

Power of the Press

“Printing and Protestantism seem to go together naturally”.
Eisenstein

The Pilgrims were the disciples of the Word. They read in the Bible,

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ... And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.” (John 1:1 & 14, King James Version)

In due time, faithful witnesses recorded in writing the messages of the Old and New Testaments. Righteous men and women produced commentaries and devotional books to aid the church. Finally, in the latter days, God's precious gift of printing powerfully multiplied the spread of the Gospel word.

The printing press, to the eyes of faith, was not a machine of human invention, but a link in God's providential governance of the world. The believers could never imagine history proceeding by chance.

God is in control, “and we know that all things work together for good to them that love God”. (Romans 8:28) The printing press was one of these “good things” from the hand of God.

Printing in England was Controlled by the King and Church

Printing was then only possible in London, Edinburgh, and Dublin; and at the University Presses at Oxford and Cambridge: but it was chiefly carried on in London.

Even there, if a man were so rash as to buy type and a hand printing press; he would be immediately sent to prison for that offence.

For no one in London was allowed to print anything unless he were a Freeman of the Company of Stationers: and even of those Freemen, only a certain few might print books; though all of them were allowed to sell or bind them.

There was a tradition amongst the London trade that, besides the King's Printers and other Patentees, there ought to be Twenty-two Printing Houses, and no more, in the Metropolis. But, for years together, there were not even so many as that.

On 9th May 1615, there were nineteen of such Printing Houses in London; possessing thirty-three hand printing presses.

The Master Printers could not have as many hand printing presses as they would like. Everything was regulated and fettered.

Each one, on his filling the previous vacancy, started with one; and, as he rose in the Stationers' Company, he might increase that number to two of such presses, and no more.

Of the above nineteen Master Printers, the five junior ones had only one press each; the fourteen senior ones had two each.

The London compositors then usually set up the books in type in their own houses; and took the 'formes of type' to the residence of the Master Printer to be machined.

The custody of the hand printing press there was regarded then as dangerous a thing as the custody of dynamite would be now. It was most carefully locked up every night, in order to prevent secret printing.

Regularly, every week, Searchers, appointed by the Stationers' Company, went through the house of each Master Printer, in order to see what books were at press, and whether they had been properly licensed. By this organization, and under these conditions, were produced the books of the Golden Age of English Literature.

It was impossible for anything that the King or the Bishops might choose to regard as obnoxious to be printed in London.

The Stuarts (the royal house of Scotland, England, Ireland and later Great Britain) had an instinctive jealousy of the power of a free Press; and, so far as in them lay, kept it under a strict supervision. Every Work, before it could be set up in type, had to be licensed by two persons:

- (a.) By a Chaplain of the Archbishop of Canterbury, or of the Bishop of London, for the time being: which two Prelates were more especially charged with the Censorship of the Press, up to the meeting of the Long Parliament in 1640. And this, not by force of any statute of the realm, as by a survival of that illimitable authority which formerly pertained to the Roman Catholic Bishops of England as 'guardians of faith and morals.'
- (b.) By one of the two Wardens of the Company of Stationers of London.

On being licensed, the Work was usually entered in the Registers at Stationers' Hall, London; the entries of which, beginning about 1553, continue, with one or two breaks, down to the present day. Of the entries in these Registers between 1553 and 1640; we have privately printed a Transcript, in five quarto volumes, containing about 3,200 pages.

Such then being the genesis of an English book in the days of the Pilgrim Fathers, one can see what a one-sided struggle they had to carry on. The Bishops could freely allow anything to be printed that made for their Order ...

... but nobody in his senses could expect them to allow for the press anything that challenged the divine right of the Hierarchy; or that attacked the iniquities and illegalities of the Bishops' Courts, as they existed up to the time that the Long Parliament swept them all away.

So the Rev. Richard Baxter tells that the Puritan and Separatist treatises were, in his early days, very hard to be met with; and were secretly read and passed from hand to hand: and, being prohibited, they were the more eagerly sought after.

