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Hannah Dustin French. Bookbinding in Early America

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In her pioneering study, “Early American Bookbinding by Hand, 1636-1820,” Hannah French noted that the earliest recorded bookbinder in the United States was one John Sanders who took a freeman’s oath in Boston in 1636, his arrival predating that of the first recorded printer by a year and by four years the first book from an American press likely to have required a binding.

In the preface to *Bookbinding in Early America*, French observes that some 700 bookbinders were at work in the United States between 1660 and 1820, albeit most, like John Sanders, are known only as names on lists compiled from city directories and newspaper advertisements or noted from a chance appearance in public documents. Only a small number—she estimates between ten and twelve percent—signed any part of their work; business and other records are virtually non-existent, and contemporary notice of their work, if any indeed was taken, has not been discovered.

A substantial record of their work survives, however, housed in libraries and book collections around the world. These are the uncounted—but surely numbering into the several thousands—examples of their creations; the merely workmanlike, the often charming, and the increasingly sophisticated, sometimes deeply beautiful, bookbindings. These bindings make feasible the study of American bookbinding which French has pioneered; but, in fact, few collections have yet been examined with any degree of thoroughness and fewer still described, catalogued, or published in ways which make them accessible to scholars, let alone encourage their further exploration. For each securely attributed binding there are dozens not yet noticed. The work of perhaps twenty binders has been explored. One enters the field, therefore, knowing it requires careful attention to many thousands of volumes, encountered somewhat randomly, with no certainty of success in establishing relationships of particular interest among them.

There is a further, fundamental, practical difficulty which cannot be avoided: bookbinding, like other graphic arts, is not well served by words, and there is no other easy-to-use, economical means of capturing and reproducing the visual “information” presented by a bookbinding. Two methods of recording, typically used together, have evolved. One, based on the description of the kinds of tools—rolls, hand stamps, medallions, letters—used by binders to build up their designs, leads to the elaborate descriptions not infrequently seen in bookseller’s catalogues: these are brilliant miniatures, *tour de force* displays of expertise, but it is from the photograph generally...
printed opposite that one “sees” the binding. The second method is the rubbing. This requires little more than thin paper and soft pencil. And with experience—and a reasonably well-preserved binding—yields an image that reminds the eye of the binding once studied. The best rubbing lose much detail, however; are not easily shared through xerography; and reproduce indifferently in half-tone publication.

Photographs have long been used to record bindings, but making them with due attention to the size and detail of the original object requires equipment, care, and not a little time and expense. The photocopier splendidly records tooling and stamping in gold and lighter colors, but like photography, has difficulty with blind stamping.

French, frequently starting from a single striking volume, has responded to these large challenges with the gift of a good part of her life, devotedly linking one binding with another on the basis of general design, shared tools, and the occasional signature or binder’s label, then linking a group of bindings to a binder; she teases the story of early American binding practice from decidedly meager and much scattered sources. She has also made substantial contributions to each of what must be seen as the two major accomplishments in her area in the last fifty years: the development of the Michael Papantonio Collection of Early American Bookbindings now institutionalized at the American Antiquarian Society, and the massive collection of rubbings taken from American bindings in the possession of Willman Spawn.

The seven essays collected here bring together in one handsome volume (printed by Meriden-Stinehour Press) five essays which previously appeared in periodicals (augmented with additional illustrations); two essays of more recent vintage (counting for nearly half the 230 pages); and catalogues (contributed by Willman Spawn) of the tools of four of the five binders about whom writes: Andrew Barclay and John Roulstone of Boston, Caleb Buglass of Philadelphia, and Frederick August Mayo, Thomas Jefferson’s last binder. One of the more recent essays, “Full Gilt and Extra Gilt,” prepared as a 1973 lecture, again surveys the field she established in 1941.

The book thus brings together the essence if not the full substance of what has been learned in over fifty years. As a review of the period 1640-1820 it is unlikely to be surpassed for many years; it is certainly the first source to which we will turn for some time to come. Barring discovery of a cache of contemporary documents which might change the course of research, it seems unlikely, however, the model French has provided will lead beyond the identification of additional bindings—these papers account for some several dozen—by binders she has studied and, perhaps, to a few more painfully extracted studies of individual binders. Bookbinding in Early America both asserts a method and leaves one uncertain about who might be persuaded to take it up. The need for an economical means of sharing and accumulating data about surviving American bindings is clear and dramatic, and there is promise in Spawn’s tool catalogues and other illustrations.
One examines these, however, with increasing concern. French’s 1941 essay, for example, was illustrated with a photograph showing the spine and front board of an elaborate binding worked in the Scottish manner, a copy of Horsmanden’s *Journal* (New York, 1744) held by the Library of Congress. The photograph, although reduced, gives an excellent sense of “the powder of dots on the background of black morocco and the more numerous fillets and gouges,” as French describes the binding in her 1957 “Scottish-American Bookbindings: Six Examples from Colonial North America.” In *Bookbinding in Early America* this binding is represented by a full-page reproduction of a rubbing of the front board in which the “powder” is lost and many of the tools are difficult to decipher, even though a second full page is given to a rubbing, equally hard to make out, of the volume’s spine. In the same essay, the book labels of Andrew Barclay, also represented in the 1941 essay, are given a full page with one repeated on a second.

In all, eighteen bindings are shown in photographs, five of them repeated from the catalogue of the Papantonio collection. Another twenty-seven bindings are represented by one or more rubbings.

The illustrations, unlike the texts, have not been simply brought over from earlier publications. “The Amazing Career of Andrew Barclay, Scottish bookbinder, of Boston” appeared unillustrated in *Studies in Bibliography* 14 (1961) but is here accompanied by three figures: a spine rubbing, a Barclay label, and a single sheet “Catalogue of Books” issued by Barclay. “John Roulstone’s Harvard Bindings” appeared in *Harvard Library Bulletin* 18 (1970) with two photographs of Francis Nicholls’ *Syllabus of Lectures* (1741), one showing the spine and front board, the other the front board only. Though these communicated an excellent impression of the binding, they are replaced here with a single rather murky rubbing of the spine and board while sixteen other figures (6 photographs, 10 rubbings), most full page, are placed through the essay. The greater representation of Roulstone’s work is welcome, but one does wonder why the earlier photograph could not have been re-used.

Indeed, the tension between photographs and rubbings is notable throughout the volume. Perhaps the most jarring example occurs in the essay “Caleb Buglass, Binder of the Proposed Book of Common Prayer, Philadelphia, 1786,” where in the space of three pages we are show eleven spines and four boards of similarly bound copies. Ten of the spines and three of the boards are rubbings. One can’t be certain what one would if only rubbings had been used, but it is certain the photographs are sharp and informative, the rubbings uncertain and problematic. Would one, looking only at the center medallion shown in the rubbing realize it has been selected to decorate the front board and title page of *Bookbinding in Early America*?

Willman Spawn’s catalogues of tools are reproduced from rubbings and are as clear, one supposes, as great care and long experience can ever make them. The four samples offered here are usefully cross-referenced first, in the List of Figures, from binding to tools used on it, and second, in the Catalogue, from individual tool to appearance on bindings illustrated. This ability to look at several impressions of a tool, both isolated and in context, seems an important aid in
using the catalogues to attribute a binding to a binder. To my regret I had not to hand a suitable candidate on which to test the catalogue, and I consequently wait impatiently for publication of the full Spawn catalogue to open wider the universe of possible identifications.

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