

## THE ART OF BOOKMAKING: A STUDY OF THE ROYCROFT BOOK PRINTING SHOP

As a follow up to my recent article about Larkin libraries, I thought I would take a look at a book printing operation not only close by, but also quite related to Larkin. Specifically, one of the finest book producers in this country in the late 1800's and early 1900's was the Roycroft Printing Shop (hereinafter, RPS) located in nearby East Aurora.



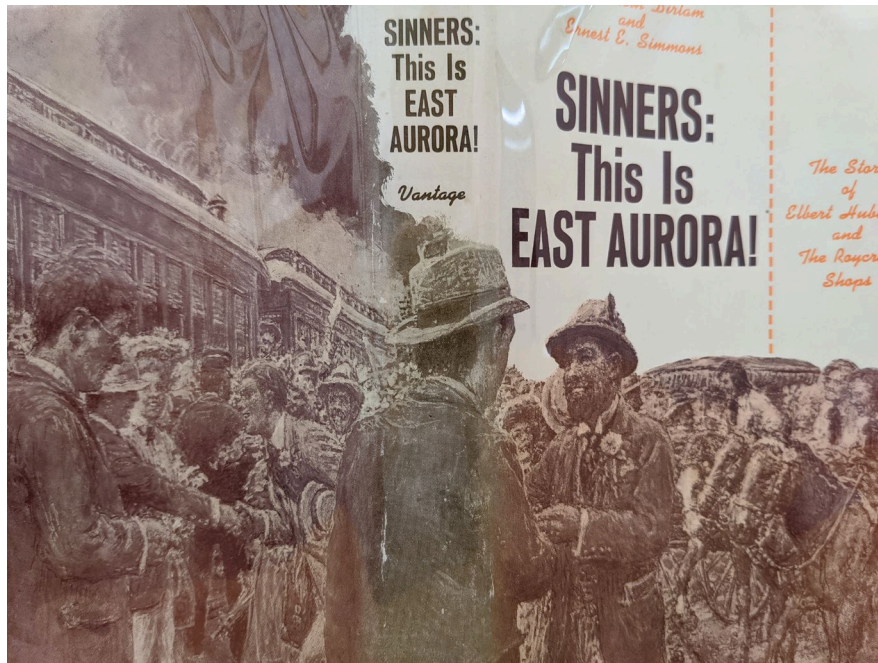
Founded in 1895 by Elbert Hubbard, (hereinafter, EH), John Larkin, Sr.'s brother-in-law, the RPS was a part of an entity established by EH in East Aurora. It technically was not a community because housing was not a part of the concept. But this nice, rural town situated not far from Buffalo, which had become known for its fine horse breeding (EH was passionate about horses), seemed like a good place to nurture a population that appreciated hand made, beautiful domestic items. He imagined a place where residents enjoyed the satisfaction of making fine, attractive home furnishings and leading a simple life and that relished home grown foods and a simple life style. It was a cooperative life-style where each member was required to contribute through such physical effort as creating arts or crafts which could be sold in shops to ever-increasing numbers of tourists drawn to this unique town. However, residents did not have to belong to Roycroft at all.

EH was to succeed in this endeavor because of his keen marketing skills, acquired from almost 29 years of working for John Larkin who was married to EH's sister, Frances. He had met Larkin in Illinois where Larkin had partnered with Justus Weller to create a soap-making business. Weller introduced JDL to the Hubbard family. One thing led to another and soon JDL was in love with Frances Hubbard. They married and in 1875, moved back to JDL's home town, Buffalo, where he created the Larkin Soap Co. Then 19 year-old Elbert, Frances' brother,

moved to Buffalo as well. He went to work for the soap company where he honed his marketing skills. Innovative schemes like giving coupons to product purchasers which in turn could be swapped for premiums were quite successful. It was a shock to Larkin when, in 1893, EH announced that he was leaving the company in order to attend courses at Harvard and become a writer.

Notwithstanding that he was married (to Bertha) and had a child, what EH was really up to was carrying on a love affair with a school teacher, Alice, who had been taken in by EH and Bertha to board with them. EH had moved Alice to Boston where he spent more time honing certain other skills, dropping quickly out of the courses in which he had enrolled in Boston.

