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William Caxton (1424 (?)-1492)

Active: 1472-1492 in England, Britain, Europe

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Indexing Data:

Active In: England, Britain, Europe
Born In: England, Britain, Europe
Activity: Printer

Life, Works and Times

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Although he probably would have thought of himself as primarily a merchant, and perhaps also as a diplomat, Caxton is now remembered for his role in bringing printing to English textual and literary culture. As the first Englishman to print books, bringing the printing press to England in 1475 or 1476, Caxton is arguably the most important figure in the history of the book in the English-speaking world.

Very little is known of William Caxton's early life. Born sometime between 1415 and 1424 (current thinking favours the latter end of that period), nothing is known of his family or place of birth, beyond the fact that it was in the weald of Kent: any specifics beyond that have not been identified in the historical record. We do know that he was apprenticed to Robert Large in the Mercers' Company of London, but even this information does not help us determine exactly Caxton's date of birth; although payment for entry as an apprentice was made in 1438, dates of payments and dates of actual entrance are not always consistent in the period, and we possess no information to guide us to whether an assumption of consistency is appropriate in this case. Caxton's apprenticeship in the Mercers' Company played a hugely significant part in shaping his later life. The Mercers were involved in trade with the Low Countries, and Caxton would have learned the basics of overseas trade, and how to handle money and conduct negotiations; he may have possibly received an initiation into contemporary politics. Certainly, Large was a significant figure in this circle: he became warden of the company in 1427, sheriff of the city of London in 1430, and Lord Mayor in 1439. When he died in 1441, Caxton was apparently still an apprentice, issuing from his apprenticeship sometime in the mid-1440s. By the 1450s he had taken the livery of the Mercers' Company.

The decades from the 1450s to the 1470s saw Caxton consolidating his position as a merchant of significant standing, and continuing his role in politics. By the 1450s he appears to have been spending most of his time in the Low Countries, and he seems to have been permanently settled in Bruges by the 1460s, where he was regarded as a respected and influential merchant. His political influence also became stronger, as he was involved in negotiations in a number of high profile trade and political disputes (including negotiating the end of the recent ban on English merchants in Bruges in 1464, and having some involvement in the negotiations between England and the Hanseatic merchants in 1471). By April 1465, Caxton had assumed the position of governor of the English nation in Bruges, a role of some significance, and a sign of confidence from the English merchant community. He held this position until at least 1470, when we find the last reference to Caxton as governor. In 1471 he left Bruges for Cologne, apparently with the intention of extending his business interests to include the trade in printed books.

Caxton was granted permission to reside in Cologne, according to historical documents, from 17 July 1471 to December 1472. The suggestion from many historians and critics is that Caxton's decision to relocate to Cologne was explicitly for the purposes of establishing a trade in printed books; that is, to acquire the means of production of printed books (a printing press) and to gain the knowledge of running a commercially viable business as a printer and publisher. As a centre for printing since 1464, Cologne may have seemed like an ideal location in which Caxton could achieve his aims. He entered into partnership with Johannes Veldener, a printer and typesetter, an association which suited both men: Caxton could learn the technical skills of printing from Veldener, while Veldener could use Caxton's fairly extensive business capital to produce larger, and more expensive, books than he had hitherto been able to manage. Possibly the first book with which Caxton should be associated as a "producer" is Veldener's edition of Bartholomaeus Anglicus's *De proprietatibus rerum* (c.1472). This was not, however, the type of text that Caxton was most interested in; as N. F. Blake has argued, Caxton seems to have had a very specific business mind in plan for his partnership with Veldener. Caxton's strategy involved selling printed books *in English* to people *in England*; no-one else was providing books in English, so (the theory goes) Caxton could gain monopoly over the potential market in England. The specific texts that Caxton thought could turn a profit were English translations of French texts fashionable in Flanders. The acquisition of this material was straightforward; Caxton was to translate the works himself; but political stability in England, a necessary precondition for profitable enterprise, was not present in the 1460s: hence, perhaps, Caxton's timing of his move to Cologne.

At the end of 1472, Caxton and Veldener returned to Bruges, set up a press, and began production of Caxton's translation of the *History of Troy*. During printing, Veldener moved to Louvain, and this seems to have been the end of the professional relationship. *The History of Troy* was finished in late 1573/early 1574, and now retains major historical significance as the first book printed in English. Another translation, the *Game of Chess*, was finished rapidly, completed by March 1574. At this point, however, the business plan seems to have run into

difficulties. Caxton, as a busy merchant, was finding it hard to keep the press supplied with translations for the English market: clearly, to pay someone else to undertake translations would eat into profit margins. So, in order to ensure that the press remained busy, the next four editions to come from Caxton's press were all of French language texts. Around this time, Caxton's approach to the English market appears to have changed: he decided to return to England and set up press there, with the hope of finding English language material more readily available than in Bruges.

Caxton brought the printing press to England in either 1475 or 1476; the latter date is the latest possible, since he was certainly established in England by the second half of that year. He rented premises in Westminster which, as the home of the court and the administration, apparently seemed to present a better business opportunity than the obvious strategy of acquiring a London premises. The first book issued by Caxton in England was an edition of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, followed by a huge number of printed texts. Over 100 editions have been attributed to Caxton, and these range across a variety of genres: Caxton's own translations, the works of English poets, historical and chivalric prose, and religious and didactic works. He has been accused of conservatism in his literary taste, and such a criticism is probably valid; he certainly did not target a "cheap print" market, as later successful printers did. The majority of the printed work was in English, although some was in Latin; as a sign of how clearly Caxton had identified his target market, none of it was in French. His prologue to Malory's *Morte D'Arthur* states clearly his view that it is necessary to increase the number of printed books in English:

many noble volumes be made of [Arthur] and of his noble knyghtes in Frensshe which I have seen and redde beyond the see, which been not had in our maternal tongue ... wherfore of suche as have late ben drawn oute bryefly into Englysshe I have ... enprynte a booke of the noble hystories of the sayd kynge Arthur... after a cōpye unto me delyverd.

Again, the fact that most of the material was not Caxton's own translations illustrates how he altered his business plan to suit the circumstances; many of the works, though, did include his own prologues and epilogues, and this gives us a wider picture of the literary aspects of Caxton's career. He continued, of course, his life as a merchant, and had a significant impact on the English book market in this way too: he imported printed books in bulk, and his contacts on the continent meant that he had access to a wide range of new foreign material. He also accepted commissions to work as a printer, producing copies of texts which he may not actively have sought out, but which were offered to him as a business transaction. Caxton died about March 1492 (the date can only be surmised from an entry in the churchwarden's account). Little is known about his family: he was married, but it is not known to whom; he had at least one daughter, but it is not known what became of her. He left a will, but it has not survived.

Caxton's literary reputation rests on two aspects of his career. One is as a writer, a producer of translations and an early commentator, via his epilogues and prologues, on a wide range of texts popular in fifteenth-century England. The other is as a producer of books rather than of texts; it is for this that Caxton is now primarily remembered, and for good reason. He was a merchant, driven by business interests rather than aesthetic; but he understood the way in which the book is a commodity, a material artefact to be bought and sold. He has some claim to being the most influential figure in the development of a print-based culture in English-language literature, an achievement for which he is still justly remembered today.

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