

The Schoolmaster Printer of St Albans.

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TO St. Albans belongs the honour of being one of the first towns in England where the art of typography was introduced, and we are fortunate in possessing in our County Museum a leaf from one of the books issued by our unknown townsman, the Schoolmaster Printer. I purpose to give a brief account of the facts which have been elucidated respecting his life and work.

The earliest dated example of printing, omitting Chinese specimens, is of European origin of the year 1423, and is of the block-printing description; about the year 1450 separate types were introduced at Mainz, and the art then made rapid strides. William Caxton, the first English typographer, commenced printing at Bruges in 1474, but came to England two years after and issued the first book printed in our country in 1477.

On December 17th, 1478, a book entitled "St. Jerome," and bearing the date 1468, was printed by a press in Oxford, but the date is evidently a typographical error for 1478. The same press issued an "Aristotle" in 1479, and on March 14th, 1479-1480, another work of which only a few fragments remain.

The first book issued by the St. Albans press appeared either in 1479 or 1480. In Chauncy readers are led to think that the second printing press in England was established in our town, and this assertion was perpetuated by local guide books; I believe I was the first to combat this theory locally and to point out that St. Albans must be relegated to the third position. Chauncy is also responsible for calling the printer "John Insomuch," from the opening words of his two English books, namely, "Inso myche that it is necessari" in the prologue to the "St. Albans Chronicle," and again "In so moche that gentill men and honest persones" from the "Boke of St. Albans."

There is an attractive and pleasing mystery hovering over the identity of this unknown mediæval printer. We gather that he was, or had been, a schoolmaster, and if the monopoly granted to the Grammar School by the Charter of 1310 were still in force, and we have no reason to

doubt that it was, he was necessarily a master of that foundation. It must not be assumed that he was a monk of the monastery, for the relationship between the fraternity and the school was simply that of patronage and protection; it was not supported out of monastic funds, and was frequented by outsiders who paid tuition fees; it was thus not even an avenue of admission to the monastery. I have thought it advisable to dwell somewhat on this point, because Chauncy states that our schoolmaster was "a monk, and erected a printing-press in the monastery, where several books were printed, one entitled 'Fruit of Time,' another 'The Gentleman's Recreation, or the Book of St. Albans,' so termed because printed here in a thin folio anno 1481, and compiled by Julian Barns, the Abbess of Sopwell." We have here probably the maximum of blunders in the minimum of space. He was not a monk, did not live in the monastery, and, among other things, Juliana Berners was not Abbess of Sopwell; her name does not occur in the list and there is no room for it.

If you refer to the report upon the Muniments of the Gape Family, published in 1905 by our Society, you will see on page 11, under date October 24th, 1500, a "Grant by John Marchall, schoolmaster" and others "to Thomas West, merchant of Calais, etc.," of two crofts in the fee of Newbury. In the "Home Counties Magazine" for 1901, Mr. William Page announced that he had discovered the will of John Marchall, "master of the school in the town of St. Albans," made on January 21st, 1501. One of the witnesses to the will was William Smith, usher, being the first usher, or second master, whose name is preserved. He left the bulk of his property to Joan, his wife, and this proves the assertion that he must have been a layman. Mr. Page suggested that John Marchall was the schoolmaster-printer of St. Albans. Unfortunately for this theory the following colophon was printed in the "Chronicle of England" in 1497 by Wynkyn de Worde:—"Here endyth this present chronycle of Englande wyth the Fruite of tymes, compiled in a booke and also emprynted by one sometyme scolemaster of Saint Albons, on whoos soule God have mercy; and newely in the year of our Lord God 1497 emprynted at Westminster by Wynkyn de Worde." From the fore-

going it is evident that the unknown must have died before 1497 or in that year, and that John Marchall, who died, as we have seen, in 1501, could not have been he. We are thus left in the dark as much as ever respecting his identity.

Eight books in all proceeded from the St. Albans press, six in Latin, all more or less educational, and two in English. Of one book, "On the Elegance of Cicero," by Augustine Dactus, only one copy is extant; it is in the Cambridge University Library, is undated, but considered to have been printed in 1479. No doubt it was intended primarily for use in St. Albans School, as was also the next, "The new Rhetoric," published in 1480. The British Museum catalogue calls this "The first book printed in St. Albans Abbey." It is obvious that if it had been printed in the Abbey it would have been so described, but it is distinctly stated in the colophon that it was printed "at the town of St. Albans, A.D. 1480." If the book had been printed in the monastery it would have been mentioned, for, later on, when John Hertford printed for the fraternity, his works are distinctly stated to have been produced at the Abbey. The third book was one upon logic, of which only a few pieces remain, and the fourth, Canon John's "Questions upon the Physics of Aristotle," appeared in 1481, and the leaf in the Museum is page 153 of one of those books. The fifth book was by Antony Andrews, a Franciscan friar, called "Questions upon Aristotle's Logic," a vast volume of 325 leaves, which appeared in 1482. The three works of Aristotle were in all probability printed for use in Cambridge University, which, unlike Oxford, did not then possess its own press.

Anxious if possible to outdo Caxton, our unknown launched himself upon a fresh venture by publishing in 1483 the "English Chronicles" under the following title: "In the yeer of Our Lord MIIIICLXXXIII. and in the XXIII. yeer of Kyng Edward the fourth at Saynt Albons, so that all men may know the actys namely of our noble Kingys of Englonde is compyled togeder thys book and moreover is translayt out of Latin into English." (An imperfect copy of this book, forming a portion of the library of Bishop's Stortford School, was

sold on July 27th, 1893, and purchased by Mr. Quaritch for £220).

Respecting the leaf in the Museum, so far as can be ascertained only two copies of the book are extant, and those are in the Bodleian Library; in the British Museum there are only fragments of pages. This leaf owes its preservation to the fact that it was used in the binding of some other book. One page is in perfect condition, but the other is disfigured, having apparently been smeared round the edges with material used in binding. It is not a proof-pull, for it is rubricated. The water-mark in the paper is not rare, being a bull's head with a star above the horns.

In conclusion I may mention that a connection existed between the presses at Westminster and that at St. Albans, some of Caxton's founts being used by the local printer; that the latter was of north country extraction, judged by his phraseology, and that his spelling was phonetic. The last book printed was the famous "Boke of St. Albans," which appeared in 1486.

In deploring the fact that none of the works of the great unknown are in the rich library of books possessed by our ancient School, which is undoubtedly the most probable place in which to seek such treasures, I consider it a matter for congratulation that the Museum possesses an example of the work of one who lived and laboured in our town four centuries ago, and is known far and wide in the literary world as the Schoolmaster Printer of St. Albans.

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