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BIOGRAPHY.

Memoir of the life of WILLIAM CAXTON, by whom the Art of Printing was first brought into England.

MR. W. CAXTON, the subject of the following memoir, was a native of that part of Kent, which was formerly denominated the *Wealde*, from the wood with which it abounded; but the exact time of his birth has not been recorded by his biographers. In his preface to "The History of Troy," Mr. Caxton has mentioned the place of his nativity, but unfortunately the day, the month, and even the year, are alike omitted. Circumstances, however, appear to supply this deficiency; and from their concurrence, we are enabled, with a tolerable degree of precision, to fix the time of his birth about the year 1410. Of his parents little more is known, than that they were respectable in their character, and decent in their circumstances; but nothing appears in their history to require any digressive retrospection. In another preface Mr. Caxton informs us, that he received his learning from his parents. This, however, his biographer intimates, amounted to nothing more than reading, writing, and a knowledge of arithmetic; which, in those days of darkness, included no small portion of a liberal education; and of this learning, he received the greater part from his mother.

As nothing is known of his early years, it is probable that he remained under the paternal roof until he had attained the age of 17 or 18, at which time he was removed to London, and put an apprentice with Mr. Robert Large, an eminent mercer, in the parish of St. Olave's Old Jewry. This gentleman was chosen sheriff in 1430, and had the honor of being lord mayor of London, in 1439. It appears that Caxton served him with much fidelity; since, as a testimony of his esteem, he bequeathed to him a legacy of 34 marks, which, at that period, was no inconsiderable sum.

Mr. Caxton on the death of his master, and on receiving his legacy, resolved to pay a visit to foreign countries. He accordingly, on leaving his native land, having acquired an intimate acquaintance with trade, embarked in the character of a merchant, agent, or factor; and, during thirty years, took up his occasional abode in Brabant, Flanders, Holland, and Zealand. But his knowledge of commercial transactions which he acquired abroad, rather increased than diminished his reputation at home, notwithstanding his long and continued absence.

In the year 1464, his name was joined with that of Richard Whitehill, Esq. in a commission from Edward IV. to conclude a treaty of trade and commerce between him and the Duke of Burgundy. This circumstance shews, that his name was not unknown at the English court; and that the report of his talents and integrity had been sufficiently favourable to raise him to this exalted office.

About four years after the previous transaction, the sister of Edward was married to the young Duke of Burgundy, at which time Caxton was incorporated in her retinue. He has himself recorded, that he was "servant of her Grace, and that he received of her, an yearly fee, and many other great and good benefits." In what capacity he stood, we have not been informed; but as her Grace occasionally found fault with his English, and desired him to correct his language, we may infer that he was treated with a degree of familiarity, which could not belong to a subordinate domestic.

Printing had now been invented about 18 years, and carried to an unexpected degree of perfection. It was practised at Mentz in Germany, but the art had been kept a profound secret from the world. "Books" however, Mr. Caxton has observed, "were not multiplied at this period, in a manner so extensive as might have been expected," and little doubt can be entertained as to the accuracy of his statement, since his restless curiosity would not permit him to remain ignorant of such an event.

His worthy patroness, the Duchess of Burgundy, urged him to undertake the translation into English, of a French book, entitled "Recueil of the Histories of Troy." This seems to have been projected by her, with a design to introduce the art of printing into England, whenever a favourable opportunity should offer.

The little knowledge which Caxton had acquired of the French tongue, and his partial forgetfulness of the English, after a residence in foreign parts of nearly thirty years, led him to think himself but badly calculated for such an undertaking. His patroness, however, urging him to begin, he entered on his work, though with much reluctance; but after proceeding a little way in his translation, he dropped it altogether for nearly two years. The Duchess at length sent for him, to inquire into the progress he had made, and to read what he had finished, and she examined three or four leaves, with the English of which she found some fault; but instead of discouraging him, he was desired to resume his labours. Being unwilling to incur her displeasure by disobedience, he renewed his application, and soon brought his work to a conclusion. It was begun in 1468, and was finished in 1471.—The Duchess received it kindly, and handsomely rewarded him for his trouble.

In the year 1462, Mentz was taken by the Duke of Saxony; in consequence of which, most of the artificers employed by John Fust, or Faustus, the great inventor of printing, were scattered abroad; and there can be little doubt that Caxton, who at this time resided near Mentz, availed himself of this opportunity to make himself acquainted with an art, the knowledge of which he had spared neither expence nor trouble to obtain. It is generally understood, that by the aid of these men, he established a printing press at Cologne, where he printed the first edition of the work he had translated.—Such copies as were preserved bore all the marks of antiquity. The letters were rude, and the language was incorrect, and more mixed with French terms than any of his expressions were after his return to England. This, Mr. Lewis, in his life of Caxton, thinks to be the first book he ever printed.

