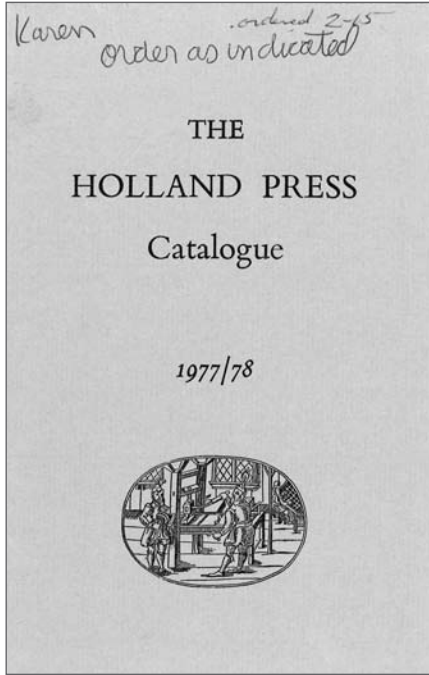


# *A History of Oak Knoll Press*

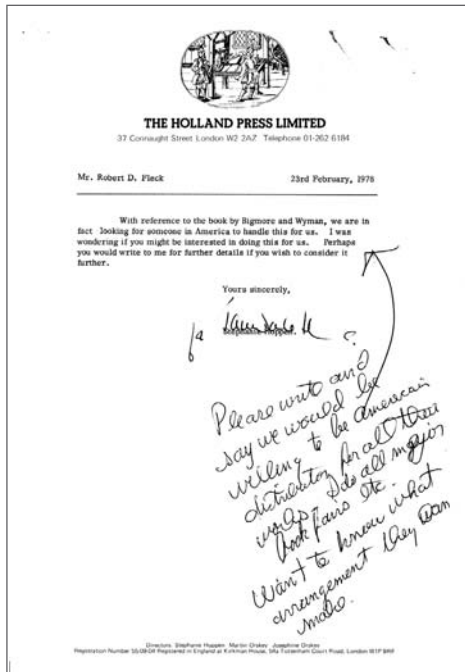
## *1978–2008*

Thirty years ago I made the life-changing decision that I should try my hand in the world of publishing. Was I breaking new ground in the antiquarian bookselling business? Hardly! Any of you who have read the history of bookselling know that the professions of bookseller and publisher have been intertwined for centuries with large out-of-print booksellers often having equally large publishing programs. This method of doing business has all but died out today. The following experiment in biography will tell you the story of how our company has tried to resurrect it.

I went to college to study chemical engineering (BChE from University of Delaware, MS Chemical Engineering from University of Virginia) and worked as an engineer for a number of companies from 1971 to 1976. As soon as I had money to spend, I started collecting books and formed large collections of Hemingway, Faulkner, Steinbeck, and books about books. In 1976, I was asked to transfer to Allentown, Pennsylvania. I looked at my job and looked in my heart to determine what I really enjoyed doing. I decided to go with my heart, and on a Monday in early March, I became a rare book seller. I had absolutely no training at the feet of a renowned bookseller, so I made all the usual mistakes of a novice in the field. All I had going for me was my love of books and reading and some hidden skills in business that I had discovered along the way. I made a decision that I was not going to follow the usual path of dealing in the modern literature that I had collected and immediately sold off or traded my personal collection for inventory in the field of books about books. This neglected field of books on the physical production and distribution of books, supplemented with examples of fine printing seemed to be a relatively unbeaten path without much competition. For better or worse, I sank all my limited resources into developing this niche market.



*The Holland Press catalogue that started it all*



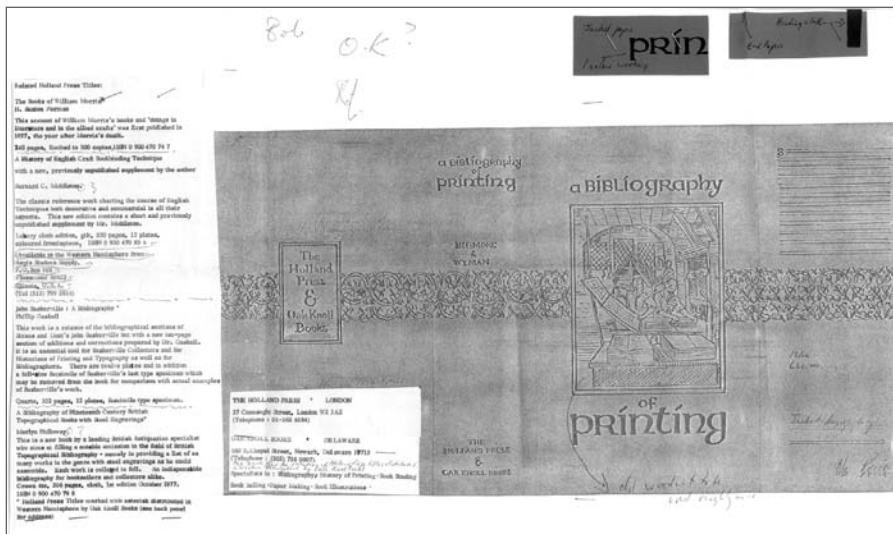
*The beginning of Oak Knoll publishing: A letter from Holland Press*

