

# Johann Froben

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## JOHANN FROBEN.

On the occasion of the 400th anniversary of Froben's death the Frobenian A.G. in Basle has issued a commemorative booklet, the cover of which reproduces a portrait of the famous printer by Hans Holbein the younger. The following article appeared in a recent number of the "Linotype and Printing Machinery Record"; it describes a fascinating period in the history of Basle when the latter town was the centre of the German printing and book trade, like Leipzig to-day.

Froben was a Bavarian who became a citizen of Basle in 1490. With the founding of the University in 1460 Basle became a seat of learning, and the gateway by which the new learning entered Germany from Italy. The opportunity thus offered to a printer was seized by Johann Froben. The fact that for one short period the books printed at Basle rivalled those of Venice or Paris both in number and quality was due in the main to the energy of this printer. Basle was at that time a free city of the Holy Roman Empire and had not yet joined the Swiss Federation. Froben's first book was a Latin Bible in octavo printed in a minute gothic fount and issued in 1491. He was employed originally in the printing house of Johann Amerbach and many of his earlier books were issued in partnership with this printer, who was already issuing Latin works in roman type. Thus from the first Froben was connected with the new school of learning and the renaissance types of Italy. Down to the death of Amerbach in 1513 Froben's name appears on comparatively few books. The important part of his work belongs to the period from 1513 to his death in 1527. In those years his activity was greatly increased. He printed the first Greek books to appear in Germany, introduced italic founts and the smaller and cheaper book after the manner of Aldus, and made Basle the centre of the German trade for books in Latin. He, too, was chiefly responsible for the style of book decoration which distinguished Basle books of his age, a style which was copied not only by German printers but throughout Europe.

In 1513 Froben printed an edition of the *Adagia* of Erasmus, a folio in roman type and with one of his new woodcut title-pages. In the title Erasmus is described as "Germania decus." Erasmus was already known as one of the first men of letters in Europe. By this time he had completed his translation and recension of the New Testament and the works of St. Jerome and was considering where these works were to be printed. Hitherto his books had been printed in the Netherlands, at Paris, and by Aldus at Venice. But he now decided on Basle, influenced perhaps by the edition of the *Adagia* and the compliment paid to him. In a letter of September, 1514, to Jacob Wimpfeling of Strassburg, Erasmus describes his arrival at Froben's shop and his manner of introducing himself as a friend of Erasmus. The result was important to Froben, for Erasmus not only remained in Basle for the printing of his two great works, but returned again and made his home there for several years. He became an intimate friend of all the members of the family and of the learned correctors of the press who worked for Froben, and was godfather to Froben's youngest son, born in 1517. From this date almost all Erasmus' books were first printed by Froben and many editions of his more popular works were sold out. At one time the printer complained that nothing but Luther tracts had a good sale; it may have been the influence of Erasmus that checked Froben from taking part in that lucrative trade, but at least he had the compensation of being the printer of one of the best sellers in Europe.

From this connection with Erasmus Froben became in the main a printer of Latin works and consequently a user of roman types and the new italic. He issued very few books in German, and seldom employed gothic founts. Amerbach had used roman types as early as 1486, and Froben's romans were at first those of Amerbach or founts closely akin to them. Indeed he never departed far from Amerbach's models and made no history as a typographer. One of the earliest German type specimens is that issued by Johann Petri of Nuremberg, in 1525. The roman founts in this specimen closely resemble those used by Froben and most other printers of South Germany. We have said that Froben printed the earliest Greek books to appear in Germany, although several printers had already used Greek for occasional passages.

