Richard Deacon

Chapter 10

[William Caxton]

LINGUIST AND EDITOR

DESPITE what the critics may say about Caxton's lack of scholarship and academic training, it is as a linguist and editor that he deserves to take his place in history rather than as printer or publisher.

A century before John de Trevisa had pointed to the difficulty which the English had in understanding one another, how a man, in say London, could not grasp what a man from nearby Kent was talking about, "For jangle that one never so fast that other is never the wiser", was Trevisa's comment on how a man from one part of the country baffled one from another area. Chaucer said much the same thing when he referred to the "so great diversity in English and in writing of our tongue", and all this was still true in Caxton's time.

Caxton himself appears to have been in a curious dilemma in his approach to this problem of the still developing, and in many respects immature English tongue. That he desperately wanted to recreate the works of Latin and French writers in the English language is undoubted. He could probably have succeeded much more easily as a printer if he had merely copied Latin and French works, relying on a continental as well as a limited English market. But he chose deliberately to return to London to print in his mother tongue.

We have already noted his early struggles with translations, the rebuke and encouragement of Duchess Margaret of Burgundy, his own dissatisfaction with his progress. but, as book succeeded book, Caxton became more confident, and that confidence showed most in what he increasingly interpolated into his translations, and the comments in his preface and epilogues. In these things Caxton revealed the true man, though even so he kept sufficiently tight a rein on his thoughts to permit us little more than a peep into his mind.

His "Frenchified English" has already been noted. It was partly a fondness for the ornateness of French and a feeling that French words had more universality of expression that had many English words. But it was originally no doubt an attempt to keep conscientiously to the original meaning, using French literary constructions in his

translations–or, as he put it: “after my simple and poor cunning... as nigh as I can or may.” Often he mixed direct and indirect speech and some passages of Caxton could be described as “Pidgin French” or “Pidgin English”, much like what one finds among the native populations of the Pacific Ocean today. But Caxton introduced many new words into the English language, many of which are current today, and his adaptations of French words were sufficiently apt to become popular. In this respect he played a remarkable role in strengthening and enriching the English language.

It could be argued by purists that any educated Englishman who had spent thirty years on the continent could not fail to improve and add to the English language, especially as French had become the accepted tongue of the cultured. This is perfectly true, but the reason why Caxton made such an impact was that he spread his version of the English language by printing it.

He admired Chaucer’s pithiness and descriptive powers, but he followed the contemporary fondness for “curious gaye terms” and “the new eloquence”. Curt Buhler makes the point that Caxton “emphasised and promoted” rather than initiated the taste for translations from French.[1] He was fully conscious of the fact that he had an uphill task in that the new learning had not seriously touched England as yet. Many have criticised Caxton for printing translations of second and third-rate literature rather than major classical works. It is doubtful whether he could have made adequate translations of the best of the classics, or if they would have been appreciated in English. The foundations of English scholarship were really only being founded in Henry VI’s reign: it was another half century before many great scholars were produced. What Caxton chose to print was not merely what certain courtiers and nobles wanted to read, but what they could easily understand. Herein lay his talent both as a modest translator and an astute editor.

Some quotations from Caxton’s prologue to *Eneydos* have already been utilised in this narrative. But in assessing Caxton as both translator and editor, it is necessary to look again at what he had to say here, because this contains much of the key of his methods and views.

[1] See *William Caxton & His Critics*, Curt Buhler.

There is his thoroughness: "I... forthwith took a pen and ink and wrote a leaf or twain, which I oversaw again to correct it." Then again we have a picture of Caxton summing up the problems posed by his critics: "And when I saw the fair and strange terms therein, I doubted that it should not please some gentlemen which late blamed me, saying that in my translations I had over-curious terms which could not be understood of common people and desired moe to use old and homely terms in my translations. And fain would I satisfy every man, and so to do took an old book and read therein, and certainly the English was so rude and broad that I could not well understand it. And also my Lord Abbot of Westminster did show to me late certain evidences written in old English for to reduce it into our English now used, and certainly it was written in such wise that it was more like Dutch than English. I could not reduce, nor bring it to be understood, and certainly our language now used varyeth far from that which was used and spoken when I was born... and that common English that is spoken in one shire varyeth from another."[2]

