



David Finkelstein, *Movable Types: Roving Creative Printers of the Victorian World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018, 196 pp. Hb £60. ISBN 978-0-19-882602-6

Reviewed by **Vicki Callanan**

In *Movable Types: Roving Creative Printers of the Victorian World*, David Finkelstein analyses complex emerging networks, agents and systems of organisation developing in typographical and compositing spheres in the long nineteenth century. He approaches these aspects from an often overlooked perspective: the development of print culture via the movement and activities of individual printers; the processes and apparatus which allowed them to operate; and the growing cultural identity which encouraged them to adopt new forms, and to fight for their rights as workers. Significantly, Finkelstein focuses on trade history and labour systems, providing a much needed addition to existing studies which have tended to focus on textual history and the Book Arts movements.

Finkelstein's detailed and interesting study considers these issues from three distinct perspectives. In the first chapter, he considers roving printers: itinerant operators who travel regionally and across national borders, to find new spheres of work and to share trade knowledge. In the second chapter, he details emerging union activities of striking printers, with research into localised action which had much wider impact. In the third chapter, he discusses the possibly surprising offerings of creative printers, who wrote poetry and prose alongside their typographical activities.

In the first chapter of his study, Finkelstein explores various examples of print diaspora which saw workers both moving from the centre (urban or centralised contexts) to the periphery (more disperse regional locations) and moving sideways, or across national borders, to expand trade opportunities and awareness of the craft into new and developing territories. Diligently backing up his findings with source material

from union records and archives, as well as photographic evidence such as trade union cards, Finkelstein elucidates the development of infrastructure. As printers moved around, scaffoldings such as trade organisations, the implementation of trade union cards and travelling tickets made this movement possible, and transferred across borders, between local and national networks. His focus on ‘tramping typographers’ is especially fascinating, and again draws links between individual endeavour and entrepreneurship on the one hand, and developing systems on the other: a case in point is the granting of relief and benevolence in times of sickness, which protected both the individual and the wider trade. These developments are contextualised against the much wider context of “settler capitalism”, where roving printers played an important role in the expanding economies of newly established towns, such as in the setting up of local and regional newspaper imprints. Here, as throughout, these issues are explored in the context of the United Kingdom and then widened to consider how systems such as emigration grants enabled travel to contexts like the United States, Canada and Australia.

The aspirations and the tensions of the growing trade union movement forms the focus of the second chapter of the text, encompassing data from the diverse settings of London, Edinburgh, Toronto and Dublin. The chapter considers similarities and cross-pollination in the intentions and impacts of disputes in these locations, whilst also taking into account the wider implications of strikes and general workplace unrest in the decade between 1870 and 1880. The sustained analysis here identifies specific demands; for example in London, where strikers sought to negotiate a nine hour day, higher hourly rates, and safer conditions for work. In Edinburgh, these issues were complexified by differences in opinion between press operators and machine men and compositors. In this way, the text highlights some of the inherent weaknesses in mechanisms of protest, and some of the reasons why these demands were often unrealised. One of the key inclusions in this chapter, and a context which is worthy of further study, is Finkelstein’s discussion of women compositors, a development which he describes as an “unanticipated byproduct” of the strikes in Edinburgh. The recruitment, activities and ultimate crushing of these pockets of emancipated labour is an important feature of the chapter, and of the text as a whole.

The third chapter, which considers the work of creative printers, approaches perhaps the most surprising and neglected contributions: of those who lived and worked as compositors, typographers or press operators, but who also wrote poetry and/or prose, and contributed to trade journals alongside their employment. As well as the works of individual ‘printer laureates’, this chapter discusses the shifting functions of these trade publications – away from the poetic, literary miscellany with a purpose of informing and entertaining, and towards agents of union activity, or more information-based content with a more activist stance, as the century progresses. Here, as with other places in the text, Finkelstein tells the stories of specific typographers and compositors, whose contributions have thus far been entirely omitted from the history of print. Examples include the compositor-poets Alexander Smart and Robert

Brough, with excerpts of Brough's poetry reproduced for the readers alongside discussions on the use and importance of regional dialect in these texts. The chapter discusses the fluctuating viability of trade journals, including Australian and American versions which experienced financial hardship as their content and readership experienced shifted. Having commenced his exploration with a rejection of the limited stance of evaluating print culture solely from the stance of the Book Arts, Finkelstein knits these seemingly disparate positions closer together in the final section of his text, exploring how publications such as the Scots Typographical Calendar blurred the lines between genre and form.

Throughout, Finkelstein's consistent focus is on the actions of individuals, but with special attention on how these connect into a wider movement of change, organisation and the development of identity in the latter years of the Victorian Era. As these individuals, instances, and iterations of trade activity emerged, so did a growing sense of what it meant to be a printer in Victorian England.

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