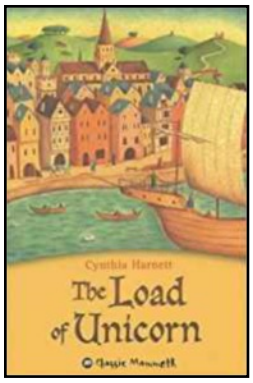
William Caxton's Choices



I've just finished a book by Cynthia Harnett that I first read at school a long time ago. It's called *The Load of Unicorn.* That sounds a strange title but the book is not about magical horses with spikes on their heads. It's an adventure involving a boy called Benedict who was apprenticed to William Caxton, the first man to print books in England. The story involves a plot against the king but begins with the theft of a shipload of Unicorn, a kind of paper used in printing.

I've really enjoyed re-reading this book and I've learned a lot from it, especially about William Caxton. Caxton is often mentioned in school books but only for a couple of lines which say something like 'Caxton was the first man to use a printing press to print books in England.' That makes Caxton's breakthrough sound simple – he had the idea of printing books so he started to print them. But it was much more complex than that. He had some big decisions to make which would decide whether his new business was a success or failure. He could well have failed.

Who was William Caxton?

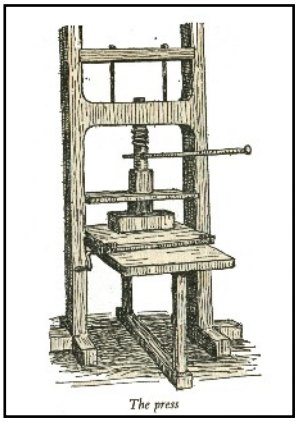
Caxton was born around 1420 in Kent. He became an apprentice to a London mercer, a merchant who bought and sold all kinds of cloth, from woollen clothes to luxury silks. In this work Caxton travelled around Europe. He must have been intelligent and reliable as other merchants trusted him as their leader in negotiations and King Edward IV chose him to make agreements about trade with other countries.

In 1471 Caxton lived in Cologne in Germany where he learned about the first printing presses in Europe, recently built by Johannes Gutenberg. In 1476 Caxton returned home, planning to set up a business printing books. He would be the first printer in England.

Where should he set up his printing press and shop?

First Caxton had to decide where to set up his business. London was the largest city so there were more people to buy books and many wealthy merchants lived there. The alternative was Westminster. Nowadays Westminster is part of London but in the 1400s they were separate places with countryside in between. The advantage of Westminster was that the King had a palace there so there were many rich visitors from all over England and abroad who might buy Caxton's books. Caxton chose Westminster.

It was the right decision.



A printing press

From: The Load of Unicorn

Should he make printed books look different from handwritten books?

There were already plenty of books in England. Cheap books were written out by men called scriveners who were employed to copy out books and documents. Expensive books were more like works of art with beautifully coloured illustrations. However, cheap or expensive, they had one thing in common - they were all hand-written. People expected books to look hand-written. Anything else wasn't a 'real' book. Therefore Caxton and other early printers made their books look exactly like handwriting, as you can see in this picture, and they included pictures too.

© Ian Dawson 2019



From: The British Library

Lines from *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer, one of the first and most popular books printed by Caxton.

What kind of books should he print?

By the 1470s around 50% of the people in London and other towns could read. More importantly, they enjoyed reading. They read histories, poetry, romances (long adventure stories though not necessarily about love), books about religion and prayer books. Caxton made sure he printed all the most popular types of books. He was in business to make money from printing after all. He printed histories of England, Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur* about King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table and *The History of Troy* (about the long Trojan war between the city of Troy and the Greek armies). Caxton translated some of these histories into English himself. He also printed many prayer books and books about religion and books of poetry including *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer. Many of Chaucer's tales made people laugh, which was very good for sales. He also printed a book for children about table-manners, how to eat and behave politely.

What kind of English should he use?

