LINTON’S “MASTERS OF WOOD ENGRAVING.”

With an art or craft which embodies several distinct branches of work and study, it is most difficult, if not impossible, to find men who are truly representative of the combined departments of such art or craft. This difficulty is very evident in the manner of bookmaking. There is no record of the life and labour of one who was a past-master in all the crafts that are blended in the complete book, and thus it is we are compelled, in a series of articles dealing with the lives and works of great men concerned in bookmaking, to take such as are guides and philosophers of a particular branch: be it book printing, book binding, or book illustration.

Since our monastic ancestors devoted their spare hours—in many instances their whole lives—to the making of books, the illustration of the text has been, and judging by current evidence, will continue to be, an all important consideration. Taking the subject upon a modern basis of consideration and casting around for a representative master, our selection immediately falls upon the person of W. J. Linton, the wood engraver. He is undoubtedly the father of his art to-day, and no man ever struggled more persistently, yet honestly, to uphold the honour of his profession—assailed though it has been and still is by almost overwhelming odds—than the subject of this notice. His life’s work upon the surface of the boxwood block will always remain as indisputable proof of the necessity for the possession by the wood engraver of high artistic faculties if he is to produce correct representations of the subjects engraved. Further, he has clearly demonstrated that there are sound principles and a solid system applicable to his art. It is this that Linton has struggled continuously to assert, by his writings and through the medium of his own handicraft. His manual of instruction for students, and his larger work, fresh from the press, “The Masters of Wood-Engraving,” have each as the motive of their creation the assertion of the art principles of engraving, particularly in their relation to the modern American school. Early in the manual we are told: “Any lad with good sight and fair and continual practice can become sooner or later an expert mechanic, a close and tolerably satisfactory clearer or carver-out of the spaces between lines drawn on a block, be they ever so small, whether with a knife or with a graver; he may do this to the wonder and admiration of the untaught and unknowing critic, who, finding an almost incomprehensible fineness, or, I would say, closeness together of lines, exclaims, ‘What a beautiful engraving!’ when from first to last it may only afford proof of good sight, much patience, and the exactness of an accomplished mechanic: only that, at the same time it is utterly devoid of beauty as an engraving—indeed, save to excuse the critic’s lack of discrimination, hardly worthy of the name of an engraving. Let us keep that name for works of art only, and so mark the distinction between woodcuts and wood-engravings! . . . .

In thus defining cutting and engraving, let me say again, I am only endeavouring to show the difference between the mechanical and art. It is a vital point.

A Wood Engraver at Work.
From Jost Ammon.

In a long chapter of the manual upon beauty of line the author immediately attacks the new school. He says: “Out of an impressionist school of painting, and subservient to the conditions of the impressionists, has arisen a school of impressionist engraving, the perfection of the imbecile. I find no other word so fit to characterise the process . . . . . Everywhere one hears it said, authoritatively, and repeated, as if there could be no doubt: ‘What a wonderful advance has been lately made in wood-engraving!’ I protest, unhesitatingly and positively—if I know what engraving is, or should be—this vaunted ‘advance’
must be condemned as retrograde and as the degradation of the art. I have cared throughout all my teaching, and endeavoured in my practice to insist upon the recognition of engraving as an art. I find nothing I can honestly call art in the "new departure" or "new development," by whichever name it may be known. I find a most marvellously successful mechanism, which is not an advance in art. Let my reader take any number of the Century or Harper and try if he can discover (except in the portraits and some few other cuts—I cannot remember many) any lines that have beauty or fitness, or any sign of intelligence. Colour is kept admirably; delicacy—that is, fineness, thinness of line—is most remarkable; the often needless, sometimes unhappy, minuteness is astonishing. I am surprised at these accomplishments, which often exceed what I thought possible in wood engraving. It is the triumphant assertion of mechanical skill. What eyes these men must have! What nicety of hand! But then—I have to speak as an engraver. In the prettiest and most successful of these engravings I look in vain for anything to tell me that the engraver had any brains. Forget the lines altogether and it may be possible to like it; but you will not care to look at it again and again. The more closely you examine it the greater will be your disappointment. Does not that of itself condemn it?" 