Here is some proof of how the English language had visibly changed in Caxton's own lifetime, as, of course, it has in most men's lifetime, but in the fifteenth century those changes were swifter and more dynamic. They must also have been perplexing to many and it was this very perplexity which Caxton understood and defined when he wrote: "For in these days every man that is in any reputation in his country will utter his communication and matters in such manners and terms that few men shall understand them. And some honest and great clerks have been with me and desired me to write the most curious terms that I could find. And thus between plain rude and curious, I stand abashed. But in my judgement the comma terms that be daily used be lighter to be understood than the old and ancient English. And forasmuch as this present book is not for a rude, uplandish man to labour therein, nor read it, but only for a clerk and a noble gentleman... therefore, as a man between both, I have reduced and translated this said book into our English not over-rude nor curious, but in such terms as shall be understood, by God's grace, according to my copy. And if any man will occupy himself in reading of it and findeth such terms that he cannot understand,

[2] See *Eneydos*, Caxton, 1490.

let him go read and learn Virgil, or the Epistles of Ovid, and there he shall see and understand lightly all, if he have a good reader and informer. For this book is not for every rude and uncunning man to see, but to clerks and to very gentlemen that understand gentlemen and science. Then I pray all them that shall read in this little treatise to hold me and excuse me for translating it, for I acknowledge myself ignorant of cunning to emprise on me so high and noble a work."[3] Caxton had the advantage of knowing and appreciating such works in English as those of Chaucer and Lydgate as well as being competent in and delighting in "the fair language of French". But he had an unfortunate habit of starting off a thesis of his own concoction simply and intelligently and then, possibly through tiredness or lack of vocabulary, tailing off into a style which was diffuse and lacking in clarity. Caxton is often paradoxically enough least clear when he is impressing the need for clarity, as the latter part of the quotation in the last paragraph shows. But as Caxton printed books so his critical faculties were stimulated and so he began to grasp that a dialogue between readers and printer, or readers and editor and translator, was essential. Criticisms of his work may have been relatively few and possibly few of them actually reached him, but his later publications suggest that he did take them seriously and even acted on some of them. When he started to print the works of Chaucer, he was well aware of all the difficulties the task presented as well as the critical opinions of others of Chaucer's now somewhat archaic vocabulary and phraseology. He had just as much a job of translation to do as if he were working on a French script.

Dr. Dibdin, in his *Typograhical Antiquities*, referring to Caxton, said: "Our typographer contrived, though well stricken in years, to translate not fewer than five thousand closely printed folio pages. As a translator, therefore, he ranks among the most laborious, and, I would hope, not the least successful of his tribe. The foregoing conclusion is the result of a careful enumeration of all his books translated as well as printed by him; which [the translated books], if published in modern fashion, would extend to twenty-five

[3] *Ibid.*

octavo volumes!"[4]

Caxton writing on Chaucer is of special interest, as he reveals Caxton the literary critic as well as the translator and editor. In his preface to the second edition of the *Canterbury Tales*, possibly after some criticisms had reached his ears, he said, "we ought to give a singular laud unto that noble and great philosopher, Geoffrey Chaucer, the which for his ornate writing in our tongue, may well have the name of a laureate poet. For before that he, by his labour, embellished, ornated and made fair our English tongue, in this royaume... he made many books and treatises of many a noble history, as well in metre as in rhyme and prose; and them so craftily made, that he comprehendeth his matters in short, quick and high sentences; eschewing prolixity, casting away the chaff of superfluity, and showing the picked grain of sentence, uttered by crafty and sugared eloquence." On another occasion he refers to Chaucer as excelling "in my opinion all other writers in our English, for he writeth no void words, but all his matter is full of high and quick sentence... For of him all other have borrowed sith and taken in all their well saying and writing."

But Caxton, in printing Chaucer, was also up against the problem that the manuscripts of the great writer were in private hands and varied considerably in their texts, as books must have done when they were produced by different transcribers. Referring to this, Caxton wrote that "of which book so incorrect was one brought to me six year passed, which I had supposed had been very true and correct, and according to the same I did imprint a certain number of the, which anon were sold to many and divers gentlemen: of whom one gentleman came to me and said that this book was not according in many places unto the book that Geoffrey Chaucer had made. To whom I answered that I had made it according to my copy, and by me was nothing added or diminished. Then he said he knew a book which his father had and much loved, that was very true, and according unto his own first book by him made; and said more, if I would imprint it again, he would get me the same book for a copy. How be it, he wist well his father would not gladly part from it; to whom I said, in case that he could get me such a book true and correct, that I would once endeavour me to print it again,

[4] See *Typographical Antiquities, or an Historical Account of the Origin & Progress of Pirnting in Great Britain & Ireland*, the Rev. Dr. Thomas F. Dibdin, 4 vols., 1810.

for to satisfy the author: whereas before by ignorance I erred in hurting and defaming his book in divers places, in setting in some things that he had never said nor made, and leaving out many things that he made which are requisite to be set in it. And thus we fell at accord; and he full gently got me of his father the said book, and delivered it to me, by which I have corrected my book."

