Reviewed by Sidney F. Huttner

It is rightly fashionable these days to disgorge up front one’s associations with the author and book under review. I’ve never met Tom Conroy, but he called me in 1996, and we talked at length about this project, then near its beginning, and particularly about the use of city directories. In May 1997, he sent his first draft, a pamphlet of a mere 27 pages, and I replied with information extracted from our 1993 register of the New York book trades. [1] Later that same year, he sent a second draft of the London section (grown to 40 pages alone), followed in early 1998 by the second draft of the section listing American, Continental and British provincial makers (another 55 pages). Fifteen months later, in mid-1999, his third draft arrived, now a substantial volume of 240 pages. In letters acknowledging the drafts, I called the second “heroic” and the third “Olympian.” So they were; but I’m left without a still more complimentary word for the 342-page book now published. While there is still much to do, as Conroy freely admits, he has nonetheless carved out an entirely new area of study.

Finishing tools are cut or cast in various metals, typically brass or bronze, and used by bookbinders to title and decorate leather bindings; to create, that is, the patterns of darkened leather (“blind impressions”) and gold letters, lines, and figures (“tooling”) found on some leather-bound books of this period. The tools are durable, and even 200-year-old tools may still be in active use. Some tool makers signed their tools by stamping the shank with their name.

Conroy’s first thought, as I recall, was to examine as many tools as he could and to record not only maker’s marks (by collecting smoke proofs) but other details: the shape of the shank, for example, or the style of the cushion. Both working preferences of individual tool makers and generalizations about regional and national characteristics might emerge from this mass of information and provide a basis on which to sort unmarked tools. Over the years, Conroy has worked his way through all of the collections of tools in North American institutions and catalogued hundred of tools.

City directories opened a second line of investigation. Names obtained from tools could be investigated against the directories, and since directories are dated, Conroy has been able to construct skeletal biographies for many tool makers. By noting shared addresses and changing partnerships, he has developed lineage charts for a substantial number of larger and enduring firms. These charts are useful, as Conroy writes, because “standards of quality, distinctive shapes, and images offered would have been set by the firm, not by the individual workman” (p. 243) and therefore have considerable potential for bringing together unmarked tools. Names of toolcutters can be gleaned from city directories and, more easily, from less frequently published business and trade directories.
The bulk of Conroy’s book, pages 1-206 and 267-275, is given over to recording all known information about individual toolcutters and toolcutting firms. Entries range in length from a few lines to several pages and include reproductions of smoke proofs of marked tools when known, display advertising when that has been found, and information drawn from directories and other sources and supplied by colleagues and correspondents. The entries are arranged in alphabeted lists for London; other cities in the British Isles; Paris; Germany, Spain; other cities on the Continent; Boston, Chicago, Cincinnati, New York, Philadelphia, and other cities in the United States; Melbourne and Sydney, Australia; and a small group of names which could not be linked to a city or country. This somewhat complex organization is partially brought together by a single name index of toolcutters. As Conroy is keenly aware, the individual entries are likely to change and grow as tools are collected and further information surfaces. [2]

The remaining parts of the book are the ones most likely to interest a generalist reader. These include Conroy’s introduction, pages 15-42, and among the appendices, essays on the shapes of finishing tools and on directories. The introduction, informed by the fact that Conroy has himself cut more than 70 tools, lays out considerable fresh information on how tools were made, the tools used in turn to make them, and the trades upon which toolmakers relied. The 70 long footnotes are themselves extremely useful (though a tad difficult to decipher since they stretch in small letters across the eight-inch-wide page; the main text is set in a more comfortable point size and double column). The essay on shapes, Appendix 1, economically but thoroughly discusses variation in shanks, pallet profiles, tables, rolls, metals, patina, file marks, handles, and other characteristics of tools.

