

TYPOGRAPHERS ON TYPE

AN ILLUSTRATED ANTHOLOGY
FROM WILLIAM MORRIS TO
THE PRESENT DAY

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IT HAS BEEN SAID (by the American calligrapher Paul Standard) that there are two books which belong in every working printer's library: Updike's *Printing Types*, and Johnston's *Writing & Illuminating, & Lettering*. Johnston's book, first published in 1906, and still in print, was also called (by Sydney Cockerell) 'the best handbook on any subject'. It is clearly and wisely worded, and beautifully illustrated: the drawings by Noel Rooke of the calligrapher's hands are especially remarkable.

Johnston's essay about Cobden-Sanderson has been chosen here because it tells us as much about Johnston as about his subject. After his death, his life was written by his daughter Priscilla Johnston. His skill at making and repairing things is a recurrent theme, as in 'Edward stayed with the Peplers whenever he spent a night in Town. After one such visit, when he had been teaching the boys to make darts, David remarked to his father "if there hadn't been flying machines Mr Johnston would have made one". Gerard Meynell seems to have agreed for he wrote Edward a postcard saying "Dear Sir, I am sending two sardine tins. Please make me a motor bicycle and a telescope".'

In *Modern Book Design*, 1958, I wrote: 'Edward Johnston was a great man, declared to have been a saint by those who knew him, a claim not contradicted by study of his face in the few photographs of him that survive. When a pupil said to him that he did not believe in perfection, Edward Johnston replied "I believe in the Book of Kells".'

See *Edward Johnston and English Lettering* by Anna Simons, Heintze & Blanckertz, Berlin/Leipzig n.d., c. 1937; *Tributes to Edward Johnston, calligrapher*, The Society of Scribes and Illuminators, Maidstone, 1948; and *Edward Johnston* by Priscilla Johnston, Faber & Faber, London, 1959.

ON A MASTER CRAFTSMAN BY A SCRIBE WHO WORKED FOR HIM

We first met when Mr T. J. Cobden-Sanderson was acting as secretary to the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society at the New Gallery in 1899. I had come to the secretary's table to ask some question – probably a tiresome one, such as exhibitors bother secretaries with – and he, softening his refusal, told me the story of a previous secretary who had been asked by an old lady whether he had fed the goldfish (the secretary, a tall and very shy poet, had drawn himself up to his full height, and had answered: 'Madam, the man who feeds the goldfish is another man').

On December 11, 1898, the entry in Cobden-Sanderson's journal (just published – October, 1926) reads: 'I must, before I die, create the type for today of *The Book Beautiful*, and actualise it – paper, ink, printing, writing, ornament, and binding. I will learn to write, to print, and to decorate.'

And on February 3, 1900, the entry is: 'Last Thursday night, February 1st, I

joined the Calligraphic Class at the Central School of Arts and Crafts'.

This was the class in 'Writing, Illuminating and Lettering' – probably the first of its kind – which, in some fear and trembling, I had undertaken to conduct in the previous autumn. It was held at the old London County Council Central School in Regent Street. Mr Cobden-Sanderson attended it only a few times – there was but little which he could get out of it – but he was much interested in the characterisation of letter forms by means of the pen. His son and daughter also attended, and I remember one evening when he sat beside me watching me write, with his son beside him. He said in a characteristically whimsical way: 'It is like watching some strange bird' (to the embarrassment of his son, who said in a loud whisper, 'Don't, Daddy, don't!'). In the spring of that year he gave me the commission of writing out his *Tract on the Ideal Book or Book Beautiful*. This tract was printed by The Doves Press that autumn and published in February, 1901. It was the second book published (the *Tacitus* was published in January) and it constitutes a key to the work of the Press. I suppose that no one has ever written with such insight, or so eloquently, of *The Book Beautiful*, and this brief comprehensive vision might well be taken to heart by all honest printers.

When we moved to No. 3 Hammersmith Terrace – only two doors from the Press – he frequently brought me small commissions to draw initial letters, headings and the like, which were afterwards engraved on wood.

Of the technical and typographic work of The Doves Press I shall not presume to speak: but we can all appreciate its works, as readers – if we are so fortunate as to possess, or be able to borrow, any of them, and we shall find them an admirable exponent of a master mind. I believe that these books were at once the plainest and the most idealistic ever produced by any of the 'Private Presses'; they recall the words, 'Whose adorning, let it not be that outward adorning. . .but let it be. . .the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit': they depend not upon ornament, nor even upon conventional 'decorative treatment', but upon their utter legibility and high quality. They fulfil the principle laid down by him: 'The whole duty of Typography is to communicate to the imagination, without loss by the way, the thought or image intended to be conveyed by the Author'. And here, in view of the reckless 'book decoration' now so common, I am constrained to quote from his journal for 1899: 'Pattern must be articulate. Its parts seen, that is to say, in some way to belong to another. Then pattern must be like the imprint of tender fingertips, touching or caressing what it loves. All other pattern is soulless and dead, and the book had better be plain and untouched – lettered only.'

