

## INCIDENTAL TO THE HAND PROCESS by Sidney E. Berger

As a graduate student at the University of Iowa in the mid-1960s, I was enrolled in a sixteenth-century literature class with Professor Oliver Steele. One day the kindly professor came into the small seminar with a handful of pamphlets, Sir Thomas Wyatt's poem "Blame Not My Lute," elegantly printed and hand sewn into brown wrappers. With minimal comment, he gave a few out to interested students.

After class I headed straight for him and asked where he had gotten them. He said that he had printed them himself with the help of the English Department's resident printer, Kim Merker. Having printer's ink in my blood (my grandfather was a printer for nearly 65 years), I was more than intrigued and asked how I could meet this Kim Merker.

I was directed to a room in one corner of the English and Philosophy Building (EPB) basement, and in a few minutes I presented myself to the bearded man who introduced himself as Kim Merker. He asked a few questions. Yes, I had taken printing in junior high school. Yes, I knew how to set type. Yes, I had printed – but only on clamshell presses like the Golding Pearl in the corner of the EPB printing shop. And finally, yes, I was interested in working at the press with him. Within a week I was distributing type, setting type, folding and cutting paper, making coffee, and enjoying grad school more and more.

I worked at the Windhover Press for the last five years of my graduate study at Iowa, leaving when I got my Ph.D. in 1971. At one time or another I saw there Gary Snyder, Vance Bourjaily, Jose Donoso, Nelson Algren, bibliographers Paul Baender, O M Brack, and John Gerber, Donald Justice, Marvin Bell, Paul Engle (who founded Iowa's famous Writers Workshop), Robert Dana, Byron Burford, Paul Nelson, Sherman Paul, Denis Johnson, and scores of others, not to mention observing correspondence from the likes of W.S. Merwin, Thom Gunn, James Laughlin, James Tate, Alan Tate, Philip Levine, Dana Gioia, Mark Strand, Peter Everwine, Charles Wright, and many others who had something to do with the press, the printing, and the personality of the place.

Over the years, I have kept as close to Kim as our physical distances would allow. He taught me fine printing and much more, and for the many ways he has enriched my life I am grateful. Harry Duncan talks of "A Pushy Apprentice" in his note later in this book. In all the ways that Kim gave Harry hell, for years I was Kim's punishment. I must have driven him to distraction in the five years that I worked with him in the shop and in the decades that followed.

In many ways Kim is my bibliographical father. He introduced me to fine books and

thus opened avenues in my life that I have been happily strolling down ever since. This bibliography is presented in the spirit of an apprentice, for I continue to learn from each of Kim's books. For all of the joy that Kim has brought to my intellectual life, this book is an expression of my gratitude.

Kim was born in New York in February 1932. He earned a bachelor's degree in 1955 from Illinois College, having had his college days broken up by a two-year stint in the U. S. Air Force (1951-53). He went to graduate school at the University of Iowa, drawn by its Writers Workshop, whose students were required to take some courses outside the Workshop. Kim enrolled in Harry Duncan's class in Typography, offered in the School of Journalism. He was there infected with the bug of printing and decided that there is where his future lay, not as a poet or teacher of English and writing. His first imprint while in Duncan's class – Bob Dana's *My Glass Brother* (#1 in bibliography) – is a lovely, well balanced, elegant first effort from his press (then called The Constance Press, after Kim's first wife).

In 1958 he founded the Stone Wall Press, and the first title bearing that imprint, *A Book of Kinds* (#4), poems by Margaret Tongue, was a little gem, with its fine illustrations by Con, its beautiful paper, and its refined and tasteful typography. After ten years of printing – from 1957 to 1967 – Kim had earned a reputation for excellence in his art and craft. In 1966 he proposed to the University of Iowa that they establish their own "private" press and, after some tense politics, the University agreed. In 1967 the Windhover Press opened its doors in the basement of the EPB, where it remained until moving to larger quarters on the first floor of EPB about 1970. The first imprint of the Windhover Press, Henry David Thoreau's *Two Fragments from the Journals* (#29), appeared in 1968. This is a lovely little book, on beautiful paper, with a touch of red, a fine illustration, and spare and elegant typography. It was an excellent harbinger of the books to come from that press.

Over the years Kim has published primarily new works of literature, selected with his critical eye. With the famous University of Iowa Writers Workshop at hand, Kim exploited the fortuitous availability of good writers and their texts. For a while he printed the works of young, unknown writers who showed great promise. The International Writers Program, with its students producing translations of their poetry, also offered Kim texts, several of which he printed under the Windhover imprint. The fact that Kim himself had been a poet in the Iowa Writers Workshop indicates his training and shows why he has had, over the years, such a fine critical acumen in selecting texts to publish.