While much of Appendix 5 – Directories, pages 235-242, is sensible and helpful, Conroy starts this essay with the assertion, “City directories are the old equivalents of telephone books.” This betrays misunderstandings that impact on how he has used city directories and the import of the information he has found in them. Telephone directories are the by-product of a specific business. Their white pages, that is, report the name, address, and phone number of line subscribers (omitting the names of those who ask that their name be removed from public listings). It is possible to learn a good deal about the demographics of subscribers to phone service (as well as non-subscribers). It is good business practice for telephone companies to produce directories: the easier it is to find a phone number, the more likely it is that a call will be made, with each call generating revenue. [3]

City directories are not the by-product of a business but rather a business in themselves, and one that remains almost as little studied as that of tool makers. It appears that once a city achieved a population around 10,000, there was a market adequate to support a directory that individuals and businesses could use to search out other individuals and businesses by name and address. City directories did not derive from a database created in the course of other activity but one created by canvassers spreading through a city over a period of days or weeks. While the demographics are difficult to study, it seems likely that canvassers had considerable interest in persons and businesses with a durable address but little interest in transients. [4] In the New York City directories I’ve worked with, for
example, many people, men and women, are described as boarding house keepers. I doubt the names of boarders were of interest to canvassers, however, nor were those of hotel guests and visitors temporarily housed in private homes and public accommodations.

Consequently, one of the avenues Conroy does not explore is that of individual workmen, particularly those who staffed the larger, longer-lasting firms that emerged in the course of the 19th century and survived into the 20th, and who did not establish independent firms. It seems likely that many of these workmen, at least early in their careers, would have lived in boarding houses and similar transient facilities and their names thus remained uncollected by directory builders.

Not to fault Conroy, but it is also necessary to keep in mind the precise focus of this study. Conroy suggests that bookbinders made their own tools prior to the late 18th century, that therefore there was little or no reason to mark them, and thus they remain outside the scope of his work. Tools were certainly made and used long before the advent of printing, however, and in parts of the Middle East, Africa and elsewhere. While evidence is certain to be scant, and none may exist, it seems counter-intuitive to believe there was not from time to time and place to place some specialization in their making. The skills of working metal, on Conroy’s own explanation, are sufficiently demanding that it seems far more likely that bookbinders would have turned whenever possible to more experienced colleagues for any but their simplest tools.

Second, with the increasing use during the 19th century of case bindings, typically covered in cloth but not infrequently in leather, the number of hand-tooled bindings declined dramatically. Cases could be stamped with plates which created the overall design in one or a few pulls, and stamped they were, as large editions, identically bound, rolled from binderies. Surely there were relationships between the businesses and workmen that provided hand-tools and those that provided plates which remain to be explored.

Bookbinding history has until recently been primarily an explication of binding design, a tradition echoed in Marianne Tidcombe’s brief and rather limp foreword to Conroy’s work. A number of bookbinders and scholars have now moved past this to begin to recover the history of book structure, book engineering, and the crafts which underlie design. Tom Conroy is pleasurably in their midst.

[1] Sidney F. Huttner and Elizabeth Stege Huttner, compilers. A Register of Artists, Engravers, Booksellers, Bookbinders, Printers & Publishers in New York City, 1821-1842. New York: The Bibliographical Society, 1993. Conroy oddly fails to cite the Register or to list it in his bibliography, but he is generous in acknowledging our help (his index of names other than toolcutters lists p. xi, p. 160, a long footnote p. 237, and p. 239; there are also unindexed citations on p. 147, p. 166 and perhaps elsewhere).
[2] A second edition will also profit from close proof-reading to eliminate minor but distracting errors and inconsistencies. A few, randomly selected, include the line break of “pastew- / ash” (p. 16); an extra space in the first paragraph, last line, of the Becker notes (p. 97); *Boston Post Boy* not italicized last line p. 102; “R.HOE” for “R. HOE”, p. 152 (or is this to indicate precise transcription? If so, has this been carried through consistently?).

[3] Voice communication is rapidly moving from fixed line telephones to wireless cellular phones; wireless technologies will certainly soon integrate not only voice but data transmission. A wireless phone is, of course, not linked to a static physical location, and I am as yet unaware of any attempt to create a directory of wireless subscribers. But some means – perhaps integral to the Internet? – that makes it possible to “look up” many if not all numbers seems inevitable.

[4] The most important American directory publishing firm to emerge from the 19th century, R.L. Polk of Detroit, Michigan, continues to create city directories, but as early as the 1940s, most of its profits came from capture of automobile registrations in each state. Make and model of automobile linked to localized demographic data such as average home value in a specific tract makes possible data-mining of high value to a wide range of business clients.

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