

A New Incunable for College

So firmly is the Father of English Printing ensconced in the pantheon of English Worthies that to chance upon William Caxton's device in an unremarked book has for long centuries been the stuff of any bibliographer's daydreams. A new copy ought to be a newsworthy discovery, so it was with one hand reflexively stretching out towards the telephone that the present writer recently found himself halted in front of a book in the College Library. On this occasion, the work of a few breathless moments killed the phonecall to the newspapers—although that is not to say that the book is unremarkable; far from it. It may not be an unknown Caxton but it ranks a close second, for it is a rare copy of the *Golden Legend*, translated by Caxton, in an early edition by Wynkyn de Worde. Wynkyn, the Father of Fleet Street, is usually understood to have been Caxton's assistant; certainly, he continued printing under Caxton's device from Caxton's shop in the precincts of Westminster abbey after the master's death in 1492. Our edition is dated 8 January 1498.¹ It was one of the last editions that Wynkyn printed at Westminster, for probably towards the end of 1500 he moved his shop to the Sign of the Sun in Fleet Street—establishing a connexion with print that Fleet Street has only recently let slip—and there he remained until his death in 1534/5.

The edition from which our copy descends was the third edition of the *Golden Legend*, otherwise known to survive in only a couple of more-or-less complete copies and a small number of others that are variously imperfect; there are also many single leaves in North American collections. The edition is dated 8 January 1498, but Lotte Hellinga has given reasons for preferring the year 1499, in that the state of the typeface used here (Type 4^c: 94G) does not otherwise occur in dated books until 1499, which suggests that the date 1498, given in roman numerals, might better be construed as a misprint.² The New College copy is fragmentary, communicating forty-seven leaves of the edition's total number of 448. But the pages are consecutive and thematically consistent; indeed, they are a discrete portion of the whole, for they communicate the section on the lives of the Old Testament Patriarchs, from Adam to Judith. This section was left out of Wynkyn's second edition, so was imported here from Caxton's first. (Our copy has lost six leaves at the beginning, containing the lives of Adam and Noah; it begins acephalously in the Life of Abraham.) Caxton's device is on the recto of the back leaf (sig. Gg6) with two woodcuts on the verso representing the Annunciation, above, and the Crucifixion, below.³

The text (largely) is Caxton's translation into English from Jean de Vignay's French translation of a Latin bestseller, the *Legenda aurea*. That work is a hagiographic compendium of saints' lives arranged according to the liturgical year, compiled in the thirteenth century by a Dominican archbishop of Genoa, Iacobus de Voragine (d. 1298). It was vastly popular in the middle ages: more than one thousand surviving medieval manuscripts have been reported, and some one hundred and fifty printed editions appeared during the incunable period. Indeed, it was the work's success in print that encouraged stationers to try the market with translations. The *Legenda aurea* was printed in German translation in 1471–2, in Italian in 1475–6, and in French in 1476 (many incunable editions followed in these three languages); editions were first printed in Dutch in 1478, in Catalan in 1494, and in Czech in 1495. In England, it was William Caxton who translated the work, augmenting the text in places, and who then printed it under the title *The Golden Legend*, at Westminster sometime between 20 November 1483 and March 1484 (*STC* 24873–4). A second edition was issued by Wynkyn de Worde in 1493 (*STC* 24875). Ours is the third edition, printed by Wynkyn with a new,

¹ BMC XI, pp. 220–21; *Bod-Inc* J-070; Duff 411; *STC* 24876.

² BMC XI, p. 220; her description of the edition is the last word.

³ E. Hodnett, *English Woodcuts, 1480–1535* (London 1935, repr. with corrections 1973), nos. 271², 241².

improved typeface and a better quality of printing. Although it cannot claim to own priority among the three incunabular editions, it is the best looking of them.

The reason that this printed book has escaped notice for so long is that it is tucked in behind a manuscript; they are bound together as MS 320. Henry Octavius Coxe in his summary listing of New College's manuscripts (1852) fails even to mention the presence of this printed matter in the book, which lay beyond the strict definition of his own interests.⁴ The manuscript portion of the present volume—the part that caught Coxe's eye—is a mid-fifteenth-century copy of the Book of Psalms from the later version of the Wycliffite Bible.⁵ The Psalms, as representing a digest of scriptural wisdom, escaped the medieval Church's normal prohibition against biblical translation, and was a favourite text for the Lollards. Thirty-five medieval copies survive of the Wycliffite Psalms, of which the New College manuscript is one. Taken together, the two parts of this volume, the Wycliffite Psalms and this particular portion of the *Golden Legend*, bear a thematic coherence, sufficient perhaps to communicate something of the *Golden Legend*'s early reception. For while study of the more or less legendary lives of saints had no validity in a reformed English Church, the Patriarchs had a firm basis in Scripture and their example might be dwelt upon to the profit of the godly. The combination of the Psalms in a legible English translation and of Bible stories from a *Golden Legend* that had otherwise been purged of the non-biblical company of saints, unite to produce a volume that might be characterized as an up-to-date, evangelical book of devotions.

Evidence on when the two portions might have been united is hard to come by. Any original binding there might have been was removed in the later seventeenth century when the present binding was applied for New College, part of a larger campaign of rebinding at the College and the earliest evidence for the College's ownership. Neither half of the volume has received much by way of annotation, although one reader of the printed portion had an interest in penance, marking for attention a sentence in the History of David about the penance of standing naked in a hole up to one's head (sig. Ee7^v), and another in the History of Solomon: 'For he lete hym to be drawen thugh Jherusalem and bete hymself with roddes and scourges that the blood folowed in the syght of all the people' (sig. Ff3^v). The volume is a happy find and would repay further investigation.

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⁴ H. O. Coxe, *Catalogus codicum mss. qui in collegiis aulisque Oxoniensibus hodie adservantur*, 2 vols (Oxford 1852), vol. 1, *sub* New College, p. 115.

⁵ As edited by J. Forshall & F. Madden, *The Holy Bible, containing the Old and New Testaments, with the Apocryphal Books*, 4 vols (Oxford 1850), 2. 736–888; the copy goes with the two prologues. The manuscript also conveys the six Old Testament Canticles, either in the translation of Richard Rolle or else in the translation found in revised Lollard versions of Rolle's English commentary, and other short doxologies and prayers, including two in Latin.