To those who knew him well, he himself showed the qualities of legibility – simplicity, distinctiveness, and proportion. He had mastery and reverence combined

with a quaint whimsicality, and he had an almost childlike way in his statement – whether in a public lecture or his writings – of the overpowering emotions inspired in him by the beauty of the earth, by the mystery of the cosmos and of being, and by visions of untold human possibility. (He would have exclaimed with the Hebrew Prince, ‘I have said, ye are gods; and all of you are children of the Most High’.) This statement, of thoughts which most men do not think about in their working hours, or do not think it good form to mention in public, even led to his being misunderstood by many who did not know him, or knew him but little. Even one or two friends of mine were among these – in the attitude of the world to a prophet. Even some of the people ‘of his own country’ (of arts and crafts) admired his work but failed to understand him. His mind approached things by the ideal, theirs by the practical. Yet few craftsmen would vie with the perfect technique of his work, and everything he touched he beautified.

All his visible material environment in all its smallest details, his work, his house, and his use and wont in both work and home, were made to harmonise to the best of his power – and he had a prophet’s eye and a craftsman’s skill – with the divine beauty of the universe.

And like the universe itself, he had many sides – a keen sense of humour keeping wrath and impatience in check – and this gentlest and most fastidious of craftsmen confessed to me once, when we were comparing notes on the difficulty of the too-obedient student (who depended too much on his teacher and wondered all the time if he were doing what he ought) that he wished that he could put up a notice over the door of his workroom, saying, ‘For God’s sake do something damned careless!’

In connection with my work I was brought into frequent contact with him, and saw much of him in the course of his ordinary life and affairs. And he knew me well enough to ‘pitch into’ me if what I had done was not up to time or standard. I subscribed all my notes written to him, ‘Your Faithful Scribe’. But when I had been ‘pitched into’, or was conscious of deserving it, marked my repentance by the subscription, ‘Your sometimes Faithful Scribe’. He probably always regarded me as ‘some strange bird’, with a kind of affectionate and amused appreciation: a feeling which I paid him back, under reverence.

He was a seeker all his life to the end. This is the dominant note of his journals. It might be said of him that ‘He searched the scriptures – of the cosmos – for in them he thought we have eternal life and that they testify of God’. He found much, as we know from by his works, and I believe that ‘in some distant star’ he is still finding.

I close this brief tribute to a Prophet and a Master Craftsman, with an extract

from an exordium characteristically printed by him in a catalogue of the books of The Doves Press: 'Greater than all that we can imagine, is the Reality of Life from its Beginning – IN THE BEGINNING GOD CREATED THE HEAVENS AND THE EARTH – in the infinitudes of Time and Space, amid which, whether as a fact or as an idea, we still live today; greater than all we can imagine is Reality, and Man's life as part of it, and it is this which, in the language of the compositor, we must "compose", and in the language of the publisher, "publish".'

Quondam Scriba Fidelis,
EDWARD JOHNSTON

Edward Johnston (1872–1944), from John Henry Nash, ed., *Cobden-Sanderson and the Doves Press*, San Francisco, 1929.

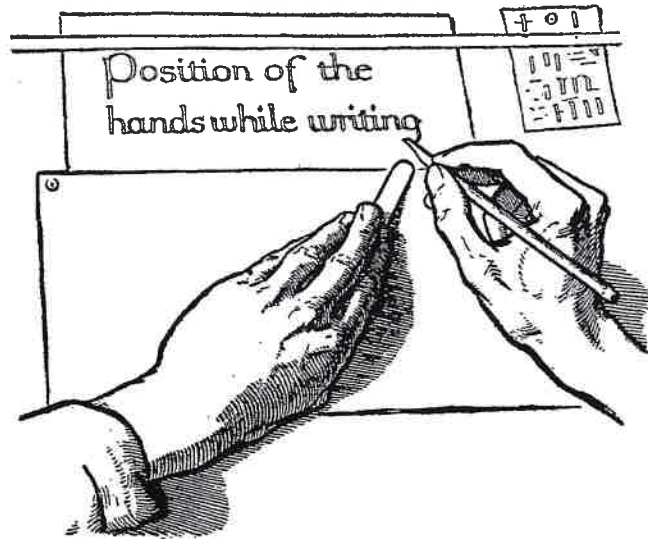


Fig. 41 in Edward Johnston's *Writing & Illuminating, & Lettering*, drawn by Noel Rooke.