

Jan Pirożyński, *Johannes Gutenberg i początki ery druku (Johannes Gutenberg and the Beginnings of the Era of Printing)*. Warszawa 2002, Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 227 pp.

There is a voluminous literature on Gutenberg, however, what circulates in popular use is frequently repeated information of secondary value. On the other hand, research into the beginnings of printing continues in many countries and seems to augur well, which is testified by the bibliography included in the work under discussion.

The fact that the topic has been taken up by Jan Pirożyński guarantees that his new book (based on solid documentation and at the same time easy to read) will find its permanent place in the historiography. The author, who made his debut with a monograph of one of the Seyms of the second half of the 16th century, years ago started research on the European culture of the Golden Age and became an excellent expert on archival materials and the beginnings of the press in Europe, above all due to his thorough inquiries conducted in the Herzog

August Bibliothek at Wolfenbuttel. In 1995 he published the work *Z dziejów obiegu informacji w Europie XVI wieku. "Nowiny z Polski" w kolekcji Jana Jakuba Wicka w Zurychu z lat 1560–1587* (*From the History of the Circulation of Information in 16th Century Europe. "News from Poland" in the Collection of Johann Jacob Wick of Zurich in the Years 1560–1587*), and in the year 2000 two subsequent volumes from the fundamental series *Drukarze dawnej Polski od XV do XVIII wieku* (*The Printers of Old Poland from the 15th till the 18th Century*) appeared in print in his edition.

In his introduction the author draws attention to the enormous bibliography (the first studies go back to 1640) on the subject and at the same time to numerous secrets concerning the father of printing ("very famous, but at the same time, paradoxically, he remains virtually unknown, and we have to say, alas, that we still do not know much about him..."). Jan Pirożyński's book is the first competent view, in recent Polish writings, of the beginnings of printing in Europe. It also takes into consideration the development of book production techniques from antiquity till the 16th century, and emphasizes the significance of the revolution in this field for intellectual life (humanism, the Reformation). The author sets himself (with a question mark) the task of reaching not only professionals in his field, but also the normal reader; on reading the book we see that this design has been fulfilled, due to the author's excellent research apparatus and his good experience as a writer of didactic works.

The first of the 14 chapters is addressed primarily to the reader with a general education, although a specialist will also benefit from this synthetic treatment of the *Długi i dawny rodowód druku* (*The Long and Old Genealogy of Printing*) — since the exposition starts with the upper Paleolithic period when (about 15 thousand years B.C.) in the caves of what is now contemporary France the prints of human palms were fixed with the help of special techniques; the next stage was Turkey (over six thousand years B.C.), Mesopotamia, Asia Minor, Athens. Of similar character is chapter II, concerning *Kultura książki późnego średniowiecza w Europie i bezpośrednie źródła inspiracji Gutenberga* (*The Book Culture in Late Medieval Times in Europe and the Direct Sources of Gutenberg's Inspiration*); (it should be noted, however, that among the recent Polish publications these questions have also been raised by Edward Potkowski's monograph as well as a number of articles by that author, one of them mentioned in the extensive but selective bibliography).

Chapters 3–10 deal with the successive stages in the printer's life and work — that is his family background, his stay in Strasbourg and Mainz, his trial and the decline of his life, as well as his memorable invention (the technical aspects of his idea to use a movable type) and his most famous publication — *The Bible*. Chapter 10 is devoted to his posthumous fame which — as often happens — was to be a recompense for enormous difficulties he encountered in his lifetime: some space is also devoted to other competitors who aspired to that fame and claimed the credit for inventing similar types, supported in their claims by other, not only German, centres greedy of fame. The author notes that successes have many fathers and in this case — although "numerous, absolutely fantastic ideas and legends" did circulate, not all the competitive versions should be completely rejected, for Gutenberg did not act in a vacuum and was not the only inventor who wanted to meet the need for the mass production of books. Therefore we should not accept his over-idealistic portrait cherished in Germany, especially over the last two centuries.

Chapters 11–14 make up a separate part of the book and deal with the significance of the invention of printing to the technology and culture of early modern times. They are based on the author's solid analysis and refer to his earlier studies. They tell of the improvements on the invention of the Master of Mainz, the 16th century publications, their importance to the process of intellectual transformations of that era, and lastly the impact of this great invention on the beginnings of the long evolution of mass media, which is still under way. This

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chapter should be especially recommended to modern media experts, who sometimes think too much of the future, and have not enough respect for the achievements of the early ages.

Jan Pirożyński's synthesis closes with appendices about the sources, the above-mentioned selective bibliography and indexes — of persons and places.

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