

Private Press, Public Service

A weathered press at the University of British Columbia provides PETER MITHAM with insights into the legacy of the Alcuin Society.

PERCHED IN THE northeast corner of the Print Media Centre on the second floor of the Audain Art Centre in the heart of the University of British Columbia campus is a stripped down iron hand press. It's perhaps the oldest and most venerable item in a collection of printing equipment that runs along the centre's north wall, providing students with both a visual and working history of printing from the 19th century to the present. To the casual observer, the press bears few distinguishing marks aside from a plate identifying it as made by "WM NOTTING | ENTERPRISE WORKS | FARRINGDON RD | LONDON." A little digging suggests it's an Alexandra, a press based on the famous Albion that would have been highly decorated in its day. The specimen at UBC lacks any such ornament, having lost even a plume of feathers seen in online examples (a student has graciously affixed a purple tuft to its rear, however).

Yet the alcove was specifically designed by architects KPMB Architects and HCMA Architecture + Design to showcase the press within the centre's collection. The honour shown the press should interest members of the Alcuin Society, whose efforts were instrumental in securing and bringing it to UBC.

Originally founded in 1965 as a counterpart to the bibliophilic societies of eastern Canada, the U.S. and Europe, the impetus for the society was to support the work of fledgling printer Wil Hudson, then proprietor of Grouse Mountain Press and eventually famous for his work with the printmakers of Cape Dorset. But the immediate ambitions of the society needed a larger *raison d'être* if it was to attract the kind of following the founding directors wanted. It was against this backdrop that a project to acquire a hand press in Seattle began being discussed in the Society's minutes for September 1967.

A plan was hatched to secure the press for the Society which would be housed at the shop of



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An Alexandra press acquired by the Alcuin Society in 1970, at its new home in the Print Media Centre at UBC's Audain Art Centre.

Wil Hudson and made available to UBC, which (it was hoped) would stake the \$500 needed to buy the press. “[Basil Stuart-Stubbs] will try to get the Library school to buy it, and agree to locate it at Wil’s printshop on the understanding that Wil will be available when needed to demonstrate to classes of the Library school,” the minutes state.

The matter was still under discussion in spring 1969. By this time, the Society would pay to get the press to UBC where the press would be “located at a point agreeable to the University, but with the Society having full access to it for suitable projects.” It seems to have finally arrived in time for an open house at UBC in March 1970 that Hudson would attend, “operating the press as a public demonstration, and creating traditional on-the-spot Keepsakes for visitors.”

The press was a fixture at the UBC library for many years until being offered to the visual arts program. “We feel very fortunate that when they were making more room . . . they thought of us and asked if we would like to have it available in our department for students to use. We, of course, said yes!” says Barbara Zeigler, a professor in the Department of Art History, Visual Art and Theory at UBC, whose students make use of the press in the department’s Print Media Research Centre. All told, the visual arts program has about 165 students enrolled in courses incorporating printing and printmaking throughout the year.

Other items in the centre’s letterpress collection include type, a type case, an antique paper cutter and bookbinding equipment donated to the centre by Marina Roy, an associate professor

in the department who often incorporates book arts into her classes. There’s also a newly acquired Glow Forge 3D Laser Printer, 3D filament printer, and a 3D scanner, all of which are augmenting the centre’s digital, screen, lithographic, intaglio and relief printing capabilities. Zeigler says each piece of letterpress equipment sees regular use by students wishing to understand, appreciate, and discover how older technologies can inform current practice. “Students in any third- and fourth-year courses across the department are able to, and often do, use the letterpress for book projects. The letterpress does, therefore, get a