While still an employee at the soap company, EH had met Harry Taber, a printing and lithograph salesman whose company, Cosack and Co., held a contract with the soap co. for providing its printing needs. Taber spoke at a meeting attended by EH on the history of printing,



“illustrating it with specimens of fine typography from the early Venetian printers. (“Sinners: This is East Aurora: The Story of EH and the Roycroft Shops,” by H. Kenneth Dirlam and Ernest E. Simmons, 1964, pp. 15-16 ; Hereinafer, D&S) That speech included a description of “how the monks copied sacred and classical writing, letter by letter, word by word, page by page, as a religious duty, sometimes spending an entire lifetime on a single

book” (p. !6) According to Paul McKenna in his book, “A History and Bibliography of the Roycroft Printing Shop,” 1996, Taber actually founded the Roycroft Printing Shop’ according to McKenna.

As you look at some of the Roycroft (hereinafter, RC) books, note that medieval style of enhanced printing which obviously informed the early RC style.

In 1895 publishers began printing small books with short essays, poetry and the like, which led to magazines with new material in each issue. By then EH had left Larkin and had started his East Aurora project which became known as RC. He also created his first publication which he called “The Philistine.” Though the public seemed to enjoy it, one of the first to publish in this magazine style was Kenneth Graham, who ranted, “It is one of the evidences of all great art to arouse imitation. No sooner does a new poet or painter appear, than



he has a hundred imitator... = The sincerest form of flattery comes to me from East Aurora, N.Y., rejoicing in the name of the 'Philistine'. I appreciate the compliment, but is there a crying need for the 'Philistine'? It gave me a vivid purple moment, and I gladly turn from it to pleasanter themes," (D&S, p.19)



In 1894 and several times thereafter, EH had visited England, exploring the arts and crafts community there. He had become familiar with the philosophy and practices of John Ruskin, William Morris and their proteges, especially their influence on the Arts and Crafts (A&C) movement worldwide. (Note that though EH boasted that he had visited these renowned men in their homes, D&S write that there is evidence that EH misrepresented at least some of the visits. One of EH's writings described his visit with a famous artist at his home where, he claimed, he had met "7 or 8" of his children and his wife. EH had sent a draft of his article about that visit to which the artist promptly responded, begging him to delete from the article any

mention of children since they had none, and the inability to conceive was the source of great distress to his wife. (D&S, p. 56)



(Similarly, EH wrote an article about visiting famed artist, James McNeill Whistler. Upon reading it after it was published in EH's "Little Journey," Whistler wrote to EH, saying, "Dear Fra Elbertus, I have just read your 'Little Journey' to the Home of Whistler; I congratulate you. The booklet contains several things I never knew before." (D&S, p. 56)

(EH actually acknowledged that he may not have actually met Morris, acknowledging that he may not have actually experienced all that he describes. With audacity, he said, "Many

of the scenes I described I have visited, and some I visit in imagination from the safe recesses of a Morris chair...Two heats of about two hours each and the deed is done.” (D&S, p. 57)

Whether or not EH actually met Morris (note: I actually did visit Morris’ home and printing shop in northern England with famed Roycroft, Kitty Turgeon, a number of years ago. I can attest to the fact that Morris’ spirit can easily be felt!), EH certainly studied him. Morris had become disgusted with the art and design of homes and furnishings of the 1800’s. He found all the furniture and furnishings, wallpapers, carpets, etc., to be ugly and gloomy. So he created Morris & Co. and redesigned everything! (D&S, p. 59) Take a look at the Morris chair we have in the Gallery near the display case holding lots of Roycroft stuff.) (P.S. Don’t sit in it!)

