

MAN'S GREATEST INVENTION

Fifth Centennial Of The Discovery Of Printing

ALL books are good books. Even bad books or indifferent books are good books. They mean that someone has thought, and, what is more, someone has been able to prove the fact in black and white. We are not able to tell exactly what animals think, or how they think, if they do think. Most of us believe that they only have emotions, and that thought is very much superior. But even if we are wrong, and our superiority is only in our own imaginings, the animals can produce none of the proof of wisdom, or even of foolishness, that we produce in the printed word.

Man has always wanted to write it down. He has been sensitive to so many more things than the others. And he has had so many more enthusiasms. These he has found it necessary to record in symbols, either because they have excited him into this expression, or because the concrete expression of them has been necessary for the very practical reason that the symbol cut into wood or stone or printed on paper, has been so much more sure of the immortality that man craves for his thoughts and himself.

A Long Time Learning

But he has been a long time learning how to fashion this weapon that arms him so effectively in superiority over all other forms of life. Almost always he has managed to cut crude figures on the handiest materials. The wall of his cave was nearest to his tyro hand, but he soon learned to better that, probably about the time he became covetous of his thoughts, and regretted leaving them behind when

some huskier beast claimed the shelter that had been his home and his library.

His progression from that first amateur method has been spread over the centuries. The method that used many pictorial symbols for so many expanding thoughts he had to replace with alphabets that could be adapted by spelling to express in words nearly all



THE FIRST ADVERTISEMENT: The panel at the back of this engraving contains the first advertisement—by W. Caxton

his thoughts. He learned to write them down and discovered ink and paper that would preserve what he wrote.

But this was still a slow method, and life was becoming each year an affair of more and more speed. There was no time for all this endless writing and copying, not enough hands in the world for it.

The Final Plunge

So he made his first really great experiment with a machine. Wheels and the hulls of boats, and weapons of war were already known to him. These were important inventions, but they concerned his movement rather than his emotions, and it was not until the fifteenth century that he took the final fatal plunge into the mass-production of thought.

When Laurenz Janzoon Coster, of Haarlem, began experimenting with movable types between 1420 and 1430, when Gutenberg shortly afterwards established the still unaltered basic theory of printing, when Caxton took the idea to England in 1476, and established the missionary tradition that Colenso brought to New Zealand in 1834, these men made all thoughts available to all men and put all men at the mercy of all men's thoughts.

To Mark the Centennial

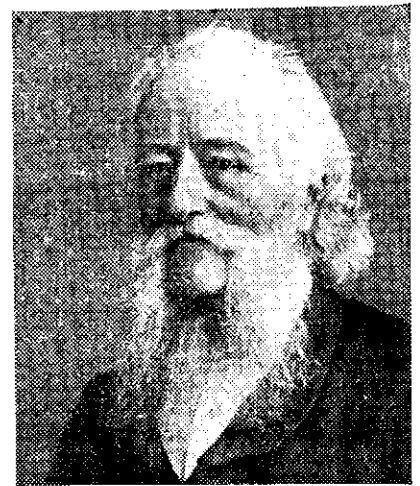
To commemorate the fifth centennial of this singular achievement, the New Zealand Libraries' Association and the

Wellington Club of Printing House Craftsmen have arranged for this month a series of exhibitions in the Turnbull, General Assembly, and public libraries of the Capital. It will open on November 25 and go on until November 30. After that date only the three city libraries will hold their special exhibits. Radio is helping to mark the occasion with a series of lectures.

Costly and Slow

Although printing from cut-out blocks was known a very long time before Coster, Gutenberg, Schoffer, and Fust perfected the theory of printing from type, the limitations of the method were considerable. It was costly, as it still is, and slow. It required a practised craftsman. It was certainly beyond the reach of the common people. The cheap and fast printing method we use to-day is attributed mainly to Gutenberg, who established a press in Mainz in 1448, with the financial assistance of Fust.

It is strange that these men who first established the best practical method of keeping records, have left no close record of their own work. Evidently they little suspected that they were making history; that one day printed leaflets out of presses little different in theory from those which they first conceived would one day fall out of the sky on to the towns in which they worked, or that bombs would follow, or



THE REV. WILLIAM COLENSO, who brought the first press to New Zealand in 1834

application to paper, the printers had progressed before Gutenberg to the separately cut piece of type that could be used over and over again according to the requirements of spelling. It was Gutenberg's achievement, not to find a quick way of printing (the idea of the press has remained as simple as it was when Jesus Christ whipped from the temple the men who changed Caesar's stamped coins): but to find a quick way of assembling the material for printing.

A Sweeping Statement

Since Gutenberg there has been no major advance in the art of printing.

That statement is sweeping. There is the rotary press that prints, in banks of six and twelve machines, thousands and hundred-thousands of bulky newspapers an hour. There is the press that prints several colours, the linotype machine that sets the type. But all these things were embodied in the principles known to printers five hundred years ago, and many of them were known five hundred and more years before that. The press is still what it was then, and what the word says it is.

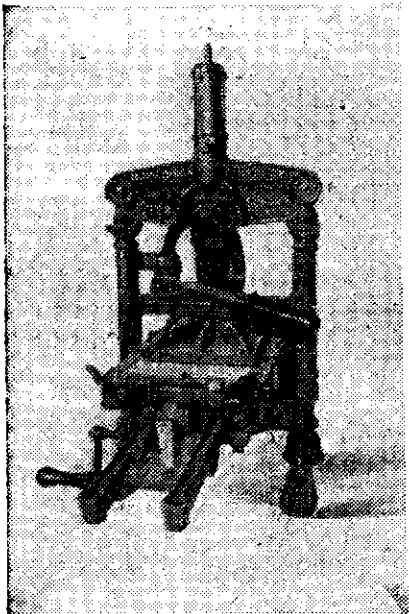
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IF all books are good books, old books are surely the best books of all, in spite of what the circulating libraries may think. The old book is a survivor. Its binding has survived the handling of so many curious fingers, and its pages have survived the turning of so many eager hands.

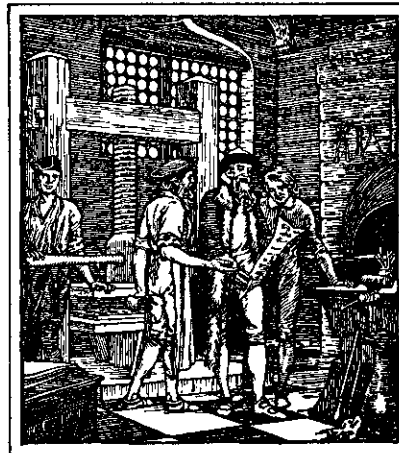
Vellum is the binding that lasts the longest. It does not keep clean. Its yellow is marked where hands have touched it through the years. But it keeps wonderfully soft and remains wonderfully durable.

During this exhibition, for the curious layman, who is not so very much interested in typography, it is this fascination of extreme age that will probably prove most attractive. And he will find vellum covers if he cares to look

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Colenso's second printing press, on exhibition at the Wellington Public Library



GUTENBERG, FUST and SCHOFFER, from an engraving

that the printed word would be used to explain the bombs to a hundred million people at a time.

Gutenberg's Invention

Their main aim seems to have been the production of books resembling the old manuscripts as closely as possible, having the single new advantage of speed and economy.

Gutenberg's invention consisted in making brass moulds by which type could be accurately cast in large quantities. From the wooden block, carved to give a reverse impression on direct