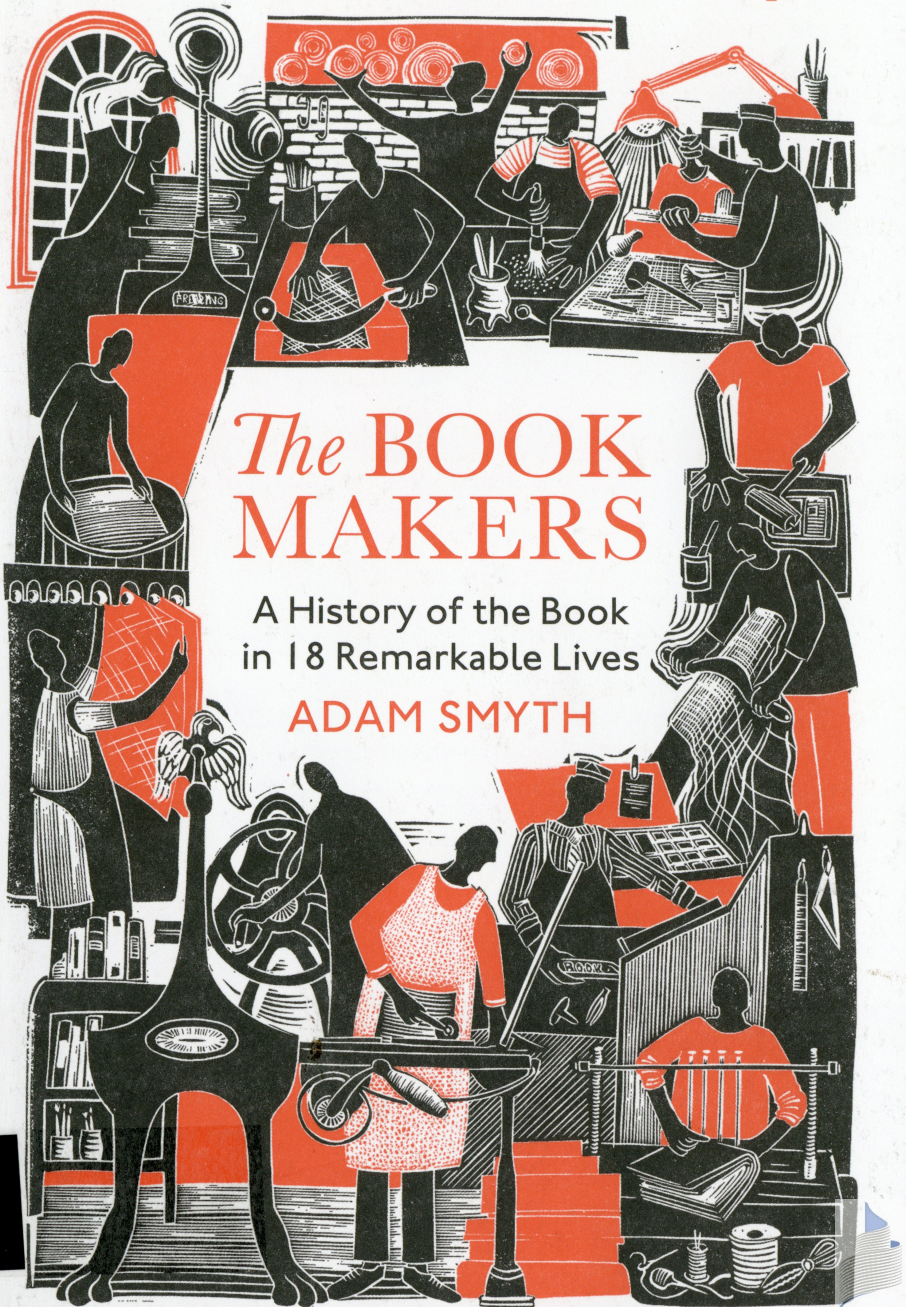


'THIS REALLY IS THE LOVELIEST OF BOOKS' *i Paper*



# The BOOK MAKERS

A History of the Book  
in 18 Remarkable Lives

ADAM SMYTH

'I CANNOT RECOMMEND IT HIGHLY ENOUGH' *Spectator*



## Praise for *The Book-Makers*

‘A fascinating book that speaks volumes’  
*Financial Times*, Summer Reads of 2024

