

This Monkey's Gone to Heaven

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REVIEWS

Rollin Milroy, *This Monkey's Gone to Heaven. Checklist Ultimo: Heavenly Monkey & HM Editions, 2000–2020*, Vancouver: Heavenly Monkey, 2022, 67 p. \$1,550 CAD (hardback)

Review by JOHN SHOESMITH
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There is a long tradition of Canadian private press publishers producing their own descriptive bibliographies. So long as the history of the private press in Canada remains in its infancy, self-produced bibliographical checklists become essential to compiling the histories and publications of these presses. Private press printers generally publish whatever pleases them, usually with little consideration for commercial interests out of motivation for the art of the book in producing the work. It should be noted that the private press is distinct from small press publishing, which was established to publish poets and writers who could not publish in the larger commercial presses. *This Monkey's Gone to Heaven* covers the publication history of Heavenly Monkey, the private press of Rollin Milroy. Milroy's preferred *HM=XX* is the condensed title of the book, which I will use from here on.

Chronicling the publications from Milroy's Heavenly Monkey press from its debut in 2000 through 2020 also reveals both an end and a beginning—*HM=XX* is the last book published under the Heavenly Monkey imprint, whereas subsequent books from Milroy's print studio will be published under the HM imprint. As Milroy explains in the introduction, bibliographies have always played an important role in Heavenly Monkey's history, including its first two books. In 2000, Heavenly Monkey first produced a bibliography of the published work of British Columbia-based

writer and illustrator Charles van Sandwyk. A year later, in 2001, Heavenly Monkey printed and published a bibliography of the books of legendary private press publisher Robert H. Reid. Reflecting on these earlier works, Milroy writes, “[p]ress bibliographies were one of my portals into letterpress printing, and from the start I looked forward to printing my own” (9).

At first glance, *HM=XX* is a fairly typical bibliographical checklist. There are sixty-one entries in total, divided into two separate sections. The Heavenly Monkey imprint on forty-two titles, up to and including *HM=XX*, and the HM editions of twenty titles are the result of multiple collaborations. Milroy has collaborated with other artists, writers, and bookbinders, especially Barbara Hodgson and Claudia Cohen over the past several years.¹ The resulting titles are arranged chronologically; a bibliographical description of methods, materials, edition sizes, and any other relevant information follows each title. The entries include additional commentary from Milroy about the books and their production, making this checklist more comprehensive than a typical bibliography. Milroy’s observations are critical because they reveal the printing philosophies and sensibilities of one of Canada’s most important private press bookmakers.

The leaf book is a recent bibliographical interest for Heavenly Monkey. Leaf books use samples from books that have usually been disassembled, which are then inserted into a new work, offering a means to discuss aspects of the printing process or provide some historical background on a press or bookmaker. Because leaf books reuse sheets from previously bound books, some book scholars or librarians do not readily accept them. Milroy, however, comes to the defence of the leaf book’s historical importance in the additional commentary for entry 1.41, *Francesco Griffio da Bologna: Fragments & Glimpses*, published in 2020. He writes, “I think people who are predisposed to be suspicious of leaf books assume a complete copy has been broken, when in fact part of the appeal is making

¹ Hodgson and Cohen have recently started their own imprint, Byzantium Press.

use of fragments from a valuable (historically, intellectually) book, and presenting a discussion about aspects beyond its content—like printing, type, publishing conditions at the time etc.—that provides additional context” (39).

Cheekily, *HM=XX* can be considered a leaf book since it also uses leaves and pages from past Heavenly Monkey projects. Milroy admits that his tendency to overproduce pages was the reason he accumulated enough leaves to include as samples. He writes, “[m]y 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” (9). In other words, many of the samples can be considered rejects. But even that has merit, as Milroy points out: “If nothing else, they illustrate my progress as a printer, and also my facility with different papers” (9). These samples, eighteen in total, have been expertly inserted into the book without disturbing its overall flow.

The first title represented with a sample is entry 1.13, *An Invitation to British Columbia*, which refers to a facsimile letter from T. E. Lawrence written in 1929 to Martin Allerdale Grainger, British Columbia’s first chief forester, in response to Grainger’s suggestion that Lawrence consider retiring in the province. The sample is an unused version of the preface and foreword, set from metal type and printed on damp paper. Milroy was unhappy with the pages, so they were swapped out for pages made from polymer plates. “If you look closely,” writes Milroy in the description, “you can see the printing on pages 7–14 is not quite as black, and a little thicker than the sheets I printed with metal” (16). After pulling a copy of the book as issued from the stacks of the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, I can confirm that the difference is slight but noticeable, although it requires a magnifying glass. In this regard, the sample sheets are not just a gimmick—rather, they illuminate one of Milroy’s printing techniques, albeit one that is somewhat controversial within the confines of Canada’s private press community: the use of polymer over metal type.

One of Heavenly Monkey's quirkier publications benefiting from the samples is *Paper Should Not Always be White* (entry 1.30), a one-page extract from Daniel Berkeley Updike's essay "The Seven Champions of Typography," originally printed on fifteen different papers. As Milroy writes in the description, it was "an experiment to see how changing nothing but the paper affects the appearance of text/type" (28). To demonstrate for those who would not be able to source a copy (only thirty copies were produced), he repeats the process by reproducing the page with that entry and the facing page using different paper (28–29). In my view, the choice of paper does make a difference.

Along with the samples, *HM=XX* also includes handwritten annotations. Milroy explains in the colophon, "This copy has not been defaced! All of the copies were randomly embellished, annotated and marginalized by Barbara Hodgson" (66). These annotations, distributed throughout the copy I reviewed, add a unique flavour to the checklist and provide additional information not contained in the descriptions.² For example, entry 1.4, *A Letter from Carl Dair About the Paper Mills of Amalfi, Italy*, helpfully points out that it was not until 2015 that the largest Heavenly Monkey run was the "slowest to sell" (11). Other annotations are playful, including a few small illustrative annotations accompanying Milroy's commentary on the so-called wickedness of leaf books.

Are bibliographical checklists supposed to be this fun? *HM=XX*, while being an essential resource for anyone studying the private press in Canada, particularly given Milroy's reputation as one of the finest bookmakers in the country, is a flat-out joy to peruse. Milroy's printing philosophy deviates slightly from other private press publishers, as demonstrated in *HM=XX*. For example, he points out that he does not print "for the sake of printing," which explains why he has not produced much in the way of broadsides (a typical format for most private presses), especially when selling at book arts fairs. His one concession is a triptych,

² The copy that I reviewed is number fifteen held at the Fisher Library.

Uncommon Deities by David Sylvian, entry 1.25. He writes, “Anything less consequential than a book rarely seemed worth the effort” (24).

Naturally, a book like *HM=XX* has a small production run, and the accompanying cost will further limit its audience. The Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library owns a deluxe copy containing additional sample pages, which cost \$1,550. While costly, these checklists are vital for documenting the history of Canada’s private press—and fortunately, a majority of these books end up in institutions rather than private hands, enabling access. Given his prominence in Canadian book arts, it is a little disappointing that Milroy does not pretend to offer any insights into the private press or fine press printing. However, he is optimistic about its future, both for his own practice and for the quality of results among those interested in good letterpress printing.

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