While residing at Cologne, he became acquainted with Wynken de Worde, and Theodorice Rood, a native of that place, and Thomas Hunte, his own countryman, who were all printers. De Worde came afterwards to England with Caxton, and continued with him to the time of his death. The others soon followed, and settled in Oxford, where they established a press, and printed books in Latin.

The number of books printed by Caxton, at Cologne, is not known with more precision, than the exact time of his coming into England. The same uncertainty rests on the title of the first book that ever issued from an English press. Mr. Lewis asserts, that the "Game and Play of Chess," was the most early specimen, and that it appeared in the year 1472, or 1473, and in this opinion he is confirmed by others; while on the contrary it is contended, that this supposition involves difficulties which cannot easily be overcome.

In 1468, the Earl of Warwick formed a conspiracy to dethrone Edward the IV. and so successful was he in the commencement of his attempt, that he compelled the king to flee into Flanders. From this place, having procured assistance from the Duke of Burgundy, he returned, slew Warwick, defeated his army, and regained his throne. Caxton had not been unknown to him prior to this event.—But of this favourable circumstance he is said to have availed himself, and to have come into England about this time, under the royal protection.—It is, however, an admitted fact, that Caxton was at Cologne in 1471. Hence some have concluded, that he occasionally visited England before that time, to make arrangements respecting the establishment of printing in this country; but that he continued his business at Cologne, until the necessary preparations were made, so that, according to these state-

ments, he can scarcely be considered as fully at work in this country until 1473 or 1474.

The first book printed by Caxton, that has any date, is said to have been printed at Westminster, about six years after 1471. But Mr. Caxton expressly informs us, that his book, the "Game of Chess," was printed on the last day of March, 1471. Unfortunately, however, he does not say whether it was done in England or Cologne, and it is now perhaps totally impossible to ascertain the fact.

In the year 1477, it is well known that he was fairly at work in Westminster; but whether in the Abbey or in his own house is rather dubious. Thos. Milling, the then abbot, who has been represented as a lover of learning, is said to have fostered him in his own house, and to have assigned him for his business a part of the Abbey. Leland confirms this account given of the abbot. A cipher introduced by Caxton into many of his books, said to denote the year 1474, has been adduced as an evidence of the year in which he began to print in England; but the exact time when the cipher was first used, can hardly be determined with exactness. It is known to have been inserted in 1480; but how many years prior to this, is involved in uncertainty.

In 1478, several books were printed by Caxton, of which the titles have been preserved; but nothing can be inferred, either from their numbers or their contents, except the progress of the art, which in England had only just started into existence. During this year, Mr. Caxton buried his father, who appears to have lived with him at Westminster. In the accounts of the warden of the parish church of St. Margaret, the following article is inserted.—"Item. The day of buryinge of William Caxton for ij torches and iiij tapers xx d."

Mr. Caxton continued to pursue his business with reputation and success, from this period, until the year 1491 or 1492, during which intermediate years, numerous volumes issued from his press. But few rivals, however, appear to share his fame or to divide his emoluments. In the year 1483, no more than four printing presses are known to have been established in England. These are, Caxton in Westminster, Rood and Hunte in Oxford, an anonymous one in St. Alban's, and De Machlinia, London. During this same year 1483, an act of Parliament was passed, giving leave "to any artificer or merchant to bring into this realm and sell any books whether written or printed." Another act states, as a reason for the former, that "few printers within this realm could well exercise the craft of printing."

It appears, that Caxton continued his employment at Westminster, but not in the Abbey, until the time of his death. This event took place, according to the account given by the church-wardens, and in Mr. Lewis's observations on it, between June 1491, and June 1492. It is not improbable that it was near the former period, as Mr. Ames has limited the time to 1491. Of the death and burial of William Caxton, the following memorial has been preserved.

"In Thaccompte of the Wardens of the Parische Church of Seynt Margarete Westminster in the Shire of Middlesex from the xxvij of May y. cccc. lxxx. the v. of Hen. vij. unto the iij day of June y. cccc. lxxxij. the vij of Henry vij." are the following articles in the second year of this "acompte" viz. 1492. "Item. Atto buryinge of William Caxton for iiij torches vis. viii d. Item, for the Belle at the same buryinge vi d."

Mr. Lewis seems to think, as no mention is made either of Caxton's wife or children, that he was never married. Palmer's continuator, however, says of R. Pynson, that "he was son in law to Caxton," but for the assertion no evidence being produced, the fact has been much doubted. Pynson it appears was a printer. And it seems highly probable, if he had really married Caxton's daughter, that he would have succeeded him in his busi-