

in colour and black and white, with contemporary illustrations plus photographs. It is extensively footnoted with references in a range of languages. The detailed index is enhanced by general headings such as Library/Libraries, Monasteries, Schools, Scriptoria and Copying Centres, and Sketes.

To the question – for whom will this book be of value? – there is no easy answer. Scholars will appreciate the large amounts of literary evidence from many languages. Unease will, however, be felt at the loose interpretative structure. General readers will be fascinated by the wealth of illustrations but overwhelmed by the detail and lack of a compelling narrative. Although clearly written, the overall construction lacks a firm design. The preface (xi–xxi) and chapter 9, “The Architectural Design of Libraries, Decoration, and Equipment” (469–92), provide helpful overviews. Serious library historians will wrestle with the remaining chapters, alternately thankful for and frustrated by the lush and unruly detail.

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Mirjam Foot. *Bookbinders at Work*. New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Press; London: The British Library, 2006. 171 pp.; US \$59.95 ISBN 9781584561682

In her most recent scholarly monograph, bookbinding historian Mirjam Foot makes a solid case for broadening the view of what “belongs” to the bibliographer’s realm by emphasizing the importance of binding structure and decoration. While giants of descriptive bibliography like Ronald Brunlees McKerrow (1872–1940) and Fredson Bowers (1905–1991) argued that bindings are not bibliographical objects, “since they are not part of the letterpress,” Foot advocates a change in approach. Her intent is not to deny that these men were textual scholars of great accomplishment; rather, she invites us to look beyond the printed sheets to see how the binding conveys meaning. Indeed, her intent is to show that bindings offer important clues that mainstream bibliographers have too long ignored.

Instead of focusing her research exclusively on the binding itself, its decoration and structure, Foot turns her attention to bookbinding manuals that were written prior to 1800. These manuscript and printed descriptions are a rich source of evidence that include descriptions of

everything from technical processes to dye recipes. Curiously, these primary sources have never received much scholarly attention, which makes Foot's research all the more timely and intriguing. She advises her readers that early binding manuals need to be used with caution, however, because some of the described practices may have been purely local or were otherwise written by amateurs. Nevertheless, Foot has tapped into a fount of valuable evidence that focuses our attention on the activities inside the binder's shop. Readers are also indulged with several early illustrations of binder's shops and equipment, which makes it easier to imagine the sights and sounds of binding practices throughout the centuries.

While we learn that most manuals use lengthy descriptions to educate binders, Foot explains that mistakes were still a common occurrence in the binder's shop. Indeed, books were frequently bound in haste, with leaves trimmed too closely, incorrect folds, and edges beaten unevenly. With all of these problems, we are reminded that the binding manuals themselves were suffused with meaning and could be misunderstood or altogether ignored. A minor quibble with Foot's treatment of this material is the way she randomly draws attention to manuals from different countries and centuries for brief discussions of a particular binding technique or treatment. Her sprawling discussion could have been better organized to give readers an understanding of exactly how many manuals were consulted and from which countries and regions. A chart with comparative figures would have been a helpful addition to the appendix. Some readers may feel adrift with the introduction of so many descriptions of binding practices and an onslaught of accompanying footnotes, but Foot is a thorough scholar and she clearly wishes her readers to get a sense of the immense range and complexity of binding activities.

To make her point that bindings are "more than a convenient way of holding a written or printed text together," Foot includes an irresistibly appealing chapter on decoration. We learn that the degree of decoration varied a great deal, but Foot devotes the bulk of her discussion to the most extraordinary work. Some manuals explain how to adorn velvet bindings with silk, pearls, and precious stones, while others describe how gilt edges can be impressed with attractive flowers and figures. The discussion of how painted and sprinkled edges conveyed meaning is especially enlightening. For example, Foot explains that solid red edges were used for common books, but sprinkled red edges added a touch of elegance and distinction. Foot also looks closely at various recipes, including those for colouring

leather, edge gilding, and the dyeing of parchment. With all of these detailed recipes, one wonders whether they are still in use today, but Foot does not pick up this line of inquiry. This is obviously a large question, perhaps best reserved for another book.

In the chapter on the economics of bookbinding, Foot provides more than enough detail to satisfy academic readers. The problem is that too many sentences simply list the cost of everything from skins to pasteboards without giving the reader a sense of how these prices affected the lives and work of early binders. Much of this information could have been presented in the footnotes or tables to free the narrative from reading like an exasperating laundry list. Foot admits that monetary comparisons are difficult to make, especially with the wide variance of currency and weights, but she could have improved the discussion by drawing conclusions or theories about how costs for materials and equipment affected business decisions and, ultimately, how binders made a living and competed for work.

The concluding chapter entitled "Image and Reality" considers the binders themselves, their skills and characteristics, and it is here that Foot offers insight into a fascinating social history. We learn that binders needed to be more than technically competent; in fact, they were held accountable for their moral and social behaviour. Some regulations required binders to know geometry, and to read and understand many languages. Other guilds were more modest in their requirements, and only specified that a journeyman be able to read and write. Although this is a concise chapter with terse descriptions of complex ideas, readers at least get a sense of what kinds of standards binders were measured against and how their contemporaries perceived them.

Overall, Foot's book deserves an enthusiastic recommendation. The book is hard to put down because virtually every second page features a splendid illustration, and Foot displays an excellent command of the material. Some readers may have difficulties with the somewhat rambling narrative style, which was tolerable given the book's short length but would have become tiresome in a longer work. Still, *Bookbinders at Work* is a worthy addition to library collections, and will certainly inspire many questions and further research.

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