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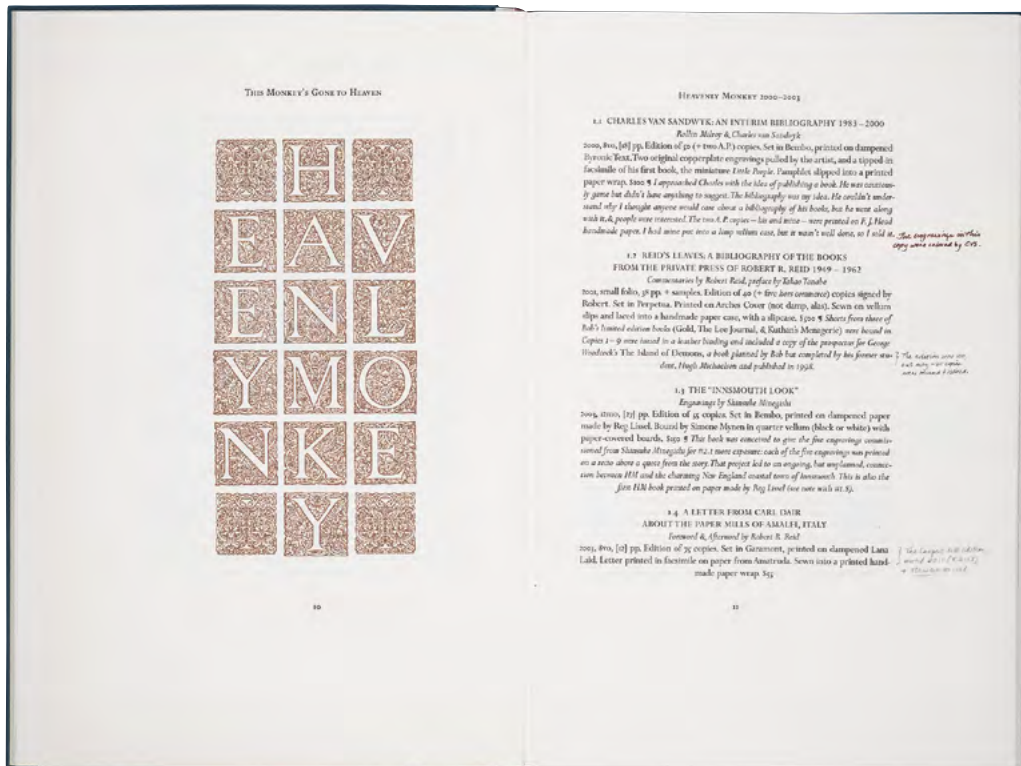
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## THE TELLING OF THEIR OWN TALES: THE CANADIAN PRIVATE PRESS

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Outreach Librarian, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library

**T**HE HISTORY OF the Canadian private press is a rich one extending back nearly a century. Yet the chronicling of this history is still primarily in its infancy and remains largely fragmented and incomplete. Catalogues accompanying private press and fine press exhibitions over the last forty years have been vital contributors to this area of scholarship (I include my own modest contribution, the catalogue *A Death Greatly Exaggerated: Canada's Thriving Small and Fine Press*, which was the companion to the exhibition I curated in 2013), but they have only told a small portion of the story.

Since there hasn't yet been a comprehensive historical survey of the private press in Canada, much of the story so far has been told by the presses themselves via self-published bibliographies, checklists, and histories of their work. For example, Barbarian Press, the influential Mission, British Columbia-based private press, has published two bibliographies since its founding in 1977: *Utile Dulci: The First*

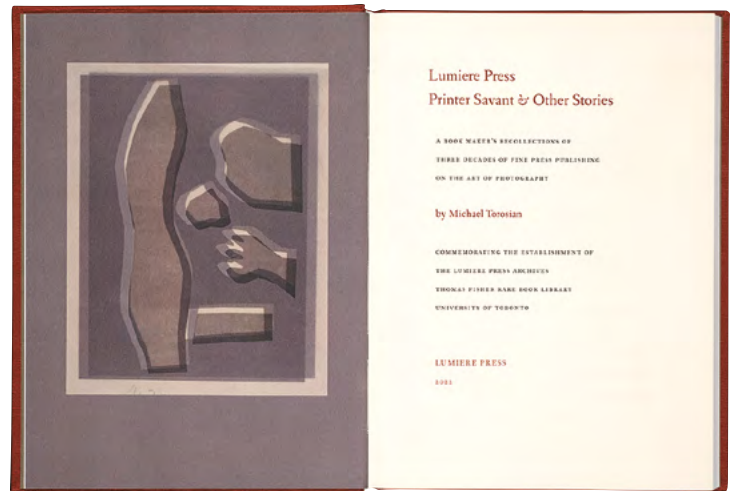
*Decade at Barbarian Press 1977-87* (1988), which it claims is its most difficult book to source (it had a print run of 150 copies; the Fisher has a copy) and *Hoi Barbaroi: A Quarter Century at Barbarian Press* (2004). Aliquando Press produced *The Aliquando Century: The First 100 Books from the Aliquando Press of William Rueter* (2008). On the more ambitious scale, the legendary west coast private press printer Robert Reid published a five-volume history *Printing: A Lifelong Addiction* in 2002. These works are essential in compiling the histories and publications of these presses. This past year, the Fisher added three such books to our collection, two newly published and one that goes back over a decade.