Kim had additional ideas about the direction of the operation that he had established at Iowa. In 1983 he organized the University of Iowa Center for the Book, under which

rubric printmakers, a photographer, a papermaker, a bookbinder, and others joined in making fine volumes in order to raise money for the Center. Not wanting to stick his Windhover subscribers with a large bill, he published an expensive volume not under the Windhover imprint but under the imprint of the Iowa Center for the Book. Samuel Beckett's *Company* (1983; #80), with haunting engravings by Deltas Henke, was the first of two artist's books that Kim has produced (the other being Amy Clampitt's *Manhattan*, #95).

Earlier, from 1970 to 1971, Kim had gone to Champaign-Urbana to be printer in residence and help the University of Illinois set up its own laboratory press at its Center for Advanced Study. It was characteristic of him to want to spread the word about printing, as he has done for many of his students over the years.

Struggling with machinery that had to be conquered, a vast body of knowledge about types and inks and papers and binding methods and materials, shortages of funds and personnel, academicians and administrators who did not quite grasp the importance of his efforts, and an intellect that wanted to expand and was capable of expanding at a much faster rate than the institution that supported him could handle, Kim went on designing, buying paper, contacting writers, reading manuscripts, editing, and, ultimately, printing. The same addictive personality which makes it practically impossible for him to stop smoking is probably one of the things that drive him to continue printing.

I watched Kim enter the shop early some winter mornings, before the sun was even up, almost unsteady on his feet. He would start drinking coffee, and soon he would be setting type with a poised, sure hand. He usually designed his books in privacy; but when I was in the shop and he was doing his layouts and roughs, it was as if I didn't exist. His concentration on the papers in front of him was absolute.

Having had only rudimentary training in printing before my exposure to the Windhover Press, I really did not understand the problems involved in the complete construction of a book by hand. I learned by watching Kim do his makereadies, spread his ink and roll it onto the type, clean the presses, and put his fist through the tympan after a press run. (When a press run is complete, the printer needs to change the tympan on the press. For Kim, the fist through the tympan was a moment of exultation at having finished the run.) I watched the manifestations of his delight when a run came off the press cleanly and evenly inked; and I experienced some of his crustiness when something went wrong, either in the printing or outside it.

The addictive personality I spoke of is akin to another character trait: perfectionism. Kim strives for precision and flawlessness in everything he does. But he quoted Harry Duncan hundreds of times, "There is no plethora of perfection in the world," when

something did not go exactly the way he wished. In appraising his own works, whenever he found a poorly inked letter, a page with slightly imperfect registration, a typo in the text, or any other defect, he would say with a bitter chuckle, "Incidental to the hand process." This became a joke for us, and any time anything went wrong – the Chemex filter tore and dropped grounds into his coffee, the ceiling leaked, his tire went flat, the door to his beautiful antique Jaguar blew off just after he had had the entire car restored – we would say, "Incidental to the hand process."

In compiling the data for the present book, I had the enviable opportunity to sit with Kim for many hours, interviewing him and listening to him talk about his books. In his face as he turned from one book to the next, from one page spread to another, I saw subtly revealed delight and more than anticipated anguish. Many of his books he had not looked at for some time, and turning to them seemed to give him a good deal of pleasure. I saw him shake his head with disgust as he said things like, "I don't know how I could have let her use this paper for the binding" or "What's this? a broken sort!" or "I would never do it this way today." Examining his books approximately chronologically, Kim talked in such a way that the maturation of the man seemed to parallel that of his volumes. He showed pride of exceptional accomplishment and resignation of recognized imperfection – at least what he perceived as imperfection. I did not always agree with him.

For instance, in the first Stone Wall Press book, *A Book of Kinds*, he found fault with the number of decorative elements he introduced onto each page. An illustration, a swash majuscule, and a second color ink (blue) were just too much for him. I see his point, yet I love the book and think it one of the more elegant pieces from the Stone Wall Press. Where I see elegance he sees extravagance. This example reveals his restraint: he has a classical view that the text is the most important thing about a book and that the typography should never distract the reader from the text.

When I left Iowa I went to the University of California, Davis, where I printed for nine years on a Columbian press, and where I taught *Printing on the Handpress* and *The History of the Book*. Both were courses in which I found it appropriate to discuss book design. Since I kept in close contact with Kim, visiting him at least once a year, buying and reading his books, I was able to show them to hundreds of students and other collectors. I never knew which to pull off the shelves. All were models of one design feature or another, and all were classically elegant and attractive. If they had defects, they were in the realm of the bindings or in some of the early experiments in design that Kim tried out and later rejected. But "defects" is the wrong word. Perhaps I should say "things that Kim came to dislike, things he learned from."

In the interviews for this book, Kim revealed one side of himself that rarely shows in