Religious Reformists Saw Printing as a Tool to Spread the Word

"At the dawn of Reformation, Martin Luther turned to the printing press and the mass-produced book. As Luther's reforming activities speeded along, he gave God the glory for every victory. His God was indeed a mighty warrior and fortress."

“It is wonderful’, proclaimed Luther, ‘how at this moment in history all the arts have come to the light...like the art of book printing, God's highest and extremest act of grace, whereby the business of the Gospel is driven forward’.”

“The author of many books, Luther had frequent dealings and frustrations with printers; many failed their high calling. Some printers grabbed for intolerable profits, and others settled for producing trivial work. Luther hoped that the printer would be as spiritually devoted as he himself, not trivial and money hungry.”

“The technological invention became a very significant factor in the history of the Reformation. Examples of Protestant printers at the service of Protestant religion could be found in many Reformation areas. “

At Geneva the printing industry was one of the most important economic enterprises. The English Reformation-inspired reform of religion. From its early days, King Henry VIII and his chief assistant Thomas Cromwell made effective use of the printed Bible and other books for rallying the English nation behind the break with Rome.

“For the practical politician, printing was a useful tool for the ‘management; of religion. From the standpoint of faith, printing was a gift from the heavenlies. As the English monarchs moved toward Protestantism, printing carried the Reformation message to the people.”

“Whenever the opportunities for Puritan printing diminished in England, the doors opened in Holland. God always provided for His own, Puritans believed, and when one door closed, He opened a different one. ‘And if our fountaine be dammed up in one place, God will open it in another.’”

The Dutch Netherlands with its renowned printing resources offered many opportunities for English and Scottish nonconformists. Although not convinced of the freedom of all printing, Protestants cherished for themselves the Dutch freedom to express their ideas and to print them.

Nearly from the dawn of English Protestantism, the Low Countries served as a haven for nonconformist English Christians. Safe in their Dutch sanctuary, Pilgrims and other dissenters could set up churches, schools, and print shops ‘in exile’.”

They smuggled papers for publication beyond the seas and then smuggled the printed books back to England or Scotland. Printing books and pamphlets was one of the many Pilgrim activities in the Netherlands.

By career they were merchants, artisans, soldiers, or perhaps they were abroad as students, scholars, and travellers. These overseas British people had financial resources for religious causes, which included support for refugee preachers, churches, schools, and payment for the printing of worthy books.

Printed books from the Dutch presses moved almost daily across to England and Scotland.

Although Puritanical religious books were the most famous, the total output of Dutch-English printing consisted of many kinds of books.

The Dutch printers excelled in quality of printing, but what commended Holland most wonderfully to Protestant writers was the relative freedom of printing. Many topics too hot for the printers of London and Edinburgh found a favorable printing reception in the Netherlands.



Fishing for Souls, 1614, a satirical allegory of Protestant-Catholic struggles for souls during the Dutch Revolt

“Leiden, like Amsterdam, excelled as a center of English-language printing in the seventeenth century. The city of more than 50,000 population had a sizeable English-Scottish community, some drawn by the university, the oldest and foremost in the Netherlands, others for commerce and for jobs in the textile workshops.”

“The printing trade was an important economic boon to the city; and with its ties to university scholarship, it provided an intellectual stimulus which flavored the life of the city. In fine printing Leiden gained a world reputation.”

“There is no city in the entire world where so many people live off of the book trade. Whole streets are full of book-stores.”

“The printing of English and Scottish books at Leiden grew steadily alongside the growth of the British churches. Several hundred English and Scots lived in seventeenth-century Leiden. Although economic motives were a large cause of settlement, religion also powerfully motivated many immigrants.”

“The Separatists as a group sought religious sanctuary. Leiden had two seventeenth-century British churches, both with strong Puritan leadership but split over the theological issue of separation or non-separation from the Church of England”

“The first was the English Reformed Church, established in 1607, the other the Separatist church, which moved to Leiden in 1609. The non-Separatist English Reformed people were a group of 200 families (1609), served by pastors Robert Dury (1610-16) and Hugh Goodyear (1617-61)”

“The Separatists were headed by the Reverend John Robinson, and by 1620 the congregation of ‘Pilgrim Fathers’ grew to about 300 persons. In 1620 a part of the group led by elder William Brewster emigrated to New England, but the larger part, including pastor Robertson himself, remained behind.”

