From Jenson to Rogers: Typographic Connections across Six Centuries

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Eusebius of Cæsarea.
De evangeliæ præparatione.
[Venice]: Nicolas Jenson, 1470.

While the Newberry Library, Chicago, owns over two thousand five hundred specimens of pre-1500 printing, its copy of one book — Nicolas Jenson’s edition of Eusebius’s De evangeliæ præparatione — has a special association with the iconic typeface Centaur, created by one of the twentieth-century’s greatest book designers, Bruce Rogers.

Born in France, Nicolas Jenson (1420–1480) was sent by King Charles VII to Mainz, Germany, in 1458 to learn the art of printing. By 1468 he had relocated to Venice, where he set up a workshop, producing his first books in 1470. One (and most likely the first) of the four books he printed that year was by Eusebius of Cæsarea (c. 260–c. 339), an early Church historian whose writings encompassed every field of Christian literary activity. Jenson went on to publish over ninety works before his death. He greatly influenced typography in his own lifetime and is widely acknowledged as the father of the roman typeface. In the late nineteenth century, William Morris revived interest in Jenson when he used his typeface as a pattern for the Kelmscott Press type.1

From his youth, Bruce Rogers (1870–1957) displayed an interest in artwork and lettering designs. After graduating from Purdue University, he moved to Boston to work as a freelance book designer. In 1896 George H. Mifflin, of Houghton, Mifflin and Company, hired Rogers to work at the Riverside Press in Cambridge, Massachusetts, eventually placing him in charge of the Department of Special Editions. He worked there until 1912, experimenting with the designs of over sixty books whose publication he supervised. It was during this period at Riverside Press that Rogers saw a copy of Jenson’s Eusebius (as the book came to be known) in an exhibition at the Boston Public Library. Rogers was immediately taken with its design: not only was the volume one of the earliest to feature a roman typeface, but it was also the first to be designed using typographical principles as opposed to old manuscript models. The design features flowing forms, understated contrasts, and bracketed serifs, all meant to help the eye move across the page. Rogers studied the book intensely. Working from photographs he had taken of it, he designed a type he called “Montaigne,” which he used in a three-volume edition of Essays of Michael, Lord Montaigne, published in 1902–04. Although Rogers employed Montaigne occasionally, he was never particularly pleased with it and reworked its design. He enlarged the photographs of the Boston Public Library’s copy of Eusebius, as well as those he took of one he had acquired, and copied the letters repeatedly, until he was satisfied that he could re-create them. Rogers’s type, however, was not an exact iteration of Jenson’s original; while it paid homage to its fifteenth-century predecessor, it was an independent design in many ways. Rogers sent his designs to the Chicago engraver Robert Wiebking, whom he trusted to cut the type based on his drawings. The type was first used for the 1915 Montague Press translation of Maurice de Guerin’s Le Centaure, and so Rogers renamed his type “Centaur.” In 1928 he oversaw the creation of a Monotype version of Centaur for type-setting machines.2

In the 1920s, Rogers struck up a friendship with Ernst Detterer (1888–1947), head of the Printing Arts Department at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and later custodian of the John M. Wing Foundation on the History of Printing at the Newberry Library. In 1921 Detterer was asked to create a version of Jenson’s typeface for the Ludlow Typograph Company. Wishing to immerse himself in fifteenth-century type design, Detterer made extensive use of the Newberry’s collection. He studied a copy of another Jenson-printed book, Leonardi...
2. Richard Eden's Annotated Copy of Peter Martyr's Decades of the New World

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Peter Martyr d’Anghiera
Petri Martyris ab Angleria Mediolanensis
Oratorium Clarississi...De Rebus Oceanicis & Orbe Novo Decades Tres. Basel: Johann Bebel, 1533.

Though it is unlikely that any book can reasonably be called a “national monument” in its own right, it will be argued here that John Hopkins University’s copy of Peter Martyr’s seminal work, the *De Rebus Oceanicis* (Basel, 1533), surely comes close to the mark. Not only is this book an early and influential copy of the first major history of the Americas, but it can also be rightly described, quite literally, as one of the first intellectual planks in the ship of state that would become the British Empire.