‘Fun and informative . . . *The Book-Makers* gives you a lively sense of the way in which books have been made and unmade, crafted, handled and spliced down the centuries’

*Prospect*

‘Vivid and often-surprising . . . The charm of *The Book-Makers* comes from its interest in wear and tear, blunders and errata, the spontaneous and the scrappy, the residual and the recycled – and in edges, of pages and bindings, society and taste’

*Times Literary Supplement*

‘Fierce scholarship and fascinating print nerdery come together here as he illuminates brilliantly a cast of printers, binders, artists, papermakers and library founders. There is a wonderful immediacy to Adam Smyth’s narrative’

*Country Life*

‘Fascinating . . . Should teach even serious book-nerds a heap of forgotten and precious information about the making of books . . . As full of surprises as any novel’  
David Bellos, author of *The Novel of the Century*



‘Amazing. From typeface to papermaking to a whole new-to-me democratic world of book interaction like commonplacing and zines, this book is a soul-expanding celebration of the human spirit’  
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‘A brilliant time-machine of a book. Each chapter feels like a party packed with old friends and new, and Smyth plays the gregarious host with aplomb’  
Joseph Hone, author of *The Book Forger*

‘I relished *The Book-Makers*: bursting with fascinating details and vividly drawn characters, its stories will delight any book lover, and Smyth delivers them with an erudite brio’  
Roland Allen, author of *The Notebook*

‘Almost every page – almost every paragraph – fizzles with facts, allusions, speculations, tidbits of etymology and gems of historical interest’  
*Wall Street Journal*

‘*The Book-Makers* stands as a monument to presses past: a delightful survey of bookish achievements from the fifteenth century to the present, attentive to the printerly peculiarities of each age’  
*New Criterion*

‘Erudite, insightful and hugely enjoyable . . .  
A fabulous, first-class read’  
Giles Milton, author of *The Riddle and the Knight*

## ADAM SMYTH

Adam Smyth runs the 39 Step Press, an experiment in printing, from a cold barn in Oxfordshire. He is also Professor of English Literature and the History of the Book at Balliol College, University of Oxford.





ADAM SMYTH

# The Book-Makers

A History of the Book in Eighteen  
Remarkable Lives

PUSTAKA PERDANA



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for Eliane





PERDANA  
LEADERSHIP  
FOUNDATION  
YAYASAN  
KEPIMPINAN  
PERDAMA

Meanwhile the blades of the scissors do not snap but glide.

Tom Phillips (1937–2022), 'Henri Matisse: The Cut-Outs'





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# Introduction

This is a book about books, and the people who made them. It's about grand, two-volume folio Bibles, and quickly Xeroxed 2020s zines, and the many books in between. It's about the lives that brought these forms – forms variously wondrous, strange, familiar, new – into being. It's about fragments of the earliest fifteenth-century books that only barely survive, and eighteenth-century volumes of such typographical elegance and calm that they sailed forth serenely (as one observing historian put it) 'to astonish all the librarians of Europe'. It's about books whose perfection makes us approach them with reverential care – *look at the inking! look at the binding! feel the paper!* – and books covered with the scribbled doodlings of readers heckling from the long-ago past.

Here is a moment when the history of a book came alive. I am in the Bodleian Library in Oxford, working my way through a pile of big folio volumes written by the magnificently singular Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle (1623–73). Cavendish is fascinating for all kinds of reasons, not least as a scientist (the first woman to attend a Royal Society meeting), and as the inventor of something like science fiction – her *Blazing World* (1666) describes a young woman invading the world with an army of talking animals and submarines pulled by 'fish men'. Cavendish was also what we'd call an early modern celebrity: 'The whole story of this lady is a romance,' wrote Samuel Pepys in 1667, after spending a fruitless day trying to catch a glimpse of her coach. On title pages, she styled herself 'Thrice Noble, Illustrious, And Excellent Princess'. Pepys imagined 'her footmen in velvet coats, and herself in an antique dress', and he fixated on the image of Cavendish bowing from her box in the theatre after a performance of her play *The Humorous Lovers*.



