

Tramp Printers

Freedom within wage work

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2017

a review of

The Tramp Printers: Forgotten Trails of the Travelling Typographers by Charles Overbeck. Eberhart Press, 2017

This handsomely and mostly hand-produced book is a tribute to the craft of printing and of historical insight, both of which verge on extinction in the modern world.

Tramp printers, like journeymen in a guild, learned skills as apprentices and then took to the road. Travel and work under different conditions and with a variety of other craftspeople enhanced their skills, but also meant the freedom to leave a workplace whenever they got tired of it.

Charles Overbeck focuses mainly on 19th century typesetters working during the time when the craft reached its peak, prior to the mechanization that soon threatened it.

Many labour historians have noted how setting type by hand significantly affects literacy and knowledge. According to one person in the trade during these times: “I have met tramp printers who could recite Shakespeare, Wilde, Chaucer, Gibbon, the Rubaiyat, Mohammed, Uncle Remus, Flavius Josephus, Isaiah, and Daniel Webster. They could edit and correct copy, spell, punctuate, parse, conjugate, and occasionally knew Latin, French, and Kant. They took competence for granted” and could “discuss politics, religion, art, music, history, and the literature of the most modern and ancient cultural subjects with erudition.” Although Overbeck doesn’t mention him, the early anarchist Pierre Joseph Proudhon learned how to set type in the 1820s in rural France. Proudhon wrote “I still remember with delight the great day when my composing stick became for me the symbol and instrument of my freedom.” His skill as a proofreader—reading type in reverse, especially Latin—exposed him to ideas far outside the universe of his peasant background. It also gave Proudhon the mobility to find work and become politically active in Paris.

The lifestyles of tramp printers resemble the more familiar stories of Depression-era hobos. Journeymen typesetters and printers hopped the trains and avoided spending money. Overbeck quotes an early 20th century journalist: “Without exception, these [tramps] were capable of earning good incomes and without exception they were chronically destitute.” The book’s numerous anecdotes about compulsive drinking bear this out.

Typesetting and Unions

Overbeck frequently points out the connection between pride of craft and solidarity among printers, manifested in events like the first successful post-independence labor strike in the U.S., organized by printers in Philadelphia in 1786.

He describes the success of the International Typographers Union (ITU) in controlling hiring and firing practices in the industry and also their substantial influence over the introduction of any kind of technology negatively affecting workers.

Few other North American unions have achieved this power so extensively.

The union card carried by a travelling typesetter both certified their skills and enhanced their autonomy. Once a particular newspaper or publishing deadline was met or the often wretched chemical environment of the print shop got to them, they could move on.

But the internal contradictions of running a worker-oriented institution with business methods ultimately made the ITU vulnerable to the de-skilling of workers that resulted from massive amounts of capital investment in mid-20th century printing technology. As a result, the union crashed spectacularly in the 1970s and 1980s. Overbeck presents this rapid decline from the point of view of the last of the tramp typographers, even those who managed to merge their traditional knowledge with the new computerized systems.

Women Typographers

Very few obviously female names appear in the book's appendix of known tramp printers, but Overbeck has collected enough information about women printers to devote a chapter to them. In it, he gives numerous examples of the sexism within print shops, a habit of both employers and male union members, but shows how determinedly women persisted in the trade. As is typical in capitalist enterprises, printing firms often exploited women as lower-waged substitutes for union members and, typical to unions in their early history, most labor organizations wouldn't accept women into their ranks.

Clearly, though, skills and efficiency weren't an issue: "During the gold rush, a swift-fingered young woman named Olive Miner set tremendous amounts of type and earned an impressive income...She was twelve years old."

Other evidence indicates that women's participation in the trade was very high, even far outnumbering men during periods like the Civil War, but since the work culture and chauvinist attitudes in the industry prevented them from entering apprenticeship programs, their wages were under constant downward pressure. After forming their own union, women were finally allowed into the ITU in 1869.

Once they had union cards, women could more practically go on the road with an autonomy similar (although never fully equal) to what men had experienced for centuries. And well into the 20th century they frequently needed to prove their abilities, despite possession of a union card. Overbeck quotes "Big Marie" Evans, indignant at being asked by a foreman what kind of work she could do. She "poked him a couple of times in the shoulder and said 'I can do anything a goddamn man can do except piss in a bottle.'"

Technology vs. Craft

As technology continues to interrupt human creativity, much can be learned from the changes in the culture and craft of the printing trades. My own experience as a typographer began in 1971, at the advent of relatively inexpensive computerized phototypesetters, devices affordable by print shops that freed them from dependency on the large, specialized, and unionized typesetting firms.

Initially, I knew nothing about typography, yet these machines allowed me to produce material good enough for the printing standards of the time. In other words, the new technology flooded the market with inferior-quality publications. Lack of attention to proper hyphenation and word spacing, among other typographical values, became normal. It took me twenty years to realize my ignorance of the 500-year-old craft.

The introduction of desktop publishing in the 1980s dealt the craft of typography a deadly blow. Mergenthaler-Linotype, frequently mentioned as a technological interloper in Overbeck's account and by 1980 the major industry player, made a Mephistophelian pact with two newcomers: Adobe Systems, which provided a software system (PostScript) destined to monopolize the market, and Apple Computers, the definitely junior partner who provided very cheap hardware for inputting the text.

The Mac was a big hit in art schools, not only as a tool for producing electronic drawings, but also as a way to earn money by typesetting and producing other graphic work on the side. This cheap labour force soon put most skilled typographers out of work.

Today typography's dominant paradigm matches that of the advertising industry: form over function. Desktop publishers are no longer proofreaders, so the aesthetics of appearance presides over the function of readability.

In the 1970s our highly politicized worker-owned and controlled typesetting shop in southern Ontario took the (somewhat equally deficient) opposite attitude: we paid more attention to the content of our work, rather than to traditional typographical standards, with results that sometimes make me shudder when I look back.

Nonetheless, I'm proud that we managed to actually publish what we did in an era when freedom of the press belonged only to those who owned one.

At the very least, our attempts to use this freedom to express our critiques of capitalism descend from the values of creativity and autonomy among tramp printers that Overbeck has so eloquently described.

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