As a typographer, Froben followed the prevailing fashion in roman founts and merely led the way among German printers in copying the Aldine Greek and italic. But what specially characterises his books is their decoration. The woodcut and metal-cut borders and initials which were designed for him by the two Holbeins and Urs Graf had great popularity in their day and are now the chief matter of interest in his books. Urs Graf, a soldier of fortune and an artist, whose spirited drawings of Landsknechts are well known, was employed by Froben before Holbein's arrival in Basle. On the title-page of Erasmus' *Adagia* of 1513 is a woodcut border by Urs Graf known as

the "Humanitas" border from one of the figures represented. It is an architectural border in the renaissance style and Froben's earliest decorated piece in this manner. In the same book are some of Graf's woodcut figure initials. Hans Holbein came to Basle at the end of 1514 or early in 1515, and by the following year he had designed two title-borders for Froben. One is the "Lars Porrena" border, depicting a story taken from Livy, and the second is a fairly close copy of a border used by Johann Weyssburger of Nuremberg. In 1517 appeared the "John the Baptist" border and several others. From 1517 to 1519 Holbein was in Lucerne, and during those years we find Froben employing the younger Holbein, Ambrosius, for example to illustrate his edition of Sir Thomas More's "Utopia." To Hans Holbein's second stay in Basle, from 1519 to 1526, when he departed for England, belongs the mass of the work which he designed for Froben and the other printers of Basle. As far as Froben is concerned this work consists mainly of title-borders, head-pieces and initials. The Bible illustrations were done for other printers. Decorative motives derived from Italy are common in this work of Holbein's and sometimes he directly copies Italian initials. But it is very definitely German work, is crowded with detail, and tends to be illustrative rather than decorative. On the whole Holbein's work as an illustrator of books is not of his best. The idea of decoration is too often neglected; in the figure initials the attention is attracted to the spirited drawing at the expense of the initial; among the title-borders are some which are little more than collections of separate compartments, as for instance in the "Kebes" border and the "Crowning of Homer." It is typical of the age that most of Holbein's borders represent scenes from classical antiquity, several from Livy and several based on stories from Lucian. Erasmus had translated some Lucian, and the edition printed by Froben was the source of a number of Basle borders. Many of Holbein's designs were cut on metal and not on wood. With a clear impression given by good presswork from these metal blocks the effect is brilliant. The sharp contrast of black and white is in harmony with Froben's somewhat black and heavy romans.

Froben had a sound reputation as a careful printer among the scholars of Europe, thanks chiefly to his connection with Erasmus. "I work neither for riches nor fame, but truth. My labour is spared not night nor day. I deem it an adequate reward if a good author comes into the hands of the public with dignity"; thus he himself described his aim. But what seems to have attracted his fellow printers was his style of book decoration. From 1520 to 1530 and later, Basle borders and initials were being freely copied in many other towns. The Basle influence was particularly strong in Lyons—we find copies of Holbein initials even in the books of Jean de Tournes. Venice, the Rhineland cities, Antwerp and London all produced copies of Froben's work. When the Reformation was finally established in Basle and decorated books went out of fashion or were forbidden, the actual blocks of the Basle printers were in many cases sold abroad. In Paris at one period it almost seemed that the influence of Graf and Holbein might predominate in book decoration. The books of several of the busiest Paris printers, for instance, Pierre Vidoue, Chrestien Wechel and Michel Vascosan, in their early days, are frequently decorated in the manner of Froben's books. In typography we find that a number of Greek founts used at Paris during this period had their origin in Basle. When Erasmus complained to Badius of his want of Greek type, Badius supplied the defect by procuring a fount from Froben. In the end, however, the influence of Geoffroy Tory drove out the Basle decorative blocks, and the best French style of book illustration owed nothing to the German artists. Interesting as Froben's books are they have only to be compared with French books of the following generation for their defects to be realised."

## WILLIAM LE QUEUX. †

The death last week of Mr. William Le Queux, the well-known novelist, recalls to my mind the somewhat peculiar way in which I made his acquaintance a little more than a year ago.