Such was Caxton's admiration for Chaucer and his great concern to get things right that, prudent and cautious as he was in his general attitude to printing, he put accuracy above all else and always paid careful heed to the criticisms and comments of his customers. Perhaps he was concerned as much for his own reputation and what his customers thought of him as for scrupulous accuracy, but this in itself was no bad quality in a printer and publisher.

Caxton was not above taking short cuts and even making drastic paraphrases in some of his works, both in English and in translations, but such was his admiration for Chaucer that he took greater pains to be accurate in printing such books as *Boethius* and *The Canterbury Tales.* His prologues and epilogues reveal how deeply concerned he was that his Chaucerian work should be clear to all readers and he invited "correction and amendment". But this is not to say that Caxton the editor did not have to intervene on occasions and take agonising decisions as how best to present a Chaucerian manuscript. William Blades mentions the problem Caxton had in printing Chaucer's *Book of Fame*: "Manuscripts of this poem were, probably, even in our printer's time, difficult to obtain. The copy used by him was certainly very imperfect. Many lines are altogether omitted, and in the last page Caxton was evidently in a great strait, for his copy was deficient *66* lines, probably occupying one leaf in the original. We know from his own writings the great reverence in which our printer held the 'noble poet', and we can imagine his consternation when the choice had to be made, either to follow his copy and print nonsense, from the break of ideas caused by the deficient verses, or to step into Chaucer's shoes and supply the missing links from his own brain."[5]

Like all good editors Caxton adopted the bold course, that of supplying the missing

[5] See *The Biography & Typography of William Caxton*, Blades.

links himself. Even so he acted cautiously, supplying not *66* lines out of his own head, but writing in a simple link of a mere two lines of his own composition.

The actual version ran like this, Caxton's two lines being shown in italics:

"They were a chekked bothe two
And neyther of hym might out goo
And wyth the noyse of themwo
I suddenly awoke anon tho
And remembryd what I had seen
And how hye and ferre I had been."[6]

In the best tradition of modern scholars Caxton put his name in the margin of the page against the two lines he had composed, but he gave no explanation of what he had done.

With other works Caxton frequently showed his authority as an editor and made alterations of his own in scripts. It is not always possible to decide exactly where he made such alterations as frequently the only surviving text of such a work is Caxton's own. He did not, as far as can be seen, interfere with any works of his patrons, but he altered *Morte Darthur* quite considerably and Trevisa's translation of the monk, Ralph Higden. Caxton was obviously highly critical of Malory and made many cuts and changes in his printed version. Malory made great play of alliteration in his text of *Morte Darthur* and Caxton took pains to tone this down. For example Malory's phrase "up to the crest of the crag" became in Caxton's version "ascended up to that hill" and "a werlow woll" became "a devil".

Where necessary, too, Caxton would modernise a text: he did this with much of Trevisa's work. But here he took a line quite different from his ruthless re-writing of Malory. Trevisa also indulged in alliteration, but not in the same crude and unmusical doggerel style of Malory. Thus Caxton printed Trevisa'a alliterative phrases. On the other hand he regarded some of Trevisa's writing as old fashioned and needing to be "a little embellished".

[6] See *Book of Fame*, by Geoffrey Chaucer, printed by Caxton, probably in 1484.

But Edward Gibbon, the historian who regarded history as little more than a register of the crimes, follies and misfortunes of mankind, made a harsh judgment on Caxton. “In the choice of his authors, that liberal and industrious artist was reduced to comply with the vicious taste of his readers; to gratify the nobles with treatises on heraldry, hawking and the game of chess, and to amuse the popular credulity with romances of fabulous knights and legends of more fabulous saints.” It is a rather biased and sweeping condemnation, but even Gibbon could not avoid paying tribute to Caxton’s attempts to set on record some of the history of England. But Gibbon surprisingly missed the vital point that Caxton was not only modestly helping to record history on his own account, but was actually making history by printing in English. Or, as Thomas Warton, the eighteenth century author of *The History of English Poetry*, put it: “It was a circumstance favourable at least to English literature, owing indeed to the general illiteracy of the times that our first printers were so little employed on books written in the learned languages. Almost all Caxton’s books are English. The multiplication of English copies multiplied English readers, and these again produced new vernacular writers. The existence of a press induced many persons to turn authors, who were only qualified to write in their natives tongue.”

