
Reviewed by Patrick Spedding

The blurb on the wrapper of this delightful publication begins “Ephemera has been collected for many years, but only recently has it become widely accepted as material for academic study.” This is a bit of an exaggeration. While it is true that scholars are increasingly interested in historical and very recent ephemera, the printed detritus of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has long been “widely accepted as material for academic study” (to say nothing of earlier material beyond the scope of the present book). An almost identical statement was made two decades ago on Maurice Rickard’s superb *Collecting Printed Ephemera* (1988): “The importance of printed ephemera is being increasingly recognized by collectors, curators and historians.”

Although both books make a claim for scholarly attention, and for an ever-increasing scholarly interest, they both give pride of place to collectors. This is probably a recognition of the fact that—in this area of print history above all others—the private collector still rules. And if the importance of ephemera for academic study really were as widely accepted as it ought to be then the cataloguing and bibliographical control of ephemera would be far more advanced than it is (the decision to exclude ephemera from ESTC being a case in point). Hudson’s bibliography, however, includes a number of important recent studies and reference works, such as Rickard’s *The Encyclopedia of Ephemera* (2000). This suggests that, if the study of ephemera has not yet “become widely accepted” or fully developed, it is at least moving in that direction.

Hudson’s book seems to be written and produced with the collector very much in mind, and is priced accordingly. (Rickard’s *Collecting Printed Ephemera* cost £25.00 in 1988; £30.00 for this book is a bargain.) It is a beautiful book, illustrated with over two hundred printed items, exactly described. The captions are informative and detailed—occasionally more informative than the text. The percentage of reduction or enlargement is given in all instances. It is a pity that the location of items reproduced is rarely provided (by my count, in only about 20% of cases). I assume that the remainder belong to Hudson. If so—and the reader shouldn’t have to guess—this underlines the fact that the private collector still rules.

The book is divided into eight chapters, corresponding to technological developments in printing, particularly in the printing of illustrations. There is no real justification for starting at 1720 and the book really does not quite reach its chronological destination of 1920. But the chapters do an excellent job of tracing developments over roughly two centuries, and on two continents, and take as a common starting point the presence of Benjamin Franklin in London in the 1720s. The fact that Franklin was apprenticed in Boston, and is not responsible for any notable development in “The Design and Printing of Ephemera” in Britain or
America is moot, as is the fact that there really were no notable developments in either country that justify 1720 as a starting-point.

Hudson begins medias in res, with letterpress and copperplate printing undertaken on wooden printing presses, as they had been for centuries. The seven chapters that follow cover “The Iron Press,” “The Rise of Lithography,” “Advancing Technology,” “Colour and Special Processes,” “Artistic Printing,” “The Leicester Free Style,” and “Process Engraving and Commercial Art.” There are a few pages of notes followed by a useful list of further reading. Each chapter provides a succinct explanation of printing processes interwoven with a history of changes in the design of jobbing printing to which these technological developments gave rise.

Rather foolishly, I thought I was already familiar with Hudson’s material: the technical and stylistic developments. I have been collecting ephemera myself for decades and since the advent of eBay I have bought hundreds of items from the period he covers. My interests have led me to read quite detailed histories of, for instance, the development of postcards, poster art, wine- and apple-box labels. But, as it turns out, I had a lot to learn about ephemera and I have to say that Hudson was a patient and entertaining instructor.

The explanation of an enormous number of competing technical developments from the period is supported by clear illustrations of examples and by regular quotation from trade journals. The latter, in particular, give some indication of the impact of these developments on the printing trades. Because the technical developments Hudson mentions are so numerous, it really isn’t possible to provide anything like a systematic over-view of this aspect of his book. But I was only occasionally left confused by his explanation of processes, or searching for an illustration to better understand the text. The use of Ben Day tints to provide colour tones is one process that wasn’t clear to me (92), but became clear from examples on the following pages (ill. 113 and 118)—where one finds a better explanation illustrated by a highly magnified detail. Similarly, “brass-rule work” is mentioned (ill. 134) before one encounters an explanation of this technique (113).

Since Hudson’s emphasis is on layout and design, much of the trade chatter that he quotes concerns aesthetics: the principles enunciated in the hand-press period on how to arrange text for public notices and posters, how to place emphasis using capitals, spacing and varying font sizes. The rectangular printing furniture of a wooden press is one of the reasons for the “characteristic horizontal-vertical stress of letterpress” (ill. 6), but also the size and weight of fonts such as Caslon. The iron frame and lever-action of Stanhope and Columbian presses led to a larger platen, which allowed much larger and fatter fonts and larger woodblocks—not just larger sheets of paper—to be printed.

New techniques for printing artwork facilitated the ornamentation of, and the integration of text and illustration on, ephemeral printing. Trade writers produced guides for the layout and design of illustrated jobbing work and discussed the practical problems a small jobbing printer faces when choosing from among so many
new fancy fonts, stock images, and printing techniques. As the industry expanded, geographically and in the volume of work undertaken, industrial production techniques were applied to printing and the production of artwork. In the larger publishing plants jobs became more specialised. Stock images and stock printing became widely available and commissioned artwork was rapidly produced using a production-line division of labour.

Printing competitions in trade journals and the exchange of “fancy” jobbing work clarify the changing aesthetic principles at play and help show the increasing importance of “artistic” layout and design towards the end of the nineteenth century (Ch. 6). The tradesmen called upon to arrange text and images, and harmonise colours, in jobbing work for “artistic printers” needed artistic training and ability. Not surprisingly, artistic printers and printers using elaborate multi-colour printing techniques began to see themselves as artists, or artisans of the exalted William Morris type. Although elaborate and artistic printing gave way first to a more free and simple (Ch. 7) and then a more austere style—especially in America in the early twentieth century—the importance of the artist/designer endured. By the end of the period considered by Hudson, book design was well established as a separate and specialised job within the printing industry, being undertaken, for the first time, by commercial artists with no background in typesetting or the printing industry.

I only noticed one typo (ill. 87 “xx%”) and my only real complaint about the book concerns the placing of images within the text. The reader needs to consult images almost continually. Although most of the images referred to in-text are within a few pages of these references they are almost never on the same page, suggesting that close proximity was not a guiding principle in the layout of images (even allowing for the difficulty of laying out such a heavily-illustrated text). However, this, and my previous quibbles, hardly detract from an otherwise excellent book that will, I hope, support further developments in the bibliographical recording and historical appreciation of ephemera.