I was on my way to Switzerland and the train had just left Boulogne when the dining-car attendant came along the corridor shouting his familiar "premier service, le diner est servi" to which, feeling rather hungry, I responded with alacrity. On arriving in the dining-car I noticed in the seat opposite to mine an elderly gentleman of rubicund countenance and a merry twinkle in his eyes, to whom I wished a good evening, the greeting being courteously returned to me. Just then the car gave a violent jerk and a part of the claret I was in the act of pouring out was spilled on the table-cloth, which drew from me an audible and very emphatic *d*—that prompted my *vis-à-vis* to comment upon the aggravating

habit of the French railways to put the dining-car in the very front of the train. The conversation having thus been opened we gradually drifted from one subject to another until we came to talk at some length about the moral rectitude or otherwise of certain people whose environments are chiefly to be found in the city, when I casually quoted a passage from one of Le Queux's stories in which the author stated that "they"—meaning the hardfaces—prayed on Sunday for their follow-men, while preying upon them during the week." Rather to my surprise, my *vis-à-vis*, who had up to this moment remained unknown to me, gave a hearty laugh at this and on my enquiring of him the reason for his hilarity he told me, with a certain reluctance, that he was the author of the words just quoted. I expressed my keen pleasure at making his acquaintance and we continued to talk together to the end of the meal, when we adjourned the meeting to a later hour when the dining-car should be empty and we could have some whiskies and soda *tele-à-tele*. We finally separated long after eleven o'clock and arranged to meet each other at the Bahnhof Buffet at Basle for breakfast the next morning. By the time this was finished Mr. Le Queux and I had become quite good friends and we parted with mutual good wishes for each other's welfare and an early "au revoir," my newly-found friend going to Interlaken while I went on to Lucerne. From then onwards we regularly corresponded and met several times at different places, the erstwhile chance acquaintance having by then ripened into a sincere friendship which, alas, has now been abruptly ended by death.

Mr. Le Queux was a great friend and admirer of our country and spent every year a number of months at such places as Interlaken, Montreux, Mirren, Wengen, the Gurnigel and lately at Engelberg, whose scenic beauties and social attractions he extolled in several brochures, of which the one on Engelberg was printed by our friend the Editor of the *Swiss Observer*.

The deceased was a genial, kindly man, ever ready to do others a good turn, and I, with many others who knew him personally, sincerely mourn his sudden and somewhat unexpected death. R.I.P. A.E.D.

## J. H.'S Weekly Letter to his Friends and Compatriots.

This week I have to apologise to my readers in general and to two compatriots in particular. The reason is that a fortnight ago J.J.S. and Dr. Egli were kind enough to take the trouble to write to the *Swiss Observer* in answer to a proposal I made some weeks ago, and, that I did not already last week take an opportunity to answer those two letters.

I intended to do so, but as I also had to redeem an old promise I found last week's letter to have passed beyond the length of what one would call a short article, before I came to take public notice of the two communications.

I think J.J.S. has not quite understood what I was driving at. My experience is commercial, and other spheres of work tell me that there are comparatively few people who ever take to writing to an Embassy or Legation, or even to a higher Official Bureau at home. They seem to believe that those offices are for the Governments and the big business organisations only. But even apart from this fact the truth is, that there are quite a number of items of information which cannot be given so easily by an accredited official as they can by private informants.

In addition to this, as has been very clearly pointed out by Dr. Egli in his letter, there is lots of information wanting which would be appreciated at home. To find and to transmit this kind of information can only be the duty of private citizens or an organisation of private citizens.

I did think on the lines you indicate, Dr. Egli, though I had drawn the circle somewhat wider and indeed, I should be pleased if some members of the Colony would follow your advice and give their names to the Editor of the *Swiss Observer* so that an informal meeting could be called and things talked over.

Now I am going to tell you an open secret. As you know I am very fond of Song and Music, though—but please keep this to yourselves—I don't actually understand very much of either. But to hear our Swiss Choral Society and the Orchestra of the Swiss Institute must be a pleasure at any time even to a dilettante like me, and I am sure most of the members of the Swiss Colony are above that standard. So I hope to see everybody at Wigmore Hall next Saturday, the more so as the concert has been arranged in aid of the "Georges Dimier Fund." Just imagine Father Dimier going to Wigmore Hall to help in some good work and to join in and create happiness, as he always did up to the very last, and then "go thou and do likewise."