

**FAC-SIMILES ILLUSTRATING THE LABOURS
OF WILLIAM CAXTON AT WESTMINSTER,
AND THE INTRODUCTION OF PRINTING
INTO ENGLAND. WITH A MEMOIR OF OUR
FIRST PRINTER, AND BIBLIOGRAPHICAL
PARTICULARS OF THE ILLUSTRATIONS**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649224388

Fac-similes illustrating the labours of William Caxton at Westminster, and the introduction of printing into England. With a memoir of our first printer, and bibliographical particulars of the illustrations by Francis Compton Price

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Cover @ 2017

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Fac-similes of examples from the Press
of

WILLIAM CAXTON
at Westminster.

By

Francis Compton Price.

London.

Privately printed.

M.D.CCC.LXXII.

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at Westminster, and the Introduction of
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WITH A
Memoir of our First Printer,
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BY
FRANCIS COMPTON PRICE.

LONDON,
Privately Printed, 1877.

[The Four-hundredth Anniversary.]

William Caxton.



Since the Rev. John Lewis, of Margate, published, so long ago as 1737, "The Life of Mayster Wyllyam Caxton," hardly a new fact, scarcely a fresh incident, affecting the biography of our first printer has been recorded; and to that work all subsequent biographers of Caxton owe their material. The incomparable monograph of Mr. William Blades has, however, rendered the subject capable of being satisfactorily studied. It is not too much to expect, through the labours of Mr. Van Praet and others, that in the archives of Bruges there will one day be found interesting particulars concerning those who worked with COLARD MANSION, and we may hope that among the particulars yet to be discovered, many *new facts* relating to "The chief Englishman at Bruges" will not be wanting.

In the fifteenth century the citizens of London disregarded the legal majority of man, and the indenture of an apprentice was always so drawn that the civic majority was not attained until the completion of the twenty-fourth year. We find in the vellum folio of the Mercers' Company [the entries extending from 1344 to 1464] that Caxton was entered apprentice to Robert Large in 1438 as appears by the following under that date:—

It. John large,	} les appitices deiiiijs
It. Willm Caxton	} Robert Large	

Ten, eleven, or twelve years was no uncommon term of apprenticeship at this time. Reckoning, however, the term of Caxton's servitude at the minimum of seven years, he could not have been more than seventeen years old at the date of entry, and therefore cannot have been born before 1421. The date of Caxton's birth being thus approximately set down, we have his own statement that he was born in "Kent in the Weeld," though topographers are not agreed in what part of the "garden of England" the Weald is to be found.

At Bruges.

Caxton's master, Sir Robert Large, "who dwelled in Lothbury," and "whofe houle standeth in two parishes, S^t Margaret's and S^t Olive's," became Lord Mayor in 1439, and at his death, in 1441, bequeathed to his apprentice, who had served him but three years, a legacy of twenty marks (a sum equal to about 150*l.* of the present value of money). A year after Sir Robert's death, Caxton went abroad, still an apprentice, to serve the remainder of his term in Flanders—probably to conclude business engaged in by his late master, who had been one of the richest and most powerful merchants in the city of London. It should be remembered that Bruges, like Florence and Venice, was far in advance of London as a commercial centre in Caxton's time, and at that city the English merchants found their mart for the large consignments of wool, then our chief product, and the Mercers' foreign trade far exceeded that of all the other Companies. Caxton took up his residence in the "Domus Anglorum," a semi-fortified structure, erected to guard the foreigner against any turbulent outbreak of the populace, whose ignorant jealousy easily imagined that the foreign merchants were ruining their nation—and he dwelled in the Burgundian Capital, paying rare visits first to London and then to Ghent and Cologne, for thirty-five years.

Having worked out the three or four remaining years of his apprenticeship, Caxton was soon in business on his own account, and so prosperously, that in 1450 he was accepted as security for one John Granton, a merchant of the Wool-staplers, who had their Staple of Wools at Calais, in the sum of one hundred and ten pounds, which sum may be estimated at ten times its present value. By an entry in the before-mentioned folio of the Mercers' Company, we see that Caxton was admitted to their livery in 1453; but for which glimpse, we lose sight of him for ten years—during which time, however, he must have continued to be successful, for in 1463 he became Governor of "The English Nation" at Bruges. This Association enjoyed great privileges—granted by Philip the Good, Duke of Burgundy. The Mercers' appear to have originated the guild, which was the Company of Merchant Adventurers under another name, with leave for other great Companies to share in the membership. In the following year King Edward the Fourth issued a Commission and appointed Sir Richard Whitehill from his Court, and William Caxton, "a most fit person," to be his ambassadors and deputies to the Duke of Burgundy "for the purpose of confirming an existing

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treaty of commerce, [which had been in force for a long time, but would expire in 1465] or, if necessary, for making a new one." These negotiations were unsuccessful, and the commercial relations between the two countries were interrupted, and not restored until the accession in 1467 of Charles the Rash, who wedded, in the following year, Margaret, sister of the English King. The marriage was solemnized at Bruges with great rejoicings, of which an account by an eye-witness may be found in the Paston Letters.