Thus, throughout his book of instruction, Mr. Linton endeavours to impress upon the mind of the pupil the value of the study upon which he is entering. He wishes it to be clearly understood that though a great many professional wood engravers are merely mechanical workers yet the correct interpretation of colour and shade in line is an art requiring highly cultured instincts and a true perception of all that pertains to the value of a picture.

In order to produce his great, and in all probability final, literary effort, Mr. Linton left his home in America and came to London, where he was in the midst of the necessary authorities upon the subject. For long months he was engaged searching the Library and Print Room of the British Museum, and with the result that many illustrations beyond the reach or cognisance of ordinary students were examined and reproduced in the work. Editions after edition were looked to for the purest impressions, and from these alone photographs were taken, the reproduction being always of the same size as the original in order to give as closely as possible the actual work of the engraver. It is fairly claimed for this grand book that the collection of wood engravings contained therein is unique, and that such a collection has never been attempted and has never been possible until now. "The Masters of Wood Engraving" is a single volume composed of two hundred and twenty-nine pages of text, interspersed with nearly two hundred cuts, and close upon fifty unopened page-subjects. Most of the small cuts are printed upon India paper and have been mounted on the page by the author himself. Considering that there were two hundred of these cuts to be mounted in the hundred copies that comprised the two editions, the stupendousness of the work for a man of Mr. Linton's years can be imagined. The smaller edition (folio, 16½ x 12 inches) each signed and numbered, has been printed and issued to subscribers at a charge of ten guineas. There were certain woodcuts, however, such as Harvey's celebrated "Dentatus" and the cuts from Durer's "Apocalypse" and "Greater Passion," that could only be given in part in the ten guinea edition, therefore an edition of one hundred copies was printed on paper large enough to take the whole of such cuts. This book is 20 x 15 inches, and it contains in addition that rarest and most important of Durer's works in wood, "The Triumphant Car of Maximilian," measuring seven feet and four inches in length with a height of eighteen inches. The price of this edition is twenty guineas. "The Masters of Wood Engraving" will most certainly take its place as a standard authority upon a subject concerning which few books of any great value have as yet been published. The author explains in the preface to his work that his purpose
has been not so much to give an account of the books in which engravings on wood have appeared, as to collect together the finest examples of the art, and to give its history through the exhibition of its master work. This, as yet, had not been done or attempted to any good purpose, although Chatto and others had done valuable work. Briefly his object was to correct a number of misconceptions, to throw out some data difficulty of knowing what was and what was not stencil work. A chapter upon block books raises the important question of whether many old blocks were cut in wood or metal, and then comes an excellent record and commentary on the work of Durer. This is fully illustrated by characteristic examples of that great master's work, and we are enabled to give one of these illustrations through the courtesy of the

The Descent from the Cross.

By Albert Durer.

for accurate judgment, and to give samples of work that have been hitherto out of reach.

The text of the book is divided into two parts, namely, knife work and graver work. The former deals with the beginning of engraving, its progress from the rudest efforts. It is shown that engraving and printing were practised in old days and upon various fabrics. Following the era of playing cards comes the history of the art in Europe, with a complete record of stencilling. The author here explains the

Chiswick Press. Lutzalburger's work is succintly touched upon and the following chapter takes us from Altdorfer to Papillon; part I closing with comments upon knife work in all its bearings. Graver work before the time of Bewick opens part II, and the work of Bewick himself is introduced with an explanation of the general ignorant worship of the renowned artist. In processional order, Clemenl, Nesbit, Branston, and Thomson are marched past, and the latter half of part II deals with what the author styles "aftermath,"
or the beginning of decadence. Harvey’s greatness as an engraver is touched upon together with Samuel Williams’ works. The French and German schools are only lightly dealt with, and the ensuing records of Smith and the author himself, brings the reader up to date. Freehand drawing, mechanical engraving, and wood engraving as a distinct art are enlarged upon, as are also the subjects of tone, texture, and line. An explanation of the difference between the new school and preceding work, with a closing question: “Can wood engraving be revived as an art?” leads to the final chapter upon the two kinds of Chiaroscuro.