Earlier this year, Michael Torosian donated copies of his *Lumiere Press: Printer Savant & Other Stories* (2022). The book essentially functions as a history of the press, told through individual stories about each of the twenty-two books Lumiere has published since its first publication in 1986. It's also a companion to

the exhibition that I co-curated with Torosian in late 2019 and is heavily illustrated with items from the Lumiere Press Papers held at the Fisher. In addition, the book's introduction provides the most detailed account of how Torosian discovered letterpress printing and bookmaking.

Like many private press publishers, Torosian relied on the community of local printers for his introduction to, and education in, the craft. In his case, that meant seeking out the advice of Toronto print legends such as Will Rueter, Coach House's Stan Bevington, and especially Glenn Goluska, who printed his books and broadsides from his kitchen. He describes his visit to Goluska's house on Harbord Street in the late 1970s: 'As I entered, I found the room dominated by a machine—a Vandercook Universal One cylinder proofing press. Glenn was making books. I could not believe it. I thought you needed a factory to make books and here was a guy in a kitchen.' Of course, that was only the start to becoming

**OPENING PAGE:** Two-page spread from *This Monkey's Gone to Heaven* (Heavenly Monkey, 2022), with hand-written annotations by Barbara Hodgson. **BELOW, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** Linocut illustration included in *Leaves from the Pie Tree* (Pie Tree Press, 2006). Frontispiece and title page of Michael Torosian's *Printer Savant*. Type specimen sheet from *Leaves from the Pie Tree*.



a publisher of books: Torosian recognized he needed to develop a complete skillset. 'Now, to be a publisher, all I had to do was master writing, editing, typography, graphic design, typesetting, composition, presswork, binding, and marketing,' he writes. 'I think this is one of those instances that when it comes to self-actualization, you should be careful what you wish for.'<sup>1</sup> It would be another ten years after that initial visit with Goluska before he published the first book issued under the Lumiere Press imprint: *Edward Weston: Dedicated to Simplicity* (1986). The press has focused exclusively on photography—Torosian himself began his career as a photographer—and is the only private press in the world devoted solely to the art form.

*Lumiere Press* is an episodic journey through both the subjects of his books, which include

some of the seminal photographers of the twentieth century such as David Heath, Gordon Parks, Paul Strand, and Lewis Hine, and the craft of bookmaking, such as choosing the appropriate typeface for a particular book or crafting the ideal cover. Owing to Torosian's meticulous bookmaking skills, the Lumiere Press books are all beautifully made. But the books possess significance beyond their aesthetic appeal: because they are also thoroughly researched, with many of them including interviews with the artists,<sup>2</sup> they contribute to the scholarship of photography and photographers. Helpfully for those studying the history of Lumiere Press, the book also includes a detailed descriptive bibliography at the back of the book. It is truly a definitive history of one of the most important private presses in the country.

While Jim Rimmer's *Leaves from the Pie Tree: Memories from the Composing Room Floor* is not a new publication—it was first released in 2006 when Rimmer was seventy-one years of age—the book is a recent and welcome addition to the Fisher. It functions primarily as a memoir of both Rimmer, who was a letterpress printer, typeface designer, and a major influence on the Canadian west coast private press scene, and the press he founded, Pie Tree. It is not, however, a conventional autobiography, as Rimmer himself admits. 'This book has been produced for the purpose of recording some type of the work that I have done since establishing Pie Tree Press & Type Foundry at my home in New Westminster BC just over forty years ago,' he writes. 'The content is somewhat varied and may be more of a scrapbook than a proper piece of bookwork. So perhaps this book's



apparent lack of direction IS its direction.<sup>3</sup> The text covers his childhood and his dyslexia, his schooling at Vancouver Technical High School where he first learned printmaking, his first job working as a delivery boy for his grandfather at printer and publisher J. W. Boyd & Sons in Vancouver, and his printing apprenticeship by learning to set type with his grandfather. As his grandfather explained it to him: ‘There are different ways to get educated. You have a fine opportunity to have a trade. Printing is an old and respected craft. There is art in printing. You are artistic; you will have a chance to use it. At one time printers were the only people aside from nobility who were allowed to carry a sword.’<sup>4</sup> While his imprint Pie Tree Press produced only four books, as well as several broadsides, they are all exquisitely produced and highly sought items. (Along with *Leaves from the Pie Tree*, the Fisher also has a copy of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, published in 2008 and donated by Chester Gryski to the library.)