## The Beginning (1978-1989)

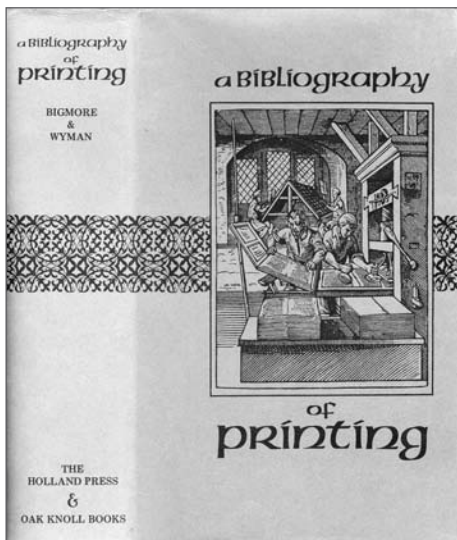
Two years later, to my family's amazement, I was still in business! My goal had been to make Oak Knoll Books the one-stop shopping place for customers who sought any "book about books" that they might need whether it was out-of-print or newly published. Stocking other publisher's books had great potential for financial disaster. The 40% discount I received made for a very small profit margin and the inventory had to be turned over quickly. However, goodwill was generated as my customers appreciated the work we put into keeping them informed of the newest books in their field. This made them think of us for the out-of-print titles they wanted.

In those days there were a few publishers of books about books who concentrated on producing reprints of the classic titles. Specialty dealers like me were experts at knowing what out-of-print titles were in constant demand by our customers and owed it to them to seek out these reprints.

An English firm called the Holland Press had been purchased by new owners and was aggressively planning reprints of important titles in my field and I wrote to them for a catalogue. The catalogue arrived and was full of just the kind of books my customers wanted. I had my secretary (my one part-time employee, Karen) write to them in February 1978 inquiring about a number of their upcoming titles. One week later, an answer came back from Stephanie Hoppen (co-owner of the Holland Press with Richard Leech) who told me which books were available and concluded with an intriguing paragraph telling me that they were looking for someone in America to handle a reprint of the classic bibliography of printing history, Bigmore & Wyman's *A Bibliography of Printing*. I handscrawled a comment to Karen on the letter, asking her to write them stating that I would be happy to distribute all of their books in America depending on their terms, and asking what I would need to do to join them in printing the Bigmore and Wyman volume. A number of letters and phone calls later, I had arranged to buy into the print run for this title and, for the first time, Oak Knoll appeared on a title page. They also allowed me to buy many of their other titles at a substantial discount and market them exclusively in America. My wife and I visited them in London and they visited us in the United States. Through these



Proofs for the jacket of Oak Knoll's first publication



Left: The first Oak Knoll publication: A Bibliography of Printing  
Right: The New Book Newsletter: selling Holland Press books

## A HISTORY OF OAK KNOLL PRESS

meetings, I found out just how jovial this publishing business can be. The English publishing world is filled with long lunches with good cheer and much wine.

Oak Knoll had always depended on “direct marketing” to sell books, and we decided to start a new type of direct mailer called the New Book Newsletter (Volume I, No. 1 February, 1980) in which we marketed other publishers’ new books at a 10% discount. The third issue (April 1980) was entirely devoted to Holland Press titles. These newsletters continued through Volume 3, No. 8 (August 1982), and I see that over time we dropped the 10% discount, which means that I was starting to recognize the importance of profit margins.

I must have been thinking of my immortality (or retaining records against future bankruptcy proceedings) as I saved all the correspondence that went between the two firms over this fast and furious relationship. Stephanie and Richard were an energetic but volatile couple, and it wasn’t long before their firm broke up and Stephanie returned to South Africa.

The second Oak Knoll publication was about as ephemeral as one can get. I had developed a friendship with John Anderson who owned a private press near Philadelphia called the Pickering Press. John was a noted typographer and his small private press books were some of the best contemporary examples of fine printing. I asked him to do a 1979 Christmas keepsake for me to give to my customers and John hand-printed a broadside in what was to be 60 copies (but we only got 50). Over the years John and I had alternating lunches between Maple Shade, New Jersey, and New Castle, Delaware, and I got to hear some of the classic tales of typography in action. He had worked for Peter Beilenson, Grant Dahlstrom, and Paul Weaver at the Northland Press before striking out on his own. The tale he told of Beatrice Warde and the animated talk she gave to a group of Philadelphia printers was hilarious. (Beatrice’s talk was so animated that one of her breasts fell out of her dress, and she nonchalantly placed it back with a smile). He could also have an onion skin cover to him, and my files contain many a letter of chastisement for the errors of my way. I sold his archives to a University before he died, and he was amazed at this feat.

