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From the Selected Works of Sidney F. Huttner

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Willman Spawn & Thomas Kinsella. American Signed Bindings Through 1876.

Sidney F. Huttner



Available at: <https://works.bepress.com/shuttner/19/>

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Willman Spawn & Thomas Kinsella. *American Signed Bindings Through 1876*. Oak Knoll Press & Bryn Mawr College Library, 2007. 4to cloth. 300 pages. ISBN 9781584562085. \$85.00.

[Reviewed by Sidney F. Huttner, The University of Iowa Libraries]

Students of American bookbinding history, some themselves now rather long in the tooth, have been waiting patiently, but expectantly, for quite some time for two of their seniors to spill their guts – well, dump their years of research: both Willman Spawn's rubbings of 18th and 19th century bindings and Sue Allen's records of 19th century binding design are legendary. But both remain largely unpublished.

Consequently this exploration by Spawn and Thomas Kinsella of "315 bookbinder's tickets, stamps, and engraved designations dating from the 1750s through 1876" representing "binders from 19 states and 84 cities and towns" cannot be less than welcomed; still, it is another trailer rather than a feature, *hor d'oeuvre* not entrée.

The book opens with a dedication that suggests it relies heavily on records accumulated by Hannah French, doyen of a still earlier generation of binding historians, that she passed along to Spawn and Bryn Mawr College. The preface notes that the book is the catalog of a January to May 2007 exhibition at Bryn Mawr and that it includes descriptions of many acquisitions made since the 1983 publication of a catalog devoted to the Maser collection. Spawn signs the 13 page essay that follows: it reprises his nearly 60 years of study of American bookbindings, primarily reviewing the scant, but nonetheless extant, kinds of evidence that link some colonial bindings to specific binders (and noting one binder about whom a fair amount is known but who has not, as yet, been linked to a single binding). Kinsella follows with a 10 page overview of the nature and use of binder's tickets to 1876.

Both Spawn and Kinsella reference the 1907 Grolier Club *Catalogue of Ornamental Leather Bookbinding Executed in America Prior to 1850* and the modest intervening literature – yes, it is possible to cover 1907 to 2007 pretty adequately in a few sentences – and both call for continued (and one hopes somewhat more rapidly expanding!) contributions. Neither appears to see – or at least notes – any opportunities for this in Web 1 let alone Web 2 or 3.

The bulk of the book is then taken up with descriptions of books bearing binder's tickets. The books and bindings are described in words. The tickets are imaged (and also transcribed). One wishes this had been reversed: the rule that one picture equals a thousand words applies in stunning force. It is exceedingly difficult – actually well nigh impossible – to accurately image the bindings mentally from the written descriptions, even when the descriptions exceed the typical couple hundred words, whereas the text of the most prolix Victorian tickets runs 25 words or less and it appears in one of the dozen or so formats reviewed by Kinsella. Bibliographies and indexes wrap up the volume

(presented inside attractively designed endsheets and Arrestox linen-finish covered boards).

Certainly this publication should be celebrated. Recommend it to your library. The way forward, however, surely lies in one or more Wikipedia-like sites to which the small multitude of us can contribute, yes, imaged rubbings and scans of bindings as well as imaged tickets and associated metadata. Bryn Mawr would be an appropriate host for a large user-driven database. Not to heap any woe on Oak Knoll (which, like Spawn and Kinsella, has done a fine, traditional, job), but – perhaps regrettably, more likely joyously – we really no longer need books like this.

NOTE: An accident in typesetting attributed this review to Sandy Cohen (at that time *Newsletter* editor). This misattribution was corrected in a headnote to an objecting comment on the review by Robert Milevski in #177.