One of Morris’ major annoyances was the quality of printing to which he had had to subject his own writings. By 1890, Morris had had it. His response was to create the Kelmscott Press. With the guidance of one of England’s finest printers, Emery Walker, Morris became an expert at hand made book publishing. Not content with creating great typography which he printed on the best quality paper, he finished his books with the finest covers and bindings. Soon Morris’ books were sought world-wide. (D&S, p. 59)



Though there was no way initially for EH to compete with the Kelmscott press, he did his best to introduce some of its qualities. By 1896 Morris-style capital letters and numbers were appearing in the “Philistine”. (D&S, , p.68) Hand coloring of letters and numbers (i.e., illuminating) were being beautifully recreated, even though the RC press was old and ordinary. D&S speculate that in 1897 a “Dun and Bradstreet report might have read something like this: “A small printing shop occupying rented quarters; business – printing magazines and books; number of employees –

8; limited equipment, most of it second hand. Caution advised until better established.” (D&S, pp. 8-9)

The first mention of RPS printing a fine book was a brief biography of RC’s hired hand, Ali Baba, published in 1898. It was “printed on hand made paper and hand illuminated, with photogravure frontispiece in characteristic pose, seated in a wheelbarrow.” (D&S, p95) About that same time, EH wrote and published “The Song of Songs Which is Solomons.” (Roycroft Collectibles, by Charles Hamilton, 2001) That book is described as being hand-printed on Ruisdael hand made paper, Type was cast to the specific order of the RPS. (Probably no more

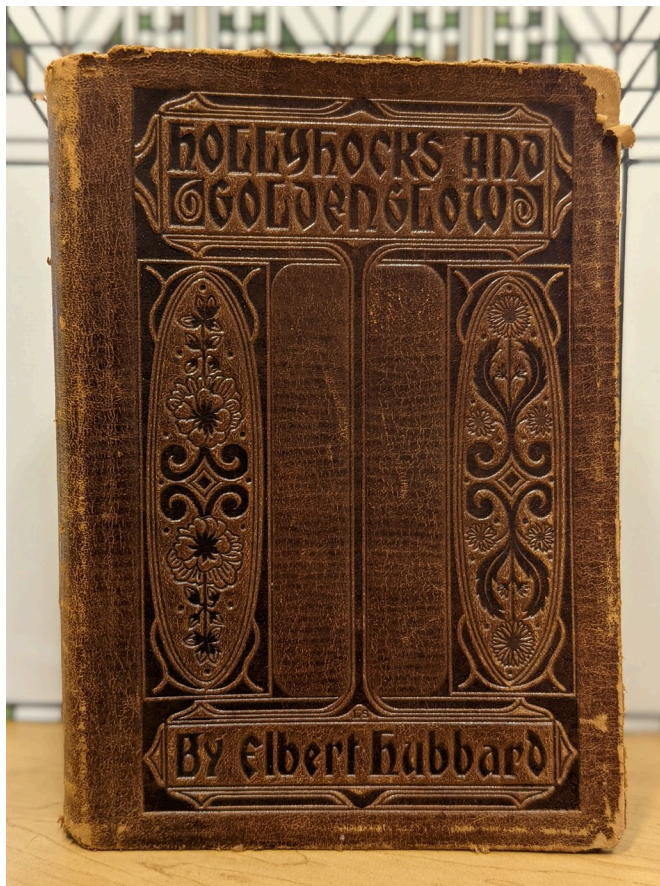




beautiful type of printing was ever made...This publication will mark an era in the art of printing in America...Only 600 copies bound in antique boards has been made...It is a work of art." Hamilton adds that EH was not a decorator himself, nor did he have one in his shop. EH was self taught and was trying to enter a 'new era' in the art of printing in America – a Morris-like era, and even though he was just a pioneer, EH succeeded. (p. 21)

EH hit a home run when he authored and printed what became a hugely popular book, "A Message to Garcia." in 1899. By 1913. it was estimated that 40 million copies had been printed (D&S, p.94). D&S opined that Morris' Kelmscott Press influenced EH to pursue a more "artistic, conscientious bookmaking. (p. 95)

Emboldened by this success, EH reached back into the recesses of medieval design both for his printing and also for the style of buildings and furnishings for the RC campus. Contemporary methods were replaced by medieval. And those who worked in the print shop seemed to find joy in their efforts. "And, behold, the people who loved good books proved much



more numerous than was first supposed... and so the manufacturers gradually awoke to the fact that there were some people who preferred to have a few good things, rather than a great many cheap ones." (D&S, p. 103)

Not only was attractive printing on fine paper developed, along with it, books began to be bound, often in leather, and in beautiful ways.