As a translator Caxton limited his work mainly to handling books and manuscripts in French, in which language he was proficient. But he almost certainly spoke Flemish and Dutch equally well and, as Governor of the English Nation in Bruges, he would need to have a knowledge of Latin. In *The Life of Saynt Rockes*, which is part of the *Golden Legend* he stated that it was “translated out of Latin by me, William Caxton”. He is also believed to have translated from the Latin *The Declamation of Noblesse.*

That he must have been a fairly speedy translator is obvious from his output. True, there are signs that in the early days, when he was not so sure of himself, he took a long time over a single translation and frequently worked over and over again on the same passage until he got it right. Later he seems on occasions to have rushed his translation and to have skipped whole passages, though this was by no means a frequent occurrence. During the seventeen years that he printed books he translated between twenty and thirty and it is even possible that he translated others which never reached his press. It is impossible to assess his

speed, but we do know that it took him ten weeks to translate *The Mirror of the World*. This may have been due to pressure from his patron, Alderman Hugh Brice of the City of London, who wanted the book printed so that he could present it to Lord Hastings. Brice must have been one of Caxton's sterner taskmasters for this book is illustrated by wood engravings, which the printer normally did not use.

Caxton took rather longer with other translations; eight months over *The Knight of the Tower,* which was only ten pages longer than *The Mirror of the World,* and as long as eleven months over *Good Manners*, which was a mere 132 pages.

It has already been noted that there was no demand for Bibles in the vernacular in the fifteenth century and that there were serious obstacles to attempting to print them. Caxton made it quite clear in his prologue to *Charles the Great* that he earned his living by printing, implying that he needed to make a profit. Had he gone to the expense of printing a Bible in the vernacular and then seen it banned from sale by the ecclesiastical authorities, such a blow could well have finished his career as a printer. No doubt the main reason was that there was no demand for Bibles and therefore no money to be made from printing them. But Caxton, being a devout Christian, contrived to work a number of biblical stories into his works. The *Golden Legend* includes a number of these such as the narrative of Adam and Eve, the stories of Job and of Saul and David. Some of the narrative appears to follow the Bible very closely, but Caxton broke off to insert this comment of his own: "And here I leave all the story and make an end of the *Book of Kings* for this time. For yet that wish to know how every king reigned after that, ye may find it in the first chapter of St. Matthew, which is read on Christmas morning."

Dr. Pierre Butler, of the John Hopkins University in Baltimore, made a study, published in 1899, of the *Golden Legend,* indicating how Caxton had added Biblical stories to the legends of the saints. "This portion of Caxton's *Golden Legend* is little more than a disguised version of the Bible," he wrote. "He dared not publish the Bible as such, for that would smell of Wycliff and rank Lollardy, and Caxton had no ambition to stir up the powers that were in Church or State, but he evaded the vigilance of the laws by inserting Bible stories in his *Golden Legend*", which became "one of the principal instruments in preparing

the way for the Reformation."[7]

This last assertion is somewhat sweeping and wide of the mark. The introduction of printing may have been one of the lesser factors in preparing the way for the Reformation in England, but it should be remembered that in this country it began with a revolution in the constitution of the Church without any change of doctrine and in many respects retained a more continuous connection with the old Church than would have been permitted by the leading continental Church reformers. Almost anything Caxton did or printed would tend towards the maintenance of such a continuous link rather than a break with it.

N. F. Blake makes one of the most sensible comments when he writes that: "Caxton is important because he is one of the few people who discuss what they are trying to do. Too many other fifteenth century authors have merely left translations without giving us any insight into their method of working."[8] Or, put it another way, while Caxton has provided us with disappointingly few clues about his life, he has provided us with an abundantly clear portrait of his work as translator, author, critic, editor, publisher and printer. It is all there in the prologues and epilogues and in those occasional interpolations of his own work which he puts into the works of others.