Peter Martyr and Richard Eden: Heralds of the New World

Though he would never cross the ocean himself, Peter Martyr d’Anghiera (1457–1536) soon emerged as a leading figure at the Spanish court with his appointment in 1518 to the royal “Council of the Indies” of the king of Spain. It was in this capacity that Martyr won permanent fame as the official chronicler of the Spanish imperial enterprise in the New World. Indeed, so admired was Martyr during his lifetime for his eight serialized Decades, or “Decades” — composite accounts of the New World discovery, each comprising ten separate chapters — that Pope Clement VII, one of Martyr’s many dedicatess in the Decades, awarded him the honorific of “Abbot of Jamaica” in 1524. Martyr’s Decades would appear throughout the first quarter of the sixteenth century in ever longer and more expansive accounts of Spanish discovery, exploration, and conquest in the West Indies and Central and South America, beginning with the issue of three separate editions of his first Decade (editio princeps, 1511), followed by a further five that terminated in the definitive edition of 1550, which was produced un-Renaissance in the direction of the leading Spanish grammarian Antonio de Lebrija.

By the appearance of the 1533 Basel edition that is the subject of this essay, a version that included only the first three Decades, as many as eight different editions of Martyr’s major work had already appeared in Latin, Italian, and French. For its part, the English-speaking world would have to wait a quarter century longer for its own vernacular introduction to the massive achievements of the Spanish, a lag in time that might well reflect English indifference, or at least a kind of insular inertia, toward the prospect of colonization on the Spanish model. The relative dearth of accessible accounts of the New World discovery and exploration was a fact much bewailed, and ultimately remedied, by Martyr’s energetic translator into English, Richard Eden (c. 1520–1576).

The influence of his mentor at Cambridge University, Sir Thomas Smith, his service to the future Elizabethan secretary of state William Cecil and the explorer Sebastian Cabot, all proved formative for Eden. He eventually ranked highly among the first generation of Renaissance Englishmen who would conspire toward the expansion of the English commonwealth well beyond its traditional borders, an effort that finally culminated in the first official English expedition to find the Northeast Passage, piloted by the navigator Edward VI, and his friendships with the Renaissance magus John Dee and the explorer

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3. Bruce Rogers Papers, Midwest Manuscript Collection, Newberry Library Archives, Chicago.
5. Rogers Papers (note 3).
to the reproach of all Christendom . . . that we have no respect neither for God's cause nor for our own commodity to attempt some voyages into these coasts, to do for our parts as the Spaniards have done for theirs. 2 In the end, it was the Decades that secured Eden's reputation not only as a translator but also as a promoter of New World imperialism at a time when the western hemisphere was still truly "new" to Europeans.

Eden's copy of the 1533 Decades is made all the more intriguing by the extent, and the many imaginative qualities, of the Englishman's copious marginal manuscript notes, which cover nearly every single page of the book. What emerges even within the first few pages of Eden's largely Latin annotations is a very distinct interest in the practical circumstances, frequent serendipities, and occasional horrors that constituted the life and daily bread of the earliest conquistadors. A palpable mood of caution emerges, for example, inspired by the explorers' frequent reports of hazards natural, animal, and mineral. Eden seemed especially interested in lands known to have been inhabited by cannibals, carefully noting the islands where they were said to reside, particularly those with a penchant for lobbing poison-tipped arrows at their European enemies (fol. 2r). Naturally, Eden matched these with various notes on local medicinal herbs that might be used as antidotes (29v, 32v). So too did he express a monitory interest in areas populated by multitudes of crocodiles, bats, lions, and tigers (40r, 50r, 51r, 57r).

Eden's jungle fevers were leavened throughout, however, by just as many wondrous annotations on the native fertility and fecundity of the islands, their superabundance of fruits and vegetation (39v, 59r), and their riches. On page after page, he cited the discovery of precious gems (54r) and much-repeated references to lodes of pearls (45v, 65r–65v). Hispaniola was Eden's Eden, an earthly paradise, the very Elysian Fields (58r, 59r). The annotator was explicit in calling attention to especially provocative purple passages in the Decades, whether by quickly drawing typical finger-pointing "nota bene" marks beside particularly inspiring lines or, at the passages of greatest moment, writing out in long-hand the word "NOTA" in especially large capitals. These flashes of imaginative enthusiasm were in turn very often keyed into particular portions of the printed text with additional detailed interlinear notes, as well as less elaborate manuscript underscoring of the printed text.