Most significantly, the RPS acquired its first printing press in 1900, naming it "Old Wash." And referred to it as "a monarch of all he surveyed." Though there were other crafts being made, they were dominated by the press. Old Wash was retired in 1919 and occupied a prominent place by the entrance hall of the print shop where it could keep a watchful eye on the newer presses that replaced it.. Prior to "Old Wash" printing must have been done off site. (The Book of the Roycrofters, Being a Catalog of Copper,

Leather and Books," 1919, p. 40)

In 1908 the RPS began producing "The Fra," a high end periodical. It was cloaked in a cream-colored cover bearing a pen and ink drawing created by RC artist, Dard Hunter. Pages were also cream colored but printed in black and orange with Bookman large size type. 'Fra' stood for 'art,' it was explained. About its binding, it was written that "Frau Margareta and

forty rosy daughters of honest farmers have charge of the folding and stitching; no wire staples for us.” (D&S, p. 189)

High quality paper was an imperative at the Roycroft Press. Dard Hunter, a well known Roycroft artist, was also a long-time paper maker. He worked for the Roycroft shop for a time, but left to pursue a career in paper making and printing. His skills in paper making and printing, marks him as one of the greats in graphic arts.” says author Paul McKenna in his “History and Bibliography of the RC Printing Shop,”

Print style described in the “Book of Roycrofters”, was created to be unique to the Roycrofters, possessing a strength, quaintness and great legibility, its particular characteristics being obtained by the use of ample margins, large or heavy-faced type, initials, rubrications and the like. Everything printed by the Roycrofters was meant to be real.” (at p. 40)

Book binding had actually started with parchment manuscript scrolls which were stored in metal tubes. When manuscripts began to be written on pages, monks began to take charge of illuminating (i.e., coloring) and binding them in book form. The book covers, referred to as binders, were often of wood in medieval times, but a fine Roycroft book is more frequently seen in wood or leather. The leather may be smooth, but often was ‘crushed levant,’ or crushed leather or suede.(p. 28, “The Book of The Roycrofters Being a Catalog of Copper, Leather and Books.” It was also called “ooze calf.” according to McKinnon, p. 67.Fine Roycroft books are often clad in “modeled leather, “ i.e. having a pattern or picture tooled by hand into the leather. Letters of gold were often inlaid into the leather.

Often times color was added to fancy capital letters or to drawings distributed here and there on a page. Interestingly, Bertha Hubbard, EH’s wife when the Print shop opened, was one of the illuminators for the first two books and then was replaced. See “A History of the Roycroft Printing Shop”, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., by Paul McKenna, 1996. Could that be about when Bertha learned of Alice and the baby she had conceived by EH while Bertha, herself, was pregnant by EH?

The Book of the Roycrofters, at p. 28, describes the art of modeling. It evolved in the 15<sup>th</sup> century in Africa and spread to Europe . During a decline in art throughout Europe in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries , leather modeling disappeared in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It was Roycroft that brought the art back to life. “The Roycrofters stood as the pioneers of the revivalists of a lost art.”

By 1964, according to D&S, some RC books were selling for as much as \$250; some were sent to Paris, Florence, Leipsig and London to compete with the finest books that the world has produced.

McKenna has carefully related the history of EH and the Roycroft Printing Press, and though noting its good qualities, he has some harsh words for EH. On the positive side, he notes that EH made lovers of books out of people who never knew books before. But on the negative side, he felt that though EH brought people to fine books, his actual goal was to promote himself through a marketable product..” EH was not the American disciple of William Morris, nor did



he intentionally promote American graphic design; he was a writer of very mediocre literary material who was a genius at promotion. (p.49)

So where did one put all these beautiful books? Roycrofters Kitty Turgeon and Robert Rust furnished the answer in their book, "The Arts and Crafts Home", 1998. As one peruses their book with its many beautiful photographs of Arts and Craft homes, one is struck by the beautiful oak or other fine built in wood bookcases that adorned walls or connected rooms. Not only were Arts and Crafts era books valuable, but "beautifully bound books were a source of pride in the Arts and Crafts home." (pp. 70, 85 and 143.