(After Robinson's death in 1625, the church had a downhill existence and faded out in the 1640s. The English Reformed Church was more durable, existing until 1807) (All in this section is from Sprunger, Trumpets from the Tower)

Printing was regulated by local and/or regional authorities. Itinerant printers of the late 1500s traveled from town to town peddling pamphlets and broadsides produced on small hand-held presses.

In 1608, Leiden banned foreigners from selling such printed matter by 'calling out' their wares.

The basic printing laws in Holland were put forth in the edict of 1581, renewed and updated at various times from 1608 through 1651.

The salient point of these regulations was to require a printer to include information in his productions about his name, place, year, author, and translators.

Anonymity and libel were illegal and fines for such behavior were heavy.

Thus, by the printing regulations of the time, many of the books printed for Puritan and Separatist uses in Leiden and Amsterdam were illegal by reason of the omission of printer, author, or other essential data. (Throop)

The number of men involved in a printing operation in this period was at least three and averaged about four per press: the bookprinter, one or more compositors (or letter setters), who would have to know how to read, and one or more journeymen.

Jasper Tourney, municipal printer in Gouda in 1613, claimed he needed no fewer than 5-6 men, who needed his constant supervision. (Throop)



Brewster, Brewer and Winslow Begin Printing

After the Separatists established their church at Amsterdam, one of their first tasks was to publicize their cause through printing.

Among Separatists, Robinson had prominent standing. Through his many publications he became one of the most-quoted Separatist theologians, and the church was a model of excellent Separatist practice.

The Separatist churches of Amsterdam and Leiden, although differing somewhat on the nature of strict Separation, produced one large brotherhood of religion.

When the Separatist group first came over to Amsterdam, they entrusted their printing to whatever Dutch printer would take their work. Eventually some of their own members, headed by Giles Thorp, set up an English shop which handled their printing work. (Sprunger, Trumpets from the Tower)

Printing by English-speaking men in Leiden began with Thomas Basson around 1585. Thomas Basson was a witness October 6, 1584 of a notarial deed at Leiden, in which he is described as 'bookbinder, citizen, and inhabitant:' His house in 1584 and 1585 was in the Kloksteg, a narrow lane opposite the University building.

Govert (or Godfrey) Basson, son of an English printer in Leiden but apparently born in Cologne about 1581, helped William Brewster launch the 'subversive' so-called Pilgrim Press in 1616. Govert's father, Thomas Basson, had settled in Leiden in 1584.

Thomas had located his home and shop near the University, and printed theses for students. He also rented rooms to students.

His book store and home appear to have been a magnet for English nationals living in Leiden and he was bookbinder for the University's library. When Thomas Basson died in 1613, his son Govert continued his printing and bookselling business in Leiden.

William Brewster arrived in Leiden in 1609. It is likely his facility with Latin (and English) equipped him for the tasks of proofreader and English teacher. (Breugelmans) Brewster eventually took a job teaching English at Leiden University. (DutchNews.nl)

It is likely Brewster learned the printer's trade from Thomas Basson, whose type was apparently used by William Brewster for a 1616 printing of work written by the deceased Robert Parker. William Ames and John Robinson in Leiden apparently financed this publication.

Then, under the leadership of the merchant Thomas Brewer (who financed the venture) and his colleague, William Brewster, the Separatists had a printing press based in Leiden and operated between 1617 and 1619.

Brewster was the Elder (lay assistant minister) of a group of English who avoided persecution in their homeland by moving to Amsterdam in 1608. In May of 1609, most departed for Leiden, to the south. They lived as a more or less close religious community. (Breugelmans)

One of Brewster's many activities in Holland was running a publishing firm that produced religious books and pamphlets, many in English. Complicating matters was Brewster's stubborn insistence on meddling with political affairs back home in England. (DutchNews.nl)

Assisting Brewster and Brewer was Edward Winslow. Winslow had been an apprentice to a stationer in England but after a dispute, decided against fulfilling his contract and began to travel in Europe, meeting the exiled English Separatist church in Leiden, Holland, in 1617.