Nowadays this wouldn't be a problem but it was for Caxton. Everyone in England spoke English but each region had lots of its own words. When people travelled around the country they could not always understand each other and that led to confusion. For example, in the south-east people used the word 'eggs' but in other parts of the country eggs were called 'eyren' which doesn't sound at all the same. Which local dialect should Caxton use for his printing? He chose the language used in the south-east of England, perhaps because more of his customers spoke that kind of English. As a result, more people used south-eastern words like eggs and gradually stopped using their region's alternatives.

William Caxton's achievement

Many people today think that life did not change during the Middle Ages. Caxton's introduction of the printing press is a very good example of an important change that did take place during the Middle Ages. He must have been a highly intelligent man, willing to try out new ideas but also very practical and determined to make his ideas work. Caxton died in 1492 so he didn't see how quickly printing spread. Books were now printed far more quickly and so far more were sold and read. This was one of the most important changes in history, let alone in the Middle Ages.

© Ian Dawson 2019

Can you read medieval English?

This paragraph was written by Caxton to explain why people had difficulty understanding travellers from other parts of England.

Can you work out what it says?

> And that comyn englysshe that is spoken in one shyre varyeth from a nother. In so muche that in my dayes happened that certain marchauntes were in a shippe in tamyse for to haue sayled ouer the see into zelande and for lacke of wynde thei taryed atte forlond. And went to lande for to refreshe them And one of theym named sheffelde a mercer cam in to an hows and axed for mete. and specially he axyd after eggys And the good wyf answered that she could no speke frenshe. And the marchaunt was angry. for he also coude speke no frenshe. But wolde haue hadde egges and she vnderstode hym not And thenne at laste a nother sayde that he wolde haue eyren. then the good wyf sayd that she vnderstod hym wel. Loo what sholde a man in thyse days now wryte. egges or eyren. Certainly it is harde to playse euery man by cause of dyuersite change of langage.

Using a Printing Press

This drawing by Cynthia Harnett from *The Load of Unicorn* shows Caxton and his apprentices printing a book. The captions explain what they are doing.

Caxton (on the right) is holding a blank sheet of paper, ready for printing.

One apprentice is using pads to put ink onto the 'type'– the metal letters that make up the words

In a moment the paper will be put over the type and slid into the press.

Then the apprentice at the back will wind the lever and 'press' the paper down onto the type – and print the words.

As soon as this page is printed, another blank piece of paper will be prepared. This means that many copies of that page of the book can be printed quickly, far faster than if it is written out by hand.

Next they will prepare and print another page in the book. And repeat the process until all the pages have been printed and can be bound into a finished book.



Printing was in full swing

From: The Load of Unicorn

© Ian Dawson 2019

Notes for Teachers

Books by Cynthia Harnett

This 'reading' was prompted in part by including a paragraph about regional dialects in Section 2 of Medieval Lives Mattered (paragraph 9 on page 12). The other influence was the coincidence of reading *The Load of Unicorn* at the same time. This was one of four novels set in the fifteenth century written by Cynthia Harnett between 1951 and 1971. The others are:

Ring Out Bow Bells!

The Writing on the Hearth

The Wool-Pack

They all have plenty of social history, thoroughly-researched with political threads and were illustrated by the author. I suspect they may not be lively enough for most teenagers today as sometimes the research slows down the stories (do I sound old!) but I still much enjoy re-reading them.

Reading medieval English text

The section of text from Caxton on page 3 – the most obvious words likely to trip anyone up if only briefly are

Line 1 – comyn – common

Line 3 – tamyse – River Thames; zelande – Zeeland – an area in the Netherlands

Line 4 – forlond – Foreland on the Kent coast

I amended the punctuation a little (helpfully I hope) but left in sufficient of the original to give a flavour.

Web-link on Caxton

This British Library page is an excellent introduction and also contains links to other BL material on individual books printed by Caxton:

https://www.bl.uk/medieval-literature/articles/william-caxton-and-the-introduction-of-printing-to-england

© Ian Dawson 2019