

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Letterpress Down Under

Robert Wood · Wednesday, September 16th, 2015

Letterpress in Australia is very different to letterpress in the United States. This is not only due to size, but culture. Australia is twenty times smaller than the United States, but there is nowhere near the same proportion of publishers who use letterpress. Moreover, the best letterpress printers in Australia have considerable relations with American producers.

For the most part letterpress in Australia is confined to bespoke producers of business cards and wedding invitations. The number of publishers, for example, who use letterpress in their books is limited to a mere handful. There is no well-known producer of poetry chapbooks that uses letterpress. This constitutes a major difference from the United States, where a whole host of small publishers support both this method of production and form of expression.

The reason for this may be due in part to the difference in available printing technologies as well as the relative marginalisation of poetry more generally. One senses also both less of a history of sustaining craft traditions and no reason for their existence. It is as if the question being asked is: why letterpress, and, even if we did use it, what would we letterpress? This is in marked contrast to the American revival in heritage and tradition from Oakland to Brooklyn, Cincinnati to the Mississippi that one sees in Kickstarter campaigns and in literary circles more generally.

There are however some producers in Australia who swim against the tide of indifference and ignorance. Alan Loney, who began as a printer in New Zealand forty years ago, still produces books, broadsides and other letterpressed material using a hand press in Melbourne. Under the banner of Hawk Press, and now [Electio Editions](#), he has for many years produced fine work that is recognised internationally. He has also printed a considerable number of poets that have gone on to publish with larger publishers and being hailed as important people of letters – perhaps none more so than the late Martin Harrison. Loney recently collaborated with the Codex Foundation's [Alchimie du Verbe](#) project. He is, unquestionably, Australia and New Zealand's finest printer in addition to being an established and well-regarded poet in his own right.

[Carolyn Fraser](#), working under the Idlewild Press imprint, is a generation or two younger than Loney. After an apprenticeship in California and considerable time spent working in other places in the continental United States, she returned to Melbourne about a decade ago. She brought with her ample skill, contemporary ideas about letterpress as well as a shipping container of material, including one Vandercook and one Platen press. For the last few years she has taught classes to keen amateurs and continued to work towards publishing texts of poetry and photographs with Idlewild. At present, she works at the State Library of Victoria as a book conservator given the

economic difficulty of being a full time practitioner of letterpress.

Recently the larger cities in Australia have been overwhelmed by a particular type of American cuisine – burgers, donuts, ribs, bagels, fried chicken have all become popular in the last year or two. We could see this as part of a hipster globalisation, a sort of fetish of junk foods as appropriation of working people's fare. There has, as yet, been no corresponding growth of poetry letterpress, which seems to have a firmer foothold in the northern hemisphere.

The appeal of letterpress is in the tactile quality of its expression. As a printer there is a palpable sense of excitement and engagement with the press itself, not simply as a screen. Setting type, mixing ink, locking up all contributes to relationship one has with one's writing. The physical process helps build attachment and that is a good thing – as a way to spend one's time, in and of itself, as well as for what it leads to, namely beautiful books. The bite into the page of letterpress, the slightly irregular human variations, the care and beauty of crafting a chapbook of poetry using letterpress are what excite.

The possibilities though for letterpress in Australia are constrained by historical circumstances and social relations inimical to small-scale publishing. Good work can flourish in hostile contexts, however, precisely because of the determination of individual printers.

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