(183)

As if they kept wise Counfels for their Lives ;  
 For when they Fly away they feek new Hives ;  
 So Men, when they have any great Defign,  
 Their Thoughts do gather, and in heaps Combine ;  
 But when they are Refolv'd, each one takes Flight,  
 And striveth which firft on *Defire* fhall Light ;  
 And thus Thoughts meet and fly about, till they  
 For their Subfiftence can find out a way :  
 But Doubting Thoughts, like Droans, live on the reft  
 Of Hoping Thoughts, which Honey bring to Nef ;  
 For like as Bees, by their Stings induftry  
 Get Honey, which the finglefs Drones live by ;  
 So Men without Ambition's Stings do live  
 Upon th' Induftrious Stock their Fathers give ;  
 And fome do Steal another Poets VVit,  
 And Drefs it up in their own Language fit :  
 But Fancy into every Garden flies,  
 And fucks the Flowers fweet from Lips and Eyes ;  
 Sometimes it Lights on thofe that are not Fair,  
 Like Bees on Herbs, that Dry and VVither'd are ;  
 As pureft Honey on fweet Flowers lies,  
 So fineft Fancies from young Beauties rife.

*The Prey of Thoughts.*

**I**F Thoughts be the Mind's Creatures, as fome fay,  
 Then, like the reft, they on each other Prey ;  
 Ambitious Thoughts, like to a Hawk, fly high,  
 In Circles of Defires mount to the Sky,  
 And when a Covy of young *Hopes* up Springs,  
 They ftrive to Catch them with their fwifteft Wings :  
 Thus, as the Hawk on Patridges doth Eat,  
 So Hopefull Thoughts are for Ambition's Meat :

Thoughts

*A printer's fingerprint in Margaret Cavendish's Poems,  
 and Phancies (1664), p. 183.*

I am midway through Cavendish's *Poems, and Phancies* (1664) when in the margins of a page I see a dark smudge. I look closer. It is ink. Closer still. A blurred fingerprint – at least I think that's what it is – parts of the swirling lines just about visible.

This is a fingerprint of the man who printed the book in 1664: an accidental, left-behind signature. And for a moment, as if by lightning, the process of this book's production is lit up: the print shop of William Wilson in 1664, the noise and the paper windows and the stink, a pressman plucking sheets still wet with ink from

the press and, before hanging them to dry on high strings running across the room, touching mistakenly an inky finger to the margin of the sheet, the sheet which, after drying, folding, stitching, and binding, was acquired by the Bodleian, and which, after a gap of 359 years, I am peering at now. That fingerprint doesn't summon into being the nameless print-shop worker who held the page I am looking at, but it does let me see Cavendish's book for what it is: a physical object, made by a little group of individuals at a particular time. Books tell all kinds of stories – romances, tragedies, comedies – but if we learn to read the material signs correctly, books can tell us the story of their own making, too.

*The Book-Makers* is a story of how books have been made by individuals across a period of about 530 years: from the very early printed books made by the Dutch immigrant Wynkyn de Worde working in London in the 1490s, to the zines of Black-Mass Publishing in New York in 2024. In between, we'll explore paper-making and binding, typography and cut-and-paste Bibles, libraries and small presses, huge books and ephemeral ballads, collectors who couldn't stop and publishers who produce a new book every week. The story has an English, French, and North American spine, but any history of the book is sprawingly international, and we'll take in China from the second century, and the Islamic world from the eighth.

*The Book-Makers* is a history of the book told through biographical portraits of eighteen men and women, each of whom made, or is making, vital contributions to the development of the book as a physical form. Some of these names will be familiar, but many will not: this is not quite the roll call we might expect.

Many of these lives are richly documented, and loom out at us from the past in something like 3D, like Nancy Cunard, printing in rural France in the 1920s and 1930s. Some, like Sarah Eaves, partner and wife of John Baskerville in eighteenth-century Birmingham, were always there in the archive, but historians have been blind to, or uninterested in, their presence. Others, far back in time, like William Wildgoose, binding books in 1620s Oxford,

are harder to grasp: we see fragments, glimpses. We arrive in the room just after they have left – but their books stand in a pile on the desk.

