

Foreword

John Fuller

Now that the Sycamore Press has its own bibliography, and its archives have been acquired by the Bodleian Library of the University of Oxford, it is hard not to think of it as a somehow fully envisaged and decisively executed enterprise. A quarter of a century of literary printing by hand! The notion has a ring of deliberation and conviction. And yet at the time my wife Prue and I launched into the thing pretty much on a whim.

After the birth of our third daughter, Prue was given by an imaginative friend not a bowl of grapes but a book of type. Fired by an old editorializing urge never properly satisfied, and with happy memories of the inky parts of the English Faculty's graduate bibliography course, I rushed out and bought an old Arab clamshell press for £20. It cost rather more to have the broken treadle welded and the whole thing shipped to our garage. Even more to set ourselves up with new Stephenson Blake type and cases, re-cover the rollers, and so on, but we were soon printing. The Arab had formerly produced cricket scores for distribution in the University Parks, and was never meant for more than cards or posters. Nonetheless we cheerfully set about publishing a 36-page booklet imposed in quarto and sewn by hand into a two-colour cover. The typography, the inking and impression, the sewing,

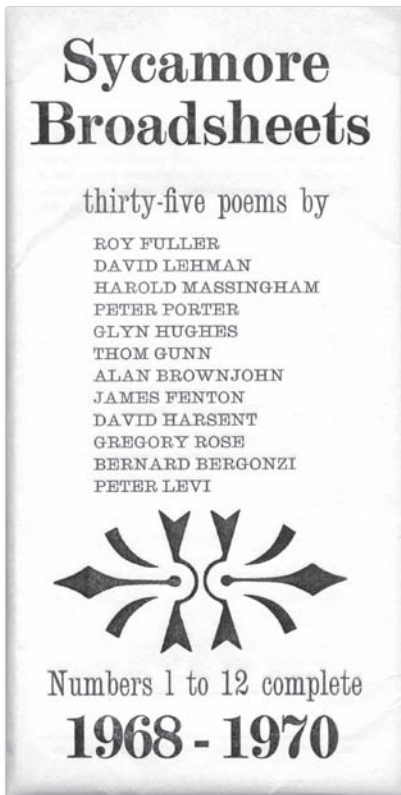
the distribution and the discovered errors all became the occasion for obsession or alarm. No worries about the contents, of course, whose composition I had encouraged and felt deserved immediate circulation: it was the Newdigate Prize poem for 1968 on the set subject of the opening of Japan in the 1850s. It was called

Our Western Furniture, and was James Fenton's first publication.

Simultaneously with the Fenton we started a series of broadsheets (actually sheets of foolscap quarto folded to a triptych), each of which would contain a clutch of new poems and sell for 6d (2½p). The idea was to promote the work of unknown poets by bribing subscribers with offerings from quite famous ones. You paid up, and were sent not only Thom Gunn but Glyn Hughes, not only Philip Larkin but Peter Scupham, not only Peter Porter but David Lehman.

The idea still seems to me a good one, but I am forced at this point to confront the perennial

dashed hopes of small presses. In general, during the lifetime of a press nobody really wants to buy its titles. No one has heard of its authors except the authors' friends. And if you publish a famous name, then no one quite believes you or loses your address even if they get to hear of you in the first place. For example, there wasn't exactly a rush to buy copies of W.H. Auden's 1937 ballad