His faults as a translator, editor and publisher were more or less typical of his time. Much has been made by some critics of his "exaggerated lip service to royalty and the nobility". But Caxton was only following the custom of his time and in any event, as a sound business man, was merely trying to win clients by flattery. Sometimes he repeated himself unnecessarily, but this may have been due partly to hurried translation and editing. As we have seen some works were rushed through at high speed, whereas others were taken more leisurely.

He has also been criticised for not seriously developing his printing to come up to continental standards, but this is rather churlish in the circumstances. Many continental

---

[7] *Legenda Aurea–Legende Dorée–Golden Legend:* A Study of Caxton's *Golden Legend* with special reference to its relations to the earlier English prose translation by Dr. Pierce Butler, John Hopkins University, Baltimore, 1899.

[8] See *Caxton & His World*, Blake.

printers spent considerable sums in improving their technique only to find they could no longer carry on. Caxton maintained his press for the best part of twenty years and was able to hand it on to Wynkyn de Worde to preserve for posterity. Though he rarely employed wood-cuts, he was sufficiently good an editor to realise that his *Game and Play of Chess* required illustrations and these he provided with woodcuts in the second edition. Blades remarked that the woodcuts in this volume numbered only sixteen, not twenty-four as "Dibdin and other writers say, eight of them being impressions from blocks used for previous chapters."

This edtion of *Game and Play of Chess* was the first book in the English language which contained woodcuts on this scale. They were extremely crude illustrations, but they served their purpose in depicting the game of chess. A figure is shown sitting at a table with a chess-board before him and holding one of the chess-men in his hand. In another woodcut a king and another person are seen playing chess, while in a third a king, seated on his throne, is bent over the game. All the pieces of the chess-board are depicted in some way or other; the king and queen; the *alphyns*, now called "bishops", depicted as "in the manner of judges, sitting"; the knight; the rook, or castle, a figure on horseback wearing a hood and holding a staff in his hand; pawns are represented by labourers with spade and whip, a blacksmith, a clerk, other types of worker; a man with a pair of scales and a purse on his belt; an apothecary, a spicer, a physician, innkeeper, a servant and a dice-player.

The game of chess is said to have been introduced to England from the Middle East in the reign of Edward I. One of the earliest references to chess in England is contained in the works of Lydgate, while Mrs. Paston in *The Paston Letters* says that the Lady Morley: "had no harpings or lutings during Christmas, but playing at tables and chess." Obviously it was a popular game among the nobility and the minor gentry during Caxton's lifetime. He himself probably learned something of the game while at the Court of Burgundy, as Froissart mentions that Charles V of France played chess with the Duke of Burgundy. Certainly the book on chess which gave him the idea for his own production came into his hands at Bruges.

Caxton sometimes had an irritating English habit of moralising unduly, but when

applying the principles of chess to morality in everyday life, he was only adapting the theme taken up by the original author of the work, Jean de Vignay, described by the printer as "an excellent doctor of divinity, of the Order of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem". Caxton said the the lessons of the game of chess: "applied unto the morality of the public weal, as well of the nobles and of the common people, after the game and play of chess." He went on to assert that: "other of what estate of degree he or they stand in may see in this little book that they govern themselves as they ought to do."[9]

Delighting in odds and ends of general information in a haphazard way as distinct from any systematic gathering of knowledge would appear to have been a hobby of Caxton. In many books this desire to come up with tit-bits of information, sometimes drawn from a variety of sources, sometimes from his own experience, is apparent. In the book on chess, for example, he first describes the invention of the game in the time of a king of Babylon known as Emsmerodach, which is an unconfirmed and a much earlier version of the game's origins than generally accepted today. His second treatise is on the "office of King" and with explanations of the names and associations of some of the principal chessmen. His third treatise is on the "offices of the common people" with whom he associates the pawn.

Perhaps one of the best examples of Caxton's gifts as an editor of texts was the use he made of certain sections of the *Polychronicon* to create a separate book, entitled *Description of Britain*. In effect, by taking out those parts of the *Polychronicon* relating to the geography of the British Isles, Caxton was able to produce a very simple text-book and guide to the territory. In this book Caxton presents a picture of Britain which covers not only England, but Ireland, Scotland and Wales as well, including details of rivers, roads, cities, towns, laws and languages. Here Caxton showed little originality other than inspired editing: he might well have amended and added to what Trevisa translated from Ralph Higden. But, as Caxton had been out of the country for most of his life, his own knowledge of British geography must have been limited to what he had read and heard.

