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TWO SUSSEX HAND-PRESSES



The Vine Press, Steyning

Sussex as a literary county is world-famed, but of its crafts less is known. Yet a craft which is of close relationship to the art of writing is that of printing and book binding, and in Sussex there are at present two hand presses. Neither of them is more than 20 miles from Brighton, for they are the St Dominic's Press at Ditchling, and the Vine Press at Steyning.

On Ditchling Common, two miles from the village of Ditchling, there is a little community of craftsmen and handworkers, the chief of whom is Mr. H. D. C. Pepler, who owns the St. Dominic's Press. A few hundred yards behind "The Crank," Mr. Pepler's house, is found the long double roomed building which houses the actual Press. In the first room of this building is found the Press itself, a rather complicated looking piece of machinery, but apparently easy to work, as a demonstrator will prove. The compositors work here, for the type is set up in this room. In the other room piles of books are to be seen lying about; some are in a half finished condition, for the books are hand-bound at the Press by Miss Dawes, sometime student of the Brighton School of Art.

One very interesting book published here is called "King George and the Turkish Knight." This is an old mumming play, noted down from Mr. T. Standing, who last took part in a performance given in a Sussex village 30 years ago. It is a good example of genuine folk drama played by the peasantry in the 18th and 19th centuries, and its origin dates back to the days of the Miracle Plays.

The list of the St Dominic's publications is quite long; among those bearing attractive titles, "Brewing Beer" is one, and "A Plain Plantain" is a recipe book of country wines, dishes and herbal cures, taken from a 17th century household book.

Many books of local interest are to be found here. "Vegetable Dyes" by Ethel Mairet, was the first book printed at this Press, and it is now in its fourth edition. Mrs. Mairet lives at Ditchling; there she produces home-dyed and home-spun clothes. "Sculpture" is an essay by Eric Gill, who used to live at Ditchling. Two other books by him are to be found at this Press: "Songs Without Clothes" and a book of selected engravings.

An important branch of the work done here is the printing of broadsheets, rhyme sheets and posters. Examples of these are exhibited on the walls of the building, and many of the posters on view are copies of those specially printed for fairs and markets in Sussex villages. Copies of the charming broadsheets and rhyme sheets can be obtained from the Poetry Bookshop in London. This fact alone is a guarantee of the excellent work done at this Press, for Harold Munro's Poetry Bookshop is a Mecca of lovers of literature.

All the publications of this Press are pleasing to read, for the printing is clear and most of the paper used is hand-made. A distinct "magpie" effect is gained, for the paper is pure white and the type is jet black. One could only wish that more general books on Sussex could be printed here, in this little Press just below Ditchling Beacon.

The other Sussex hand-press is at Steyning. If one turns out of the High street and walks along Church street, on the left will be seen a quaint little cottage, with two big yew trees growing on either side of the door. This cottage is the charming home of Mr. Victor B. Neuburg, the proprietor of the Vine Press. The Press works are attached to the north end of the cottage, and here are printed some very good books of Sussex verse which add another link in the wonderful chain of Sussex literature.

Mr. G. D. Martineau, the famous Sussex poet, has had two volumes of poetry published by this Press. Of the volume entitled "The Way of the South Wind," one critic very appropriately says: "It smells of the Sussex soil and the Sussex airs, and it brings us Sussex men and women—all good, and it rings true."

As Mr. Martineau is descended from the same family as the famous 19th century authoress, Harriet Martineau, one is not surprised to find such a young poet with so gifted a pen. The title of his other book which the Vine Press has been fortunate enough to secure is "Teams of To-morrow," a collection of lively poems on cricket and sport and out-of-door life.

Four tales of old Russia are collected under the title of "Before the Storm." These are little cameos of a social order that has passed away never to return and the authoress is Princess Ourossoff, a Russian aristocrat. The explanation of the title is made clear by the prologue which says "As relics of an extinct age little fossils of an old and romantic social order these sketches are presented to the discriminating reader."

Mr. Neuburg is himself a poet of no mean talent, and among his songs of Sussex, collected under the title of "Swift Wings," are to be found one or two of the most genuine poems ever written about Sussex. One short lyric on a famous beauty spot in Brighton, "Old Steyne," contains the following beautiful lines:

"It is divine, an emerald light
Set in the sombre heart of night,
A wavering nocturne in a town,
With silver starlight looking down,
Upon the breeze-tossed, dark green trees,
Murmuring soft night harmonies."

It is the reading of such a lyric as "Old Steyne" that enlightens one as to why the Vine Press publications are so attractive. The poet and printer, the artist and crafts man are fused in the one man, with the result that his creative faculties are expended on both word-painting and word-printing.

There are other interesting books published here, and although not so many as at the St Dominic's Press, they are books which probably have a wider appeal.

The Vine Press do not do their own book binding but it is done by Mr. T. H. Kensett, of Brighton. Although the Vine Press cannot boast of so famous an illustrator as Eric Gill (many of whose wood-engravings are in publications of the Ditchling Press) their books are illustrated with wood cuts. The Vine Press have over 70 blocks made by three brothers of Steyning Denis, Eric and Percy West.

The beautifully produced books of these two hand-presses are a credit to Sussex.