*The Book-Makers* is a history of the book with people put back in: not a techno-determinist account where abstract mechanical forces drive change, not a chronology of inventions, but a narrative teeming with lives, and a history that is full of the contingencies and quirks, the successes and failures, the routes forward and the paths not taken, of these eighteen book-makers. People make books, and this is a history of the ways they have done so. *The Book-Makers* is a history that is also a celebration: a celebration of both the printed book as a technology at the heart of human culture, and a celebration of the rich and unpredictable particularity of the lives that put it there.

One crucial coupling in this volume is that of books and people. Another is that of books and time. One of the refrains running through *The Book-Makers* is that books have a complicated, deeply layered, often looping relationship to temporality. The book in my hands has existed at all moments between 1664 and today, and will continue to endure long after I have gone. The marks on books – the readers' annotations, the ticks or crosses, the heckling commentaries, the signs of damage and use, the scribbled records of ownership – describe this journey.

*The Book-Makers* is organised chronologically, from Wynkyn de Worde to Yusuf Hassan, but it doesn't argue for a linear narrative of improvement. It isn't the case that books, as objects, get better as the years tick by: a Whiggish version of history as improvement or a process of refining doesn't work. The paper used by Gutenberg in the first printed Bible, with its brilliantly clear bunch-of-grapes watermark, is of a time-defeating quality unsurpassed by modern industrial processes. The pages look today as they did on a summer's morning in 1455. At William Morris's Kelmscott Press in the 1890s, books were made to the specifications of medieval manuscripts, even though that age had long passed. Morris's books flicker between historical periods, belonging to several, not

one. At Thomas Cobden-Sanderson's Doves Press in the early twentieth century, type was designed to resemble Nicolas Jenson's letters from 1470s Venice: Doves Press books were purposeful anachronisms, books that didn't fit, ways of refusing the drift of technology at a time when industrial book production was developing fast. And chronological adjacency – the sense that an object is explained by the thing next to it in time – is not always the best basis for comparison: Laura Grace Ford's cut-and-paste *Savage Messiah*, written in the early 2000s and battling the gentrification of London, finds a natural interlocutor in Mary and Anna Collett's collaged, cut-and-paste Bibles from the 1630s.

*The Book-Makers* is a history of the physical printed book that has been written in a contemporary culture which is increasingly online. I have chosen not to devote a whole chapter to e-books or online publications, although the book-makers of the final chapter have lots to say about these. One way of understanding the relationship between the digital and print in the 2020s is to look back to history at other moments of media change, like the relationship between manuscript and print in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Printing didn't wipe out a culture of handwritten texts: the relationship was a kind of mutuality. Early printed books – including the first of them, Gutenberg's Latin Bible of 1455 – tried very hard to look like handwritten texts, in part because, like all new media scrambling for credibility, print disguised its own novelty, but also more generally because handwritten texts were the only available models. What else could print look like apart from manuscript? The idea that the new media form (print) replaced the old (handwriting) just isn't right, any more than digital has replaced print today. The most popular kind of early printed text, the almanac, actively encouraged handwritten interventions: one almanac from 1566 offers itself as a space for anyone 'that will make & keepe notes of any actes, deedes, or thinges that passeth from time to time, worthy of memory, to be registered'. Far from killing off scribal activity, early printing functioned, in the words of the book historian Peter Stallybrass, as 'a revolutionary

**'A passionate paean to the book, in all its different forms...marvellous...fascinating...thought-provoking'**

**Adrian Tinniswood, *Literary Review***

**'Absorbing...The Book-Makers explores the lives of a handful of men and women who each contributed something distinctive to the history of the book. The story they collectively tell is not one of continuous technological improvement but rather a cyclical drama of making and remaking the idea of the book itself... offers many delights for bibliographical mudlarkers... Smyth breathes both books-as-objects and their creators back into life'**

**Daisy Hay, *Financial Times***

**'This really is the loveliest of books and you will never again take for granted reading a physical volume'**

***i Paper***

**'It is, in the truest sense, an enthusiast's book; one that deserves to find enthusiasts of its own'**

**Tim Smith-Laing, *Daily Telegraph***

**'Agile storytelling and chatty erudition evoke not just the physicality of the book but also its innate humanity'**

**Hephzibah Anderson, *Observer***

**'Sparklingly learned and it enough'**

**John**

**Kinokuniya**

THE BOOK-MAKERS : A

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