He always showed a flair for providing his readers with easily assimilable knowledge.

[9] Game of Chess, translated from the French by Caxton, printed in Bruges, 1474.

Probably none knew better than he how few courtiers were scholars and that they needed to have information served up to them in modest doses. His selection of *The Image or Mirror of the World* was typical of Caxton in his role of the popular medieval educator of the nobility. Translated from the French, it touched on a wide range of subjects from philosophy and geography to meteorology and astronomy. But in writing the prologue for this work Caxton employed an unusual tactic in his translation. Instead of literally translating the French, as was normally his custom, he embellished and extended it. He spun out his translation almost as though he was padding out pages that had to be used up, sometimes supplying three adjectives where the French version only had one, doubling his verbs without justification and occasionally adding in some item of information of his own. The overall impression is that in his prologue to this book Caxton the editor became Caxton the public relations officer and propagandist. He was trying to sell the book, to beat the drum to win over his readers. In modern times this would be done with an emaciated preface and a punch-line at the end. In Caxton's time it was done by pattern-weaving with words, emphasising point by doubling up on nouns, adjectives and verbs, turning a simple prologue into a fugue of doublets and triplets.

He was as cautious as ever, all the same. Caxton always anticipated criticism from his readers. He was no Hugh Cudlipp who would "publish and be damned", nor a Duke of Wellington giving the comeuppance to his blackmailing mistress. Caxton's policy was to print what he felt was right to print, but to beg his readers to believe that if there was any error, it was not his, but the author from whom he was translating. Thus he wrote in this work: "If there be fault in measuring of the firmament, sun, moon or of the earth, or in any other marvels herein contained, I beseech you not to impute the fault to me, but in him that made my copy."[10] Not courageous editorship, but justifiably sound defensive tactics in

[10] *The Mirror of the World*, translated 1481, printed by Caxton. The origin of this work is not easily traceable and probably various sources were used, though an unknown writer of a Latin work, *Speculum vel Imago Mundi*, in the early 13th century must have supplied the original manuscript which was translated into French for the Duke of Berry in 1245. There was also a later translation which was most likely to have been used extensively by Caxton. The probability is that this work was heavily financed by Alderman Hugh Brice, of the City of London, especially as wood-engraving was

medieval England.

Judging from the way in which he expanded the prologue to this book, Caxton intended it for a much wider market than the courtiers who normally comprised his customers. This was an attempts to break through to the merchants and all who were able to read and might have the money to buy books. Dedicated to Hugh Brice, the alderman of the City of London, Caxton stressed of this book: “I have made so plain that every man reasonably may understand it, if he, advisedly and attentively, read it, or hear it.” For good measure, and doubtless to appeal to a more popular taste, Caxton introduced some twenty-seven woodcuts into the work, explaining that without these “it may not lightly be understood”.

The illustrations were mainly diagrams of the scientific principles propounded in the book, but they also included some engravings intended to portray in an elementary fashion the subjects touched on in the work as a whole–a teacher looking at a globe and astronomical instruments; Christ holding in his hand and ball and cross; the creation of Eve who appears coming out of Adam’s ribs; a mathematical teacher with a board on which numerical characters are inscribed; a geometry teacher with a pair of compasses in his hand, drawing diagrams; a female figure with a sheet of music in her hand, singing, and a man playing the flute; the symbole for astronomy is a man with a crude type of quadrant in his hand, taking a sight.

This was Caxton’s first attempt at copious illustration and, whether because the work was rushed through, or whether Caxton’s ability as an editor did not extend to art work, the truth is that some of the diagrams were so badly drawn in the first place that the printer put them in the wrong place.

Perhaps the most popular of Caxton’s translations down the ages has been *The History of Reynard the Fox*. This legendary fable is none the less intriguing because its author is so elusive a figure. About 1255 a Brabantine minstrel translated Walter Map’s *Lancelot du Lac* at the command of his master, Lodewijk van Velthem, and Jacob van Maerlant produced

---

used so freely and the intention of this patronage was for a book to be presented to Lord Hastings.

several romances dealing with Merlin and the Holy Grail. Among these Flemings was Willem, a shadowy figure, variously described as minstrel, poet, priest and scholar. His origins are vague and his best known work is undoubtedly *Van den Vos Reinaerde* (Reynard the Fox). One suggestion is that at some time Willem must have been a *praemonstratenser* from the Abbey of Drongen near Ghent, a cloister with estates near Hilst and Hulsterloo in 1269, but everything about the man remains uncertain as far as his native Holland is concerned. An unrelenting search of the archives of the Amsterdam University Library and all the principal libraries and museums of Holland produced no further clues. Yet such was the quality of his *Reynard the Fox* that speculation about him continues.