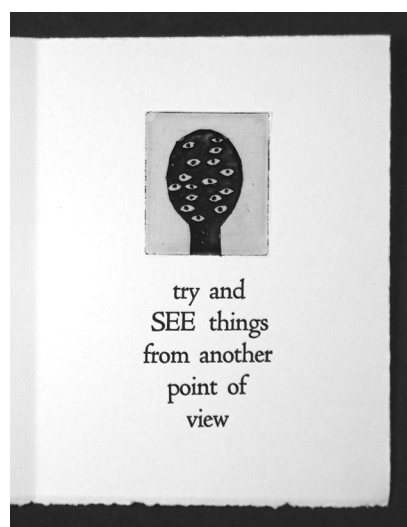
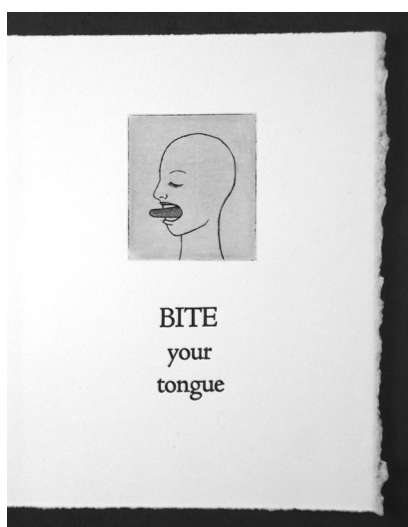
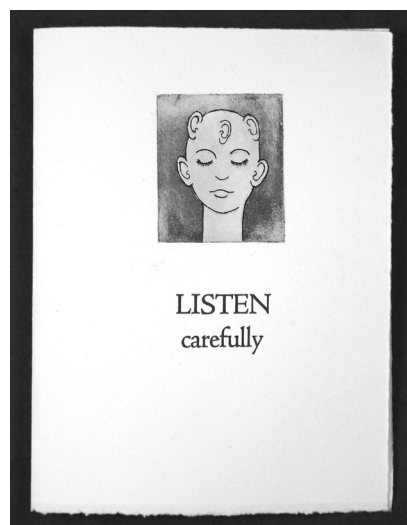
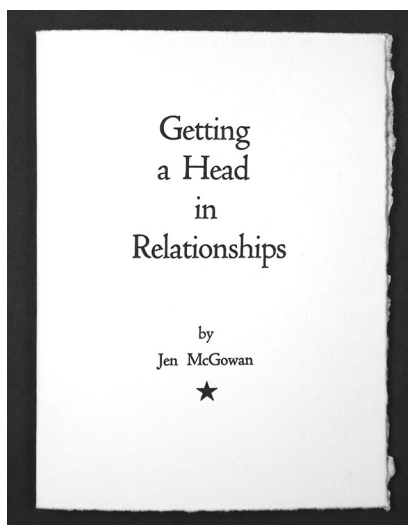
fair amount of use,” she says, explaining that the mechanical, analogue process is distinct from digitally printed works or commercially printed offset. “It gives a different look,” she says. “You don’t see the impression unless it’s the real thing.”

Works printed in the studio are occasionally selected for inclusion in the centre’s collection and have been used in practical ways, too. Zeigler recalls how the letterpress was employed on behalf of the department to print placards to shed light on APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation) human rights, and the use of force and pepper spray against protesters during the APEC meetings in Vancouver in 1997. (The protest

was notable for the use of pepper spray against demonstrators, prompting then-prime minister Jean Chretien’s infamous quip that the only pepper he used was on his plate.) The effort was a reminder of how traditional printing remains an evocative tool of political expression in the popular imagination. “The letterpress provides



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The Alexandra press continues to be used by students of the UBC visual arts program.



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Jen McGowan's project is one example of the works printed on the Alcuin Society press housed at UBC.

an important link to the past that is still much used and appreciated in the present," she says.

Zeigler says there's been renewed interest in the printing arts as students think about the origins of digital culture and engage online. What was once limited to a select audience can now be discussed widely, and easily, rather than wrestled with in isolation. As Mike Hepher of Clawhammer Press in Fernie noted in a panel discussion on the interface between handmade and digital books, "[Digital media] is a way of finding community . . . [of] seeing what other people are doing, not feeling like a weirdo, understanding that there are lots of

different ways to do something, seeing new ideas, being inspired and asking questions."¹

This is as true for students who will form the next generation of book artists as much as for older practitioners looking for new perspectives on a lifetime of experience. "There's been quite a revival," says Zeigler. "People can talk more."

1. See "The Handmade Tale: Book Arts in the Dystopian Present," *Amphora* 178 (Spring 2018), 8–12.

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~ Peter Mitham is editor of *Amphora*.