

Title**February 2020****Martha Attridge Bufton (M.A.B.)**

I'm here today with Larry Thompson, who is the master printer for the new Books Arts Lab at Carleton University. What is the Book Arts Lab?

Larry Thompson (L.T.)

Basically, it's two rooms that have been built by the library right on the main floor and about 110 feet by 66 feet in total but into two rooms. One side has tables and is more for teaching and for people sitting down doing book crafts or work like that. And the other side is full of printing presses and lead type. There's also facilities, or, or soon will be, on the press side for doing paper making and paper decorating.

There's really five pillars that the Book Arts Lab works within the context of this space: There's printing, book binding, calligraphy, paper making and decorating, and wood cut, uh block cuts creation. That's what the Books Arts Lab is.

M.A.B.

Why is it important for teaching and learning here at Carleton?

L.T.

Well of the things that's, has been deficient, I think, particularly in the liberal arts, is the notion of being able to have a hands-on approach to things. Traditionally, in English, History, the social sciences, have been taught by reading and writing and oral presentation and any science student will tell you, someone who's in Physics, or Biology, or Architecture, whatever, they work both their hands and their head. And I think the combination of the two is important for a student's development. This is generally considered experiential learning.

On the STEM side, they don't even know what the issue is, that's just, that's as natural to them as breathing. You know if you're going to take Physics, you're going to have labs. In liberal arts, it's not so sure. There's very little hands-on. This provides an opportunity for students to experience, even in a cursory way, some of the book arts that they perhaps are studying. People are still discovering us.

We've been promoting what we're doing but not too much because we didn't want that tsunami coming in right now. We'll have modules set up by the beginning of the next term where, that professors and teachers can insert into their courses, can be one hour, can be three hour courses, whatever they want to sacrifice.

M.A.B.

So unpack that term book arts for me.

L.T.

When I use that term, I'm referring to the traditional crafts involved in the creation of books because these crafts are no longer done as a, on a commercial basis, on a wide,

industrial way. They've been elevated to an art form. It's, it's allowed for a certain survival of these traditional techniques, letter-press printing, woodblock cutting, book binding and the more of our societies speeds up, the more people I think seem to be drawn to these slower processes, be able to gain some insight of some sort.

M.A.B.

What's your background in terms of setting yourself up to be the master printer?

L.T.

I've graduated from Carleton University with an English degree, a long, long time, and it's kind of ironic to be back again here, ironic in a good way, doing this type of work. As a freelance writer through the 80s and 90s, it was definitely a young man's game, I'd say, it was or a young person's game. Around 2000, the internet was really coming into swing and I was quite happy to change gears. So I changed going the opposite direction, slowing down, I bought a press, I bought some type, I wanted to do illustrated and eventually the books evolved into being artists' expression of their own as opposed to being a publishing venture. So, I came to call myself an artist with a press.

M.A.B.

Now, are you currently teaching in the English department here, 'cause I think that the Book Arts Lab is, has primarily come about as a collaboration between the Department of English and the Library.

L.T.

Absolutely. The press that started it all, the Chandler and Price, which was on display here in the Library for years, as it turned out it belonged to the English department and at first I was contacted to give advice on how to move it into storage. And then I was contacted again and told they were going to build a book arts lab around it and I thought, "Well, this is something I want to be involved with." At the same time, I was voicing some of my ideas about pedagogy to various people in the English department and the, the head of English at that time, said, "You should teach this studies in publishing course." And it's not your regular [laughs] fourth-year university seminar. They, they have to do a lot of hands-on stuff, so go through everything from oral tradition to cuneiform tablets right up to how those things have integrated themselves into, into the digital realm.

Along the way, I inherited a course on professional writing and editing so I, I do that as well.

M.A.B.

And all of those things go together in terms of understanding, not just books, but other sort of print materials, right?

L.T.

I think also getting the idea of what's needed here at the university as opposed to a studio where artists come and just create and then go away again. As we all know, there's great benefit to the student body other than curiosity I suppose, and this is where

they have to come and actually handle everything. You walk into, particularly the press area, because of the old cabinets and the old presses, is a tendency to think museum right? But it's not. Everything is usable. If it's not going to work or if it's not going to be used, we'll get rid of it and find something that will be used. The challenge will be to make sure everything will be utilized. I think that's something I bring to, brought to the table from the beginning. A focus on a particular area of challenges that we could overcome here at Carleton and there are other areas of the book arts and experiential learning that are just too far beyond the pale to take on but everything here is going to be manageable.