The work has always had a universal appeal down the centuries and it is to Caxton's credit that he recognised the popularity an English version of it would have. Nevertheless he was somewhat abashed by the satire of the work and he once again covered himself by stating: "There is no good man blamed herein; it is spoken generally; let every man take his own part as it belongeth and behoveth; and he that findeth im guilty in any deal or part thereof, let him better and amend him; and he that is verily good, I pray God keep him therein; and if any thing be said or written herein that may grieve or displease man, blame not me, but the fox, for they be his words and not mine. Praying all them shall see this little treatise, to correct and amend where they shall find fault; for I have not added, nor minished, but have followed, as nigh as I can, my copy which was in Dutch."[11]

It is curious how, though Caxton dealt entirely with books and pamphlets, one sees him almost as an editor of national newspaper, shaping popular taste, taking cognisance of public opinion and deciding what kind of writing sells best. This is because in the first place the printed book was in effect the first newspaper, but much more so because Caxton wrote prologues and epilogues and edited other people's works rather as an editor appeals to mass circulations. The circulation to which Caxton appealed was certainly not a mass one, and tremendously restricted. Nevertheless it was the all-important narrow market which had to be won over before any real break-through could be attempted. Caxton's greatest

[11] *Reynard the Fox*, translated from the Dutch by Caxton, printed 1481.

achievement was that he realised just how important it was.

Most early printers would have been content to satisfy the needs of the Court just as the publishers of the so-called "serious" newspapers such as *The Times* were content to fulfil their commitment to this very narrow readership right until the early 'sixties of the present century. Caxton as an editor can be compared with the role filled by Pulvermacher when he popularised the *Daily telegraph* in the late 'thirties, or the belated editorial revolution at the *Sunday Times* in the 1960s. For Caxton in his life-time broke away from mere Court readership to the middle classes, the merchants of the City of London and others of the professional class.

Caxton had two complementary qualities: first, a respect for and deep appreciation of contemporary scholars and writers, which revealed itself in his scruples about tampering with their work; secondly, a ruthless desire to be up-to-date, to re-write and continue with other people's histories, and to bring into his work some semblance of a moral or political purpose. Caxton was not a critical or controversial historian: in this respect he was the editor intent upon accuracy, not the leader-writer aiming at putting over a point of view. He seems to have made use of several sources for his historical work and an example of his objectivity may be gleaned from his account of the death of King Richard II. He gave two accounts of how Richard died, but did not indicate which one he accepted beyond mentioning that one of the two versions was "the common opinion of Englishmen".

Yet this is not to say that Caxton lacked a critical approach as an editor. If his approach to history was hampered by inhibitions and some indecision, in tackling other works the impatience of the subeditor peeped through and he pruned rigorously. In his translating of the *Golden Legend* and considering the additions he made to this work, he knew that the length of the original text would demand drastic cuts, not only because of the general reader who would be hopelessly bored if they were not made, but because of the need to keep down printing costs. On the other hand some cuts and omissions were made because of Caxton's orthodox religious beliefs. He would not tolerate doubts. Here the romantic in him coincided with the devout Catholic. In quite a few of his works he excised passages which might seem to savour of the unorthodox, or which could be construed as

casting doubts on dogma or doctrine.

Perhaps one could sum up Caxton the editor as a “High Church Tory” with radical undertones–not an unusual combination in some ages–but at the same time a kind of “Beaverbrook” in reverse, that is to say an English patriot who believed the future prosperity of his country lay in achieving an understanding with other nations of Europe to form a bulwark against the infidel; added to which one could attribute to him some of the qualities of the popular educator which Northcliffe became and some of those robust Nonconformist principles which maintained the journalistic prowess of Robertson Nicoll. All this was somewhat of a medieval mish-mash, but sufficiently leavened to make this courageous man the first and easily the most influential of all English editors.

Source : Richard Deacon, *A Biography of William Caxton, The First English Editor Printer, Merchant and Translator*, London, Frederic Muller Limited, chapter 10, p. 136-152.