Sue, at that time nowhere in print or even in existence other than as Sycamore Broadsheet 23. And who wanted the poems of Alan Hollinghurst when I first published them? I do get orders now that he's famous, but they're probably all from investing bibliophiles (and almost certainly they believe *Confidential Chats with Boys* is as racy as *The Swimming Pool Library* or *The Line of Beauty*). We published 200 copies of *Our Western Furniture* at 5 shillings (25p) a copy, and perhaps thanks to a dramatized reading on the Third Programme (itself a result of my sending producer George MacBeth a copy that proved to be miscollated and therefore that amusing thing, an instant rarity) we did sell out after two years. Now a copy of *Our Western Furniture* has been spotted in a bookseller's catalogue at £300, and the Hollinghurst at \$1,300. However, an edition the following year of 400 copies of Norman Bryson's *The Swimmer and Other Poems* has never sold out (I have plenty of copies a quarter of a century later), probably because its student author became a distinguished art historian and not a distinguished poet. My single important piece of advice to would-be small publishers therefore is: whatever you want to print, and whatever your technology, do make sure that you are ready to give a lot of time to publicity and distribution. I never was, and it was a mistake. Once the finished booklet was in my hands (and the poet's twenty-five complimentaries in his or hers) I was happy. Oh yes, I would drive to London and haunt the bookshops, placing half a dozen copies here and there on a sale-or-return basis, but often forgot to return and see what had happened. Fatal.

In my rash technical enthusiasm I found ways to print music, using musical symbols that you rubbed off from sheets of transfer paper (it was called Letraset) and then having zinc line-blocks made. I tried to print linocuts (it was impossible to get a satisfactory impression). Prue learned some bookbinding, and produced

a small number of bound copies of *Our Western Furniture* printed on thicker paper. I even made my own paper and printed on it, despite its being unsized, of varying thickness and generally as rough in texture as egg cartons. But the main point of what we were doing was, of course, to publish new poetry.

I suppose my immediate role model was Oscar Mellor's Fantasy Press, one of the very last publications of which, *Oxford Poetry* (1960), I had edited. Oscar had the distinction of having published Gunn, Amis, Larkin, Jennings and others in the 1950s; I admired both his taste and his chaste typography. If I had had the time and energy I would have tried to publish more of the new poets of the 1970s and 1980s. As it is, I am proud to have acted as booklet-midwife to the emerging James Fenton, Mick Imlah, Bernard O'Donoghue, Alan Hollinghurst, Mark Wormald, Gerard Woodward and others (including members of the John Florio Society of Magdalen, who helped with the production of three collections of their work during the 1980s). Setting type by hand is laborious, and it was never more than a weekend activity, a booklet taking almost a year to produce. Typesetting sometimes seemed to be little more than an excuse for gossipy lunches; getting an edition sewn and guillotined often needed the bribery of stiff vodkatinis. And having sometimes to machine on into the dusk by lamplight seemed a romantic thing to be doing.

My haphazard technical skills must have irritated my poets. No proofs, of course, since once I was inked up I couldn't bear to stop. If the author could be around to correct the text during machining, so much the better: stiffer vodkatinis were in order. (I never had a good enough bribe for the dismal process of distributing type.) Sometimes terrible things happened, as on the occasion when I ran out of the letter *f* while setting a particularly clotted double-spread of Mick Imlah's poem about Quasimodo (a loquacious dramatic monologue: the completed forme seemed to

weigh about as much as a small car). My simple solution (at least, it seemed simple to me) was to ask him to rewrite the poem here and there, losing two or three *fs*. I now marvel that he was willing to do so, turning ‘foul as water’ to ‘pale as water’ and so on. On the other hand, I can’t imagine what the alternative would have been. We couldn’t wait for weeks while I ordered more type. Nor could I be bothered to reprint a whole impression of a Fenton broadsheet when I got the title wrong (the actual *title!*).

The letterpress printer with dirty fingers scouring his empty *f* box, getting a locked knee from treading and callouses from sewing, is closely and wonderfully in touch with his craft, even if he is as lazy as I was. The same goes for the hypnosis of composing: you remember the line as you set it, you remember

it back-to-front and upside-down, you jolly well curse it when you find you haven’t minded your *ps* and *qs* (though with me it always seemed to be *ns* and *hs*) and you find you remember it as you distribute it. You do rather have to like a poem to do all that. I loved them all, and am still haunted by them in ways that I am never haunted by poems I have simply *read*.