Rimmer has done it all, as he points out in the book’s introduction: printing, illustration, type design, typefounding, type engraving, bookbinding, graphic design, stonecutting, and digital type design. (One of my favourite discoveries: he designed the iconic 1970s logo for the rock band Heart.) Printing with his own type, however, was his true love. ‘Although it is difficult for me to place any one part of my craft over another, few experiences can match the perfect joy of seeing the first composed words in a new type that I have designed and cut.’<sup>5</sup> To that end, Rimmer devotes many pages to explaining how he was able to create and cut type in his small workshop. This is the section that will delight those that want to truly get in the weeds of the craft of typefounding, covering all the steps necessary to create one’s own type and including helpful illustrations and photographs. While Gaspereau Press produced a trade copy of the book in 2008, retitling it *Pie Tree Press: Memories from the Composing Room Floor* (with the helpful addition of a bibliography), Rimmer’s version remains the definitive edition, and serves as an important primer on one of the titans of the Canadian private press.

Owing partly to Rimmer’s influence, the west coast in recent years has produced some of the country’s finest private press publishers. Heavenly Monkey has been one of the most lauded presses in Canada, admired for its book design and the overall high-quality production of its books. Founded by Rollin Milroy, the press last year released its second

bibliography, *This Monkey’s Gone to Heaven: Checklist Ultimo: Heavenly Monkey & HM Editions 2000-2020*, or *HM=XX* (which is Milroy’s preferred condensed title). While chronicling the publications from the press from its debut in 2000 through 2020, it also marks both an end and a beginning: it is the last book to be published under the Heavenly Monkey imprint as future books coming from Milroy’s print studio will be published simply as HM. As Milroy explains in the introduction, bibliographies have always played an important role in HM’s history, including its first two books: in 2000 it produced a bibliography of the published work of the British Columbia-based writer and illustrator Charles Van Sandwyk, and the second, in 2001, was a bibliography of the books of the legendary private press publisher Robert Reid. ‘Press bibliographies were one of my portals into letterpress printing,’ writes Milroy in the book’s introduction, ‘and from the start I looked forward to printing my own.’<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, the next HM book to be published will be a bibliography of Jim Rimmer’s work. Milroy also claims he will not produce another bibliography of his own press.

*HM=XX* is, at first glance, a typical bibliographic checklist. There are sixty-one entries in total, divided into two separate sections: Heavenly Monkey imprints (forty-two titles, up to and including *HM=XX*) and HM Editions (twenty titles), which functioned as a collaborative imprint with other artists, writers, and bookbinders. Over the last several years, the imprint has primarily collaborated with Barbara Hodgson and Claudia Cohen, who have recently started their own imprint called Byzantium Press. The titles are arranged chronologically, containing a bibliographic description of methods, materials, edition size, and any other relevant information. What makes this checklist more comprehensive than a typical bibliography is that most of the entries include additional commentary from Milroy about the books and their production. These observations are not only a bonus, but crucial since they often reveal Milroy’s printing philosophies and sensibilities, which is particularly relevant considering his current stature as one of Canada’s most important private press bookmakers.

*HM=XX* includes eighteen samples from the press’ books. He was able to accumulate enough extra leaves due to his tendency to overproduce pages when working on a project. As he explains: ‘My eye was honest enough to know when a sheet wasn’t well printed, so for many years I printed many more sheets

than called for, knowing my spoilage would be high; when examining the sample leaves included here, remember why they’re available for inclusion.’ In other words, many of the samples can be considered rejects. But Milroy points out that even that has merit: ‘If nothing else, they illustrate my progress as a printer, and also my facility with different papers.’<sup>7</sup> Along with the samples, *HM=XX* includes handwritten annotations. As Milroy explains in the colophon, which also doubles as entry 1.42 of the checklist, ‘This copy has not been defaced! All of the copies were randomly embellished, annotated and marginalized by Barbara Hodgson.’ These annotations, distributed throughout the book, add a sometimes-cheeky flavour to this checklist, as well as providing additional contextual information not contained in the descriptions.

These bibliographies and checklists will surely continue to be produced by this country’s private press community. With Will Rueter hanging up his printing apron, the final bibliography for Aliquando Press will soon be produced by Gaspereau Press, and Barbarian Press’ fiftieth anniversary in 2027 will most likely result in another welcome retrospective of its work, adding to our knowledge and appreciation of this sometimes-neglected Canadian publishing space.

## Endnotes

- 1 Michael Torosian. *Lumiere Press: Printer Savant & Other Stories*. (Toronto: Lumiere Press, 2022), 13-14.
- 2 Complete transcripts of the interviews are available in the Lumiere Press Papers.
- 3 Jim Rimmer. *Leaves from the Pie Tree: Memories from the Composing Room Floor*. (New Westminster, BC: Pie Tree Press & Type Foundry), 11.
- 4 Rimmer, *Leaves from the Pie Tree*, 22.
- 5 Rimmer, *Leaves from the Pie Tree*, 68.
- 6 Rollin Milroy. *This Monkey’s Gone to Heaven: Checklist Ultimo: Heavenly Monkey & HM Editions 2000-2020* (Vancouver: Heavenly Monkey, 2022), 9.
- 7 Milroy, *This Monkey’s Gone to Heaven*, 9.