



John Boardley. *Typographic Firsts: Adventures in Early Printing*

*Typographic Firsts: Adventures in Early Printing*. Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2019, by John Boardley. \$40.00. ISBN: 978-1851244737.

For centuries, humans have been surrounded by printed material. It is easy to ignore that certain typographic elements we take for granted now were, at some point, a novelty. John Boardley's *Typographic Firsts*, published by the Bodleian Library, creates awareness for these developments that (mainly) started in the fifteenth century and still shape our books (even the digital ones) in the twenty-first century.

In his blog <[loveTypography.com](http://loveTypography.com)>, Boardley describes himself as a “British-European writer now living in Saigon in the south of Vietnam” but otherwise remains vague about his biography. The Bodleian Library online shop labels him an “independent researcher and design consultant” and his forthcoming publication “Remarkable Renaissance Books” is scheduled to be published soon (<https://remarkable-books.com/>). Otherwise, Boardley remains a mystery.

*Typographic Firsts* offers a timeline, an introduction, twelve main chapters, an epilogue, a glossary and list of abbreviations, endnotes and an index. The 192 pages further offer 70 high-quality illustrations. The introduction presents the general situation in fifteenth-century Europe for the key players, addresses the main problems concerning the change from manuscript to print and the difficulties and dangers of the business of printing (economic and otherwise). The twelve chapters focus on the following “first” aspects: printing, fonts, italics, female typographers, illustrated printed books, colour printing, gold printing, printers’ marks, title-pages, printed music, maps and children’s books.

Overall, the book is well-researched and has 335 endnotes (mostly up-to-date secondary sources) to prove it. Each chapter deserves a book or seminar on its own, so it would be unfair to criticise the, at times, general observations and very few (slight) inaccuracies. It is misleading, however, to label fifteenth-century paper as “inexpensive”, even compared to parchment (p. 10). And whether Dürer really created the woodcuts for Brandt's *Ship of Fools*, as Boardley states (p. 72), is disputed. But overall, Boardley's writing is precise and offers caveats whenever necessary. For book historians, some chapters will not reveal new insight.

But the astonishing breadth (albeit somewhat eclectic) of *Typographic Firsts* almost certainly offers new aspects to readers familiar with book history. The first chapter, for example, is unlikely to introduce new ideas to most SHARP-members (first typographers in Europe addressing the usual suspects). But the chapters concerned with first printed music or first gold printing may uncover less well-known aspects about early printing. The author does a tremendous job at introducing every chapter to make the reader curious. Added to that, Boardley offers many fascinating anecdotes that stress the relevance of each chapter: from the famous provenance story of Harvard's B42 copy (a thief underestimated its weight, consequently fell six storeys with the fall broken by the two volumes) to the acquisition of the only extant copy of Waldseemüller's *Universalis Cosmographia* by the Library of Congress in 2003. Most chapters conclude with a brief outlook on how the respective typographic convention has further developed throughout the decades. The epilogue offers more "typographic firsts" that did not find their way into the chapters (first printers in Britain, first printed Hebrew texts etc.). It concludes with a very succinct history of technical developments (from Koenig's press to digital typesetting) and a brief comment on the survival rates of incunables.

Without explanation, the introductory timeline only lists major printers, first prints and other historical events during Leonardo da Vinci's lifetime. It may indeed be convenient that da Vinci was born around the time Gutenberg first experimented with printing, but da Vinci's death in 1519 seems to be a random date for early printing. Maybe that is the whole point. The book's index, however, does not even list Leonardo da Vinci. Speaking of the index, it is rather extensive and can be considered a real treasure. Even printers named only once appear. (Unfortunately, Peter Schoeffer's last name is misspelled at times and the index does not refer to page 131.)

The overall design of the book is beautiful, with ample white space, especially in the margin, occasionally used for descriptions of the illustrations (unfortunately sometimes omitting information about the date). Undoubtedly, the illustrations, focussing on the novelties in early printing, are a great incentive to own the book as they are well executed: either using complete pages and/or cropping the important element and magnifying it. The text does not always refer specifically to illustrations. For example, Aldus Manutius's printer's mark is



discussed on page 103, but is already shown five pages earlier. Also, since illustrations appear virtually everywhere, the whole book is printed on coated paper, which is a bit frustrating while reading with a direct light source.

There are only a few further flaws to point out. Unsurprisingly, the more traditional topics (for example, title-pages or fonts) get more attention compared to the rather under-researched and thus more interesting topics for book historians (for example, the first female typographers). The “Further Reading” list would work better if offered after every chapter rather than thrown together in one big list. Also, both glossary and list of abbreviations appear rather short and not necessarily helpful for either the general reader or scholar. The Eurocentric approach is most unfortunate, however. Boardley almost completely neglects early printing in East Asia. He mentions it several times, but dismisses it in one sentence: “Early experiments with movable types of clay, wood and bronze in China and Korea had failed to be widely adopted.” (p. 9). Chapter 5 even addresses the *Diamond Sutra*, printed 600 years before Gutenberg, but fails to offer illustrations.

Neither publisher nor author addresses who the target audience is, and the book itself seems ambivalent. It is clearly a scholarly work with over 300 endnotes and the level of detail is impressive and, at times, almost overwhelming. It is confusing, however, that the main text offers definitions for “parchment” and “humanism”, but not for “vellum” or “gathering”. Finally, Boardley usually uses endnotes to refer to the source. But sometimes, he offers random information that has little to do with the topic, whatsoever (for example p. 172, n291).

Overall, *Typographic Firsts'* shortcomings are few and can be neglected. The work feels like a labour of love for both the author and the publisher trying to highlight the fascinating multi-faceted diversity of book history. To the curious general reader, this is a great book gift. But even scholars of the field are in for a treat and might be inspired by this beautiful book.

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