I moved my business from Newark to New Castle, Delaware, in December 1979. John and Emily Ballinger moved up from North Carolina

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 and Robert Fleck, of  
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*Left: RDF and the Ballingers  
 Right: 414 Delaware Street, New Castle*



*Millie Fleck & RDF on left at the Morris's moving party*

## A HISTORY OF OAK KNOLL PRESS

and bought into the business, giving me a down-payment of \$20,000, which was just enough cash to allow me to buy 414 Delaware Street. This Victorian storefront had been a butcher's shop during its entire life and was sold to me by Herb Tobin, a legend in New Castle lore. Herb was the last in line of the family butchers and knew every reputable historical fact (and many disreputable facts) about the city of New Castle. We had a first-floor bookshop, and I rented the second and third floor to the Ballingers as their living quarters. This building had great "history" to it, which meant there were cracks and creaks everywhere, and when winter came, the drains froze. The original slaughterhouse behind the house came with my purchase and was quickly converted into a wine storage area. There was a typical New Castle basement—low headroom and dirt floors. It is a wonder that we all managed to work and store the books that we had in the four rooms on the first floor. The Ballingers had different ideas about running a business than I did, and they departed in 1982 for Williamsburg, Virginia, and the Bookpress, another antiquarian book business.

The third Oak Knoll publication was also a Christmas keepsake (for 1980) and was an excerpt of a chapter from Lawrence Block's *The Burglar Who Liked to Quote Kipling*. The part reproduced was a humorous story of what happened to a book thief when caught in Rodenbarr's bookshop. This pamphlet was printed by hand by Henry Morris of the Bird & Bull Press, who was a new-found friend in 1980. Millie, my wife, and I had one of our first dates going to Henry and Pearl's moving party, bidding farewell to Elm Street in Philadelphia. It was all very funny, with lots of wine and lots of speeches that made no sense whatsoever. But it started a relationship that led to many publications and the establishment of a friendship that continues stronger than ever.

As is typical with all bookselling businesses, Oak Knoll kept running out of room. From our start in 1976 in the second floor bedroom of my Newark home, we had moved to a renovated two car garage in that Newark house and then to New Castle. The first floor of 414 Delaware Street in New Castle proved to be too small as well, so Millie and I moved our home and the business up the street to 212 Delaware Street in 1985. This historic house (the Booth house, named after Delaware Chief Justice James Booth) was built in stages with the first section built in 1713, a wing added in 1795, a lawyer's office added for the Judge and



*The "Booth House" with the bookstore in the wooden part*



*214 Delaware Street, New Castle*



## A HISTORY OF OAK KNOLL PRESS

then his son (both Chief Justices) in about 1830, and two additional sections after that. Four rooms had been added behind the lawyer's office and Dr. McGuire had used this for his family medical practice for about 50 years. We bought it in August 1985 from a DuPont attorney whose wife had used the four side rooms for a daycare business (they had seven children of their own). Millie and I had looked at this house three years earlier but didn't have the money to buy it. This time around we were successful and convinced the bank to lend us the money to buy the house, with the proviso that we would move the business into the daycare center space and sell 414 Delaware Street. Once in there and functioning, I saw that if we could rent out 414 Delaware Street, we could hold on to both properties. Our friend and banker Gordon Pfeiffer had stood by us since the beginning and he came through once again. Renters were quickly found and the old 414 property stayed in the family. Our youngest son, Rob (keep that name in mind!), was born in July of 1985, so he got to live in two homes in one month. I also had a new employee start in May of 1986, my father. He just retired this year, thus earning credit as the Oak Knoll employee with the longest tenure. My father and mother moved to New Castle from the Chicago area when my father retired as Director of Research for the Griffin Wheel Company. Dad immediately started working for me at the bookstore. He was our inventory management person and major fixer-upper. His eldest son (me) happens to be hopeless at mechanical things, so his fix-up skills became an important part of his job description. And when the occasional cash flow problem occurred, I knew where a short-term loan could be procured.

Bookselling continued over the period 1985 to 1988 with almost all sales occurring in the antiquarian side of the business and only three publishing titles produced. One of these was Dick Huss's *The Printer's Composition Matrix*, which was the first new manuscript that we published for a larger audience. Many an afternoon was spent in Lancaster visiting this fine old gentleman at his printing company. Dick kept his personal collection of books on printing history there and still set type himself and did personal binding. He eventually sold me many of his books on printing history. We also issued the second book in a series of reprints of important titles relating to printing and binding history (Bib. #12 & 17). In keeping with our theme of adding value to reprints that we published, we asked Paul Koda to write lengthy introductions to each

## BOOKS ABOUT BOOKS

volume, which he did with great skill. Paul was a librarian with a collector's instinct who often guided us with his astute opinions.

In 1984, we took the important step of installing a well-developed software package, which aided us immensely in growing the business. As you can see by this chronology, Oak Knoll Press, with its 18 titles, wasn't exactly exploding on the publishing scene up to 1988.



*Mollie & "Bob Sr.," Mom and Dad*