Life Imitating Art: The Trans-Atlantic Voyage of Richard Eden's Peter Martyr

Any bibliophile, particularly one contributing to a volume dedicated to important association copies in great American libraries and private collections, must pay close attention to those who owned and enjoyed their books over the centuries before passing them on to subsequent generations. This temptation is especially in evidence with this fascinating jewel of early Americana, for recorded on the title page and the front endpapers is evidence of no fewer than nine of the ten known owners of the book accompanied, often enough, with specific dates of purchase and prices paid, from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century and onward, down to the final known owner, John Work Garrett, to whom it was passed down by his father. The earliest of these was, of course, Eden himself, whose autograph appears simply at the central top portion of the title page: "R. Eden." A contemporary ink inscription in the upper right-hand corner of the initial front free endpaper indicates that a sixteenth-century owner, ostensibly Eden himself, paid a full six shillings for this 1533 copy, not an insubstantial sum at the time. No evidence exists of the book's subsequent owners following Eden's death in 1576, at least until the appearance of the bookplate of the late seventeenth-century churchman and theologian John Milner (c. 1651–1705). As the bookplate notes, Milner received his M.A. from Peterhouse College, Cambridge, in 1675, at which time he proceeded to several ecclesiastical posts at Durham Cathedral and surrounding parishes. Milner is interesting on several levels, most notably as a conservative religious controversialist who published tracts against several leading lights of the early Enlightenment, including Isaac Vossius, sometime librarian to Queen Christina of Sweden; the biblical scholar and philosopher Jean LeClerc; and LeClerc's close friend John Locke.
Milner’s library was sufficiently large to merit a published auction catalogue, produced in 1715, ten years before the death of Dr. John Moultrie.8

Over the course of the eighteenth century, Eden’s copy of Martyr’s *Decades* passed successively through the personal libraries of at least three owners and, though the sequence of association is impossible to reproduce with complete confidence, the first of them was most likely the Reverend John Wibbersley (c. 1729–1782), who signed and dated the title page “E Libris 1776.”9 The book then seems to have been in Milner’s in the north of England, moving from Milner in Durham to nearby Newcastle-upon-Tyne, where Wibbersley held various ecclesiastical positions, and where he is perhaps best remembered for having published a sermon delivered before the Assizes in 1752.8 Wibbersley earned for himself a reputation as a distinguished book collector in his own right, so much so that his personal library caught the attention of the celebrated London antiquarian bookseller Thomas Payne (1728–1799), who is reported to have acquired his collection in 1783.7

Though it is not entirely clear, it is likely that Payne sold the ex-Wibbersley copy of Eden’s annotated Peter Martyr to one of two other known eighteenth-century owners of the book, both of whom were linked together personally through marriage, despite having spent most of their lives on opposite sides of the Atlantic. The first of these was the third successive divine to be associated with the volume, the Reverend Thomas Robinson (c. 1710–1750), whose bookplate appears below the signature of Milner’s on the front pastedown. “Tho: Robinson Coll: Mert Socoius” (Thomas Robinson, Fellow of Merton College, Oxford). The son of an Oxford banker, Robinson took his M.A. at Merton in 1736 and subsequently spent much of his career in Oxford as headmaster of Magdal en School and as chaplain at Merton. Yet another antiquarian and bibliophile in the grain of Milner and Wibbersley, Robinson also became linked with the book trade itself upon his marriage to the daughter of the Oxford bookseller James Fletcher, Jr., in 1776.8

Fletcher appears to have connected Robinson in some form of direct association with the third, and arguably the most remarkable, eighteenth-century owner of Eden’s Peter Martyr, Dr. John Moultrie, who signed, dated, and priced the title page “[j]ohn Moultrie, M.D. 1766,” indicating his having served in 1788 as a delegate for Plymouth, Massachusetts, at the state convention for the adoption of the new federal Constitution and later as a representative and senator in the Massachusetts legislature. President George Washington named him comptroller of the United States Treasury, an office he left when appointed a federal judge for the Massachusetts district, a position he retained for some forty years.10 Davis was described in a memoir published shortly after his death as a deeply committed New England antiquary who amassed a “large and well-selected library, which contained many rare and curious books, [in which] he took great pleasure, and of its treasures he made diligent use.”11

While Davis’s biographer noted that the judge left a “valuable bequest of books” to the library of the Harvard Divinity School,12 it is clear that the Eden copy of the *Decades* was in fact sold on the fourth day of the Davis auction, conducted in July 1847 by the Boston auctioneer Joseph Leonard. The copy of the catalogue at Harvard’s Houghton Library is priced in manuscript, revealing not only that the book was sold for $10 (with no mention of the Eden association in the description), but also that there was stiff competition for rarities throughout much of the sale.13 Other extant copies of the Davis catalogue, which is a rarity in its own right, reveal that several of Boston’s most distinguished antiquarian book dealers attended the sale and competed with one another for books, including George Livermore, a proprietor of the Boston Athenæum and a trustee of the Massachusetts State Library, and his friend Charles Deane, who would go on to found the Library of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, a position he retained for some forty years.14

Other People’s Books

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2. Herons: Richard Eden and Peter Martyr