Winslow helped the Separatists in their underground printing activities and soon became one of the leading members of the group. He married Elizabeth Barker in 1618, listed as a printer in the marriage records. (Mayflower400UK)

A Commemorative plaque notes “the site of the Vicus Choralis (or Pilgrim) Press” in Leiden.



Many controversial tracts and books had been written in Scotland and England, whose publication was prohibited in those countries; and Brewster was shrewd enough to see the demand for such literature, and the possibility of building up a publishing house for the Nonconformists. (Champney)

Brewster used his printing press to churn out a series of political pamphlets that he sent to Scotland to badmouth the monarchy. (DutchNews.nl)

King James had gotten wind of the press with its – in his eyes – pernicious books. Very soon Brewster was suspected to be the printer – not surprisingly, as his name and address are mentioned on two of the books – and James ordered Dudley Carleton, his ambassador in the Dutch Republic, to take measures to stop the production of these books as soon as possible.

Initially, the Dutch government, the town council of Leiden, and the board of the University, of which Brewer was a member, were not very willing to cooperate. (Breugelmanns) The publishers had powerful friends who fought this demand.

Moreover, there had been certain rights and privileges accorded to the University, and its students could not be arrested by the civil authorities. The matter became one of the feuds between ‘Town and Gown,’ the University protecting Brewer, who might have defied the demands of the law. He very magnanimously consented of his own accord to go to England and answer to the King for what he had done.

The matter became almost an international, episode, and his safe conduct was assured the Dutch Government. But instead of promptly trying Brewer, he was committed to prison, where he was left to

languish for fourteen years, being only discharged by the Long Parliament when the Puritan party came into power.

All this time William Brewster was a hunted man, and he and his friends knew that he stood in danger of a similar fate. For these and other reasons the Pilgrims determined once more to take up the staff and wallet, and this time to remove to so distant and isolated a country that they would be able to preserve their religious liberty. (Champney)

They never managed to apprehend him, but they did seize his printing press. Brewster later managed to make it onto the Mayflower before it set sail for the Plymouth Colony in September of 1620. But not all of the Pilgrims went on the voyage.

Those chosen to leave were primarily the youngest and strongest among them. The rest of the congregation was expected to join them on a future trek after their new home was successfully established.

Only a few dozen Pilgrims joined the initial crossing. The remainder of the ship's passengers were made up of experienced sailors and various 'hired hands' from England that were eager to seek better lives in the New World. (DutchNews.nl)

Information here is primarily from, *Patience a Daughter of the Mayflower*, Champney, 1899; DutchNew.nl; *Reevaluating the Pilgrims as an insular group in Leiden - 1609-1620*, Nockels; *George Soule - Printer's Devil in Leiden*, Throop, Vol.-43-No.-4-Autumn-2009; *Trumpets from the Tower*, Sprunger; *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe*, Eisenstein; *Mayflower400UH-org*; *The Pilgrim Press: a Press That Did Not Print (Leiden 1616/17-1619)*, Breugelmans; *The Pilgrim Press, A Bibliographical & Historical Memorial Of The Books Printed At Leyden By The Pilgrim Fathers*, Harris; *Trumpets from the Tower: English Puritan Printing in the Netherlands 1600-1640*, Sprunger

In an effort to provide a brief, informal background summary of various people, places and events related to the Mayflower, I made this informal compilation from a variety of sources. This is not intended to be a technical reference document, nor an exhaustive review of the subject. Rather, it is an assemblage of information and images from various sources on basic background information. For ease in informal reading, in many cases, specific quotations and citations and attributions are often not included – however, sources are noted in the summary. The images and text are from various sources and are presented for personal, noncommercial and/or educational purposes. Thanks, Peter T. Young