This is not an arts studio, it's a lab. We're not trying to create master book binders or master printers. We're trying to create students and scholars who have another dimension in their education, hopefully go back to their studies carrying that with them.

M.A.B.

The lab is here for undergraduate and graduate students at Carleton as well as faculty. But I know you have a plan to share the lab with high school students.

L.T.

From the very beginning, it was considered an open space. This became cemented when we got the iron press, which is in the lab here. It's the 1850s or you know, circa 1850s, Washington press. A very traditional looking one. It came from Canterbury High School, the high school of the arts in Ottawa. They had the same paradigm that we work with, which is if we're using it we keep it and continue. If it's not being used, and the students were not using the press. We came to an agreement. Carleton would definitely be using the press and return they asked for I think it was half a day a semester and both Patti and I said, "We can, we can do much better than that." So they're going to be coming at some point during the breaks, or during you know, because they rollover for about a month or six weeks after our semester ends so that's time for them to come in.

M.A.B.

And the Enriched Mini-Course Program, or the EMCP, is a program where certainly the University of Ottawa and Carleton, offer a suite of one-week courses for students from Grade 7 to Grade 12 [Larry: That's right]. And the students come here at the beginning of May, they can take a course in law, or book arts, or when my older boy came, he did a history course on the pirates of the Caribbean. So the idea is to introduce students to what happens in a university but in a fun, age-appropriate way.

L.T.

Yeah, so we're very much going to do something like that. Might score a Harry Potter theme. Basically, I'm going to touch base with what the, what the kids are looking at these days and we'll tailor something to that, that idea. It goes in line with my theory that print technology, the, the books arts, basically resonates with every field of study, every field of interest. Some are harder to find but there's always an application somewhere.

M.A.B.

So, is print dead?

L.T.

Not at all. There're converging and concurrent technologies and there's some things that digital is appropriate, appropriate for. I am quite inspired by Carleton and fourteen other universities are doing, is putting their collections together, the records of the collections which will be a tool for them to streamline their collections, knowing that other partner libraries will have what they need. And thanks to the, Amazon and all these places, the process of shipping books around is relatively simple and, and secure. So, it's an easy thing, set up the infrastructure for sharing hard copies. So, you're going to have fourteen libraries, each of them having very small stack collections, but all combined, they have an entire, a fully stacked library.

Nobody loves books more than I do and when I see them destroyed, it's almost a visceral feeling. However, I've got that pragmatic side that got me through a decade of freelance writing and other business ventures, that ah, says we have to move but print isn't dead. And the other thing is, is that, as the book itself becomes more of a rare thing, it's value will again increase. Right now, the world is almost made of books, we're swimming in them. For a book lover, that's wonderful, but there's just not enough place for them. If I know pendulums, they over swing and there'll be a point when we say things are becoming very valuable and rare. And that's why I make books that I do for collectors in my own practice--hand-set type, handmade bindings, the whole bit. Because they're sole desired artefacts.

And I think more and more of the academic concern, certainly here at Carleton, is looking at the book as, and the text, as a material thing which dovetails beautifully with what we're doing here in the lab.

M.A.B.

So, what's it like to be a non-traditional person working in a really important library space?

L.T.

Most everywhere I've worked in my life, I've gone into traditional settings and been the non-traditional person. I think probably what I'm doing here in the lab is the most radical thing I've done. Part of it is the, the speed at which it's happened, which is like blindingly fast, and its only, the pace is only going to pick up more and more. It seems an unnerving amount of demand for the lab in the coming months and years from a number of different quarters. And I think it's, uh, the right thing happening at the right time with the right people. Cause, a year earlier or a year later from now it might not have been able to be a possibility.

To me, this lab is a, is a miracle. It's not just for the university community, which is in dire need of this kind of experience, but also for the book arts community as a whole. Once we have policies and everything, all the sort of legals, all that sort of stuff sorted out, it could become a home base for a lot of organizations. With the, it opens up the

opportunity for more people who are pursuing book arts to discover Carleton too, the whole idea of what libraries can be in the future.