

Book Review of Mirjam Foot's *Bookbinders at Work*. New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Press; London: The British Library, 2006. 171 pp.

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How a book is bound gives us a wealth of information about the environment in which it was made, including the social, historical, and cultural trends which reigned during its creation. In *Bookbinders at Work: Their Roles and Methods*, Mirjam M. Foot examines the role of bookbinders and their practices to demonstrate their significance in the production of books, in how books were valued, and on the European book trade between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. *Bookbinders at Work* is an excellent introduction to the subject of bookbinders and bookbinding, with enthusiastic descriptions of the activities of the bookbinder and beautiful images to enthrall the reader. As Foot states, “the lessons a book can teach can be enhanced enormously by ornamentation, and also by the structural peculiarities and decoration of its binding.”¹

Bookbinders at Work opens by explaining that bookbinding, and especially the binders themselves, have largely been overlooked or ignored by modern bibliographers and historians. Foot challenges the standard interpretation of bookbinders and argues that bookbinding is integral to our understanding of the history of the book and the study of books as cultural objects. This claim is supported with evidence taken from bookbinding manuals, a primary source material that has rarely been used prior to the writing of this text. Bookbinding manuals provide a wealth of important information, such as: the materials, equipment, and processes necessary for the creation of a bound book; the organization of the book and binding trade, and the relation between binders, booksellers, publishers, and owners of books; the costs and prices associated with bookbinding; and the daily life, character and habits of the bookbinder.² Foot has an expansive resume on writing about the history of bookbinding and is a professor emeritus of Library and Archive Studies at University College, London.³ Using relatively unexplored bookbinding primary source material, *Bookbinders at Work* is an important addition to the historiography of bookbinding and the book.

¹ Foot, *Bookbinders at Work*, 27.

² *Ibid.*, 1-2.

³ “IRIS Profile: Professor Mirjam Foot.”

The narrative begins with an examination of why bookbinding has often been excluded from bibliographic study in the past and the context in which binding has previously been considered. The introductory chapter includes a brief overview of the historiography of bookbinding and the reasons behind some common trends. Several different types of bindings are shown in order to demonstrate how “the character of a book is changed by its binding.”⁴ For example, lavish and impressive bindings were often given to texts that were authoritative in their own right emphasizing their importance further.⁵ The binding of a book can provide valuable information, such as the provenance of the book, the reasons for the book’s production, its function, the public it was aimed at, and cultural movements present at the time of its creation.

Drawing from early bookbinding manuals, an overview of the bookbinding process and an examination of the perception of bookbinders across Europe are provided. Here Foot further demonstrates the usefulness of these bookbinding manuals utilizing them to contrast the diverging roles which bookbinders had throughout different countries in Europe. The role of the buyer in how the book was bound is also highlighted in this chapter, which is a topic that has traditionally been disregarded.⁶ A detailed overview of the bookbinding process is provided, the procedures are described in detail, and the differences in practices performed across Europe are discussed.

After reviewing the process of binding a book, the variety of decorations that were added to a bound book are described in detail. The different techniques for various ornamentations are elaborately detailed, including edge embellishments, cover decorations, bindings, and gilding. For example, some of the various methods of decorating book covers that are mentioned include colouring, staining, sprinkling, marbling, engraving, and dying.⁷ Foot details these different processes in depth and provides an abundance of colour photographs of books that possess the decorations mentioned. The visual examples of the embellishments are fascinating and provide an essential component to describing such a visual practise.

Unfortunately, throughout the text when Foot describes and references a figure, the reader will often find themselves flipping through numerous pages attempting to locate the image the author is describing. This flipping through pages to locate the image makes the text

⁴ Foot, *Bookbinders at Work*, 27.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 76-103.

quite cumbersome and severely disrupts the flow of the narrative. For example, Foot makes reference to Figure 55 on page 144 while the figure itself is found much earlier on page 114.

When examining the history of bookbinding it is essential to consider the costs of the extensive amount of equipment and materials that were required to bind a book. Booksellers' and bookbinders' accounts are examined in order to compare the similarities and differences between binderies, and the costs they incurred, across several European countries. We are given an in-depth look at the daily life of a bookbinder, including how much time a binder would spend on different types of binding, their wages, their labour requirements, and the prices they would charge the customer.⁸ However, the chapter on 'The Economics of the Binding Trade' reads like a tedious list of costs and prices, providing an overabundance of stark data without enough context. In addition, the chapter concludes merely with a paragraph listing prices of everyday goods in Leipzig during the 18th century.⁹ The information was provided in order to give the reader an idea of the cost of living and explore whether the bookbinder's wages were enough to live on. However, Foot does not complete her argument and merely gives a plethora of data without a conclusion on what can be drawn from the detailed information provided.

The final chapter focuses on the bookbinders themselves, examining how they were perceived and the skills required to become one. The requirements to become a bookbinder were diverse, sometimes requiring the highest education and other times only requiring a modicum of ability to read and write.¹⁰ An unusual theme is noted where a bookbinding guild would often require its members to be moral and upstanding citizens.¹¹ By examining different writings and engravings of the time, Foot discovers that how bookbinders were perceived by their contemporaries varied wildly. Unfortunately, the well-conceived and researched narrative of *Bookbinders at Work* ends without a conclusion. Foot makes an argument for why bookbinding and bookbinders should be studied and throughout the book she gives excellent support for her argument, demonstrating the complexities of bookbinding reflect important aspects of social history. However, Foot does not provide any conclusion for her argument which leaves the reader without any sense of completion.

Bookbinders at Work provides an excellent introduction to the history of the binding of books and those who bound them. Foot demonstrates why an examination of the products and

⁸ *Ibid.*, 107-116.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 122.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 128-131.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 127-128.

practices of the bookbinder are essential to bibliographical study and to the history of the book. She also provides us with a glimpse of how bookbinders were viewed throughout Europe and demonstrates how integral the nature of the bookbinder is to how books are valued. With the emergence of electronic resources, how we view the book is changing and evolving. By understanding the history of how and why books were bound as they were we can better understand what books will mean for our future.

References:

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<https://iris.ucl.ac.uk/iris/browse/profile?upi=MMFOO74>