Red October, Black October," and supervised the selection of the 22 essays composing this very ambitious volume. The exhibition itself presents 729 works by 308 artists and is the largest ever mounted by the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts (MMFA). Designed by Michael Lerch, it makes brilliant use of all the gallery space in the Museum. The labyrinthian layout of large and small galleries greatly enlivens the contents of the show. A music room, complete with player piano performances, provides an appropriate break between the rather severe, if not ominous opening sections and the sorties into cafe life, Art Deco, and the Paris and New York scenes which follow. Because the curators are presenting an era which witnessed the institutionalization of modernism, they are faced with a tension that



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Fig. 1
Christian Dell. Wine Jug,
about 1924. Silver and
ebony, 20.3 x 16.5 cm,
Germany, private
collection. (Courtesy of
Barry Friedmand Ltd.,
New York)