Caxton retained his post as Governor of The English Nation to 1469—but about this time some reverse of fortune apparently befell him. A Judgment, dated May 12, 1469, sets forth a dispute between an Englishman and a Frenchman who agree to abide by the decision of William Caxton and Thomas Perrot as arbitrators and common friends—but Caxton being obliged to leave Bruges for some cause not mentioned in the document, a full court of merchants was summoned, and the judgment declared in the names of the arbitrators. From Bruges, Caxton went to Ghent, and afterwards to Cologne; he was probably in the train of Edward IV., when that monarch was seeking refuge from the machinations of the great Earl of Warwick. But it is idle to speculate as to what *may have been*, which is always the greatest barrier to our observing what *is*. It is certain that Caxton received some appointment in the Court of the English wife of Charles, and became a favourite with the noble lady. In conversation, the Duchess elicited from him an acknowledgement that, "having no great charge or occupation," he had, before her Grace's arrival, commenced the translation, from French into English, of *Le Recueil des Histoires de Troye*, by Raoul le Fèvre. Discouraged, he had abandoned the task; but he tells us in his prologue to "The Recuyell," that his noble mistress made him fetch his "five or six quires," and submit them to her inspection; and she "commanded me straightly to continue and make an end of the residue then not translated—whose dreadful commandment I durst in no wise disobey, because I am servant unto her said grace, and receive of her yearly fee." Thus the mercer becomes lost in the courtier; the translation he began as an amusement he concludes apparently with but little satisfaction, and it is finished at length "in the holy city of Cologne in September 1471." The statements of Caxton have led many bibliographers to the opinion that the "Recuyell" was printed at Cologne by Ulrich Zel, who would thus be

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made the instructor of Caxton, who tells us in the epilogue to the third book that it was during its progress through the press that he learned the art; but Mr. Blades declares in favour of Colard Mansion, with many a cogent reason. My own opinion is that Caxton always refers to the *translation* of the "Recuyell" finished at Cologne, and that the "Recuyell," as afterwards "The Game and Playe of the Cheffe Moralyfed," were printed at Bruges. Be that as it may, soon after "The Game and Playe of the Cheffe" was printed, Caxton took leave of the land of his adoption, and turned his thoughts towards England, where he arrived laden with a freight more precious than the most opulent merchant adventurer ever dreamed of, to endow his country with that inestimable blessing, the printing press—the instrument destined to relieve mankind from the thralldom of ignorance, superstition, and vice. Towards the end of the year 1476, or the beginning of 1477, we find Caxton in occupation at Westminster, his press erected in the Almonry, which was a building erected by a most admirable and excellent personage, whom the printers of England might well regard as their patroness—Margaret of Richmond, mother of King Henry the Seventh, who was the great patroness of learning, and, as we know, the friend of Erasmus. She founded the Almonry, not for the purpose of encouraging printing, it is true, but for that of extending her charity to the necessitous of the neighbourhood, of which some vestige still continues in a dole which is given every Saturday to the poor of Westminster in the Hall of the College of St. Peter. As far as can be made out, the Almonry stood near the great west door of the Abbey, at the entrance of what is now called Tothill-street, and as a matter of fact the Almonry was then included within the Abbey precincts. For many years an old building [which tumbled down in 1846] was pointed out as Caxton's house, but it was proved to be no older than the time of Charles the Second. This did not prevent parts of the woodwork being made into walking-sticks and snuff-boxes, and presented to various patrons of literature as genuine relics of our famous printer. Caxton himself tells us that he lived in the Almonry, and from the same source we know the very sign of the house he inhabited—*The Red Pale*, which, it has been conjectured, might stand for *Red Pole*; but the far greater likelihood is that the sign had a *heraldic* significance, and was a shield of one of the heraldic metals, a pale *gules*. A curious hand-bill advertisement, printed and circulated by Caxton *ante* 1480, furnishes us with these particulars. Of this interesting relic, the earliest English "broad-side" extant,

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particulars are appended to the *fac-simile* [Plate 2]. From his house in the Almonry, Caxton issued all his important works, except the "Recuyell," the first edition of "The Game and Playe of the Chesse," both printed abroad, and the "History of Jafon," which last may have been printed either at Bruges or Westminster. When Caxton started in England his whole stock of type consisted of two founts, a *church* or *text* type and a *secretary* type. These founts he purchased in the Low Countries and brought with him. When they began to wear he procured new founts, with a small fount of larger size for headings; but whether Caxton at any period of his career cast his own letter seems now impossible to ascertain with any certainty.

For some time he was busied with the work of his patron, Anthony Wydevile, Earl Rivers, "The Dictes or Sayengis of the Philosophres." This work is dated November 18th, 1477, the earliest certainty, and the real date of the Caxton anniversary. If we had a book of Caxton's, as we have of Colard Mansion's, *Primum opus impressum per Willelmum Caxton*, it would be a different matter. As it is we must work upon the "Dictes" of November, 1477, until we know more. The "Dictes" is especially interesting from the fact that the conclusion of it affords us a specimen of Caxton's own style of literary composition. His patron, the Earl, with whom he seems to have been on the most affectionate terms, having omitted to translate certain conclusions of Socrates "towchyng women," Caxton supplies the omission. These passages are reproduced in the *fac-similes* [Plates 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8].

About one hundred separate works have come down to us from the Westminster press, of which number no less than thirty-three are known by single copies or fragments only. If so great a proportion of his work is unique, how much is lost altogether? We are possessed in the various public and private collections, all told, of nearly six hundred volumes from Caxton's press. Had Caxton's opportunities allowed, he would probably have used wood-engraving to a much greater extent; the chief difficulty was no doubt experienced in obtaining the services of an engraver—many of the blocks being badly cut into, and the draughtsman's work thereby destroyed. The best specimen of the wood-engraver's art his works afford, and one which has been much praised for its