Thus closes a most elaborate work, the main contentions of which cannot be gainsayed. Whether the world of letters and art, as existing to-day, will grow into a taste for that which is only true and correct in the forms of illustration, we dare not venture to say, but can only hope that it will be so. However, until this is accomplished, there is no great hope for a general acknowledgment and practice of the Linton school. Mr. Linton has done all that a great teacher can do, and it is only to be hoped that succeeding generations will be so impressed with the great engraver’s principles of work as to return to them, and only endeavour to improve in the matter of execution. While the printed text of our books remains what it is, pure wood engraving is its only true form of illustration, and Linton the only living master and teacher of that form.

A few notes of Mr. Linton’s life will be given in our next issue, together with a notice of his “Poems and Translations,” published by Mr. J. C. Nimmo, by whose permission the portrait of the great master of wood engraving has been reproduced for our pages.

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Mr. Andrew Lang, in his book entitled “The Library,” devotes a chapter to bindings, and his advice to the bibliophile is: “Let old English books, as More’s ‘Utopia,’ have a cover of stamped and blazoned calf. Let the binder clothe the early Rabelais or Marot in the style favoured by Grolier, in leather tooled with geometrical patterns. Let a Moliere or Corneille be bound in the graceful contemporary style of Le Gascon, where the lace-like pattern of the gilding resembles the point lace in which La Fontaine liked to view himself. Let a binding, à la fanfare, in the style of Thouvenier, denote a novelist of the last century; let panelled Russia leather array a folio of Shakspeare, and let English works of a century ago be clothed in the sturdy fashion of Roger Payne.”

Book-lovers have a language of their own. For example, a Bibliopelast is a Bibliophile with a special regard for bookbindings. A Bibliopelast is a book mixer; a Bibliophile is a book美国人 for Bibliophiles; a Biblioklept is a stealer of valuable books. A man who has a collection of choice manuscripts and refuses to let another man consult them is a Bibliopelast. Bibliolatry is the worship of books.

Thomas Maioli, from whose name the well-known style in binding is derived, resided in Italy during the earlier portion of the sixteenth century. He was not a binder, but, like Grolier, a rich bibliophile with a taste for fine bindings. The great beauty of the Maioli bindings lies in the graceful scroll-work finishing.

Binding in which the back is coated with a drying solution of India-rubber, was patented by William Hancock in 1836. It is largely used for music, plate, and single sheet work.

To determine the real size of a bound book, writes Mr. Wm. Blades, find the signature and count the leaves (not pages) to the next. A further test is the binder’s thread in the middle of the sheet: the number of leaves from each thread to the next will give the same result. But these rules do not apply to the old black-letter books and those of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, in which the most satisfactory test is the watermark. The rule is: a folio volume will have all the watermarks in the middle of the page; a quarto has the watermark folded in half on the back of the book, still midway between the top and the bottom; in an octavo it is at the back, but at the top, and often considerably cropped by the binder’s plough; and a 12mo and 8vo have the watermark on the fore-edge.

The finest bindings of the sixteenth century were those collected by Canevaro, physician to Pope Urban. They are easily distinguished by a medallion worked in gold, silver, and colour, with a small device and motto, “Libri declaro.” These bindings are unsurpassed. There are several fine specimens in the British Museum.

Some of the finest specimens of artistic decorative printing done in Italy are the little books offered to people upon the occasion of their marriages. They are generally in the form of an original poem, an essay, or a historical dissertation on marriage customs, written by some friend of the bridegroom.

Books should be kept in a warm and dry place, otherwise they will become speedily mildewed. The mildew shows itself in the form of roundish or irregular brown spots, and cannot be cured. After the process has once commenced it can only be checked by the utmost attention to dryness.