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## WILLIAM CAXTON

[by John H. Lienhard](#)

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Today, an intellectual combines mind and machine. The University of Houston's College of Engineering presents this series about the machines that make our civilization run, and the people whose ingenuity created them.

In 1474 William Caxton finished volume three of his translation of the histories of Troy. In those days, writers finished their manuscripts off with personal notes, called *explicit*s. Caxton's explicit said, "My pen is worn, mine hand heavy, mine eye even dimmed." That much was a typical scribe's complaint.

But this explicit was a turning point. You see, Caxton had done something about his tired hand. He went on to say,

*... because I have promised [this book] to divers gentlemen ... therefore I have practiced and learned ... to ordain this ... book in print ... it is not written in pen and ink as other books are.*

Caxton was English. He'd come to Bruges in 1442 as apprentice to a merchant -- the same year Gutenberg printed the oldest book we know about. Bruges was part of the Duchy of Burgundy -- a great European cultural center. Caxton did well there. By the time Gutenberg printed his great Bible, Caxton was wealthy.

He'd also begun collecting hand-written books. That love of books led him into a new occupation. At 47, he entered the service of Margaret, Duchess of Burgundy. Margaret was a noted scholar -- an arbiter of good taste in literature. Caxton was intimidated by her scholarship, but he was also enamored of it.

When Margaret authorized him to translate the histories of Troy, the first two volumes were very popular. Margaret kept asking for copies. Caxton had to write each one out by hand.

So he learned some of the new art of printing, and he invented the rest. His printing wasn't as good as Gutenberg's. His spacing and alignment were crude by comparison. His ornate type faces didn't have the same classical grace.

The early European printers were fine technicians and only so-so scholars. Caxton was only a fair technician, but his vision reshaped the very purpose of literature as he printed.

After his third printed book, he left Burgundy and set up England's first press at Westminster Abbey. There he changed the rules of the game. European printers had given patrons what they expected -- fine copies of Latin and Greek manuscripts.

None of that for Caxton. He knew books must interact with living readers. He published in English -- *The Canterbury Tales*, a French-English dictionary, romances. He was preparing his one-hundredth book when he died in 1491.

Caxton's England was a cultural backwater. But now, late in life, he took up more than just the trade of printing. He reconnected high culture with the people. He set the stage for Shakespeare. When Caxton took books to the people he changed them -- and he changed England.

I'm John Lienhard, at the University of Houston, where we're interested in the way inventive minds work.

(Theme music)

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Deacon, R., *A Biography of William Caxton: The First English Editor, Printer, Merchant and Translator*. Chatham, Frederick Muller Ltd., 1976.

Blake, N.F., *Caxton: England's First Publisher*. London: Osprey Publishing, Ltd., 1976.

Jennett, S., *Pioneers in Printing*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, Ltd., 1958, pp. 28-46.

Many facsimile volumes of Caxton's works are available. Check your local library. The actual title of his first printed book was *Recuyell of the Trojan Histories*. (*Recuyell* is an old French word meaning "collection.")

The oldest known printing in fully movable type is a single page from a book with the title *The World Judgment*. The date is 1442, and the quality of the printing is already quite good. It was almost certainly Gutenberg's work (see Chapter 1 of the Jennett book, above).

The following website displays Caxton's printer's device and some of his history:  
<http://home.vicnet.net.au/~neils/renaissance/caxton.htm>

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No. 11.—*Recuyell of the Hist. of Troys,*  
c. 1471.

of Malakel, the  
of Seth sonie to  
Aloes Rode Rfi

No. 12.—*Dictes and Sayings,*  
1477

From the 1897 *Encyclopaedia Britannica*

If it plese ony man spirituell or temporel to bye ony  
pyes of two and thre comemoraciōs of salisbury use  
enpryntid after the forme of this prelet lettre whiche  
ben wel and truly correct, late hym come to westmo-  
nester in to the almonestrye at the reed pale and he that  
haue them good chepe .-. .

**Supplico scet cedula**

*Bodleian Library, Oxford.*

FACSIMILE OF CAXTON'S ADVERTISEMENT OF HIS BOOKS