ON PAPER: THE EVERYTHING OF ITS TWO-THOUSAND-YEAR HISTORY

Nicholas A. Basbanes
Alfred A. Knopf, 2013

THE PAPER TRAIL: AN UNEXPECTED HISTORY OF A REVOLUTIONARY INVENTION

Alexander Monro
Alfred A. Knopf, 2014

PAPER: PAGING THROUGH HISTORY

Mark Kurlansky
W. W. Norton & Company, 2016

Reviewed by Amy Richard
Owner and proprietor of Amy Richard Studio

GIVEN THE GENERAL SCARCITY OF BOOKS written *about* paper, a flurry of recently published monographs is cause for celebration among bibliophiles and paperphiles alike. Nicholas Basbanes led the way in 2013 with *On Paper: The Everything of Its Two-Thousand-Year History*, followed in 2014 by Alexander Monro's *The Paper Trail: An Unexpected History of a Revolutionary Invention*, and most recently Mark Kurlansky's *Paper: Paging Through History*, published in 2016.

Why the sudden interest in publishing monumental books about paper? Were these intended as memorials? Or could it be that paper is somehow gaining new significance in the face of an all-consuming digital presence? With these questions in mind, a review of all three books seemed appropriate. At the very least, I hoped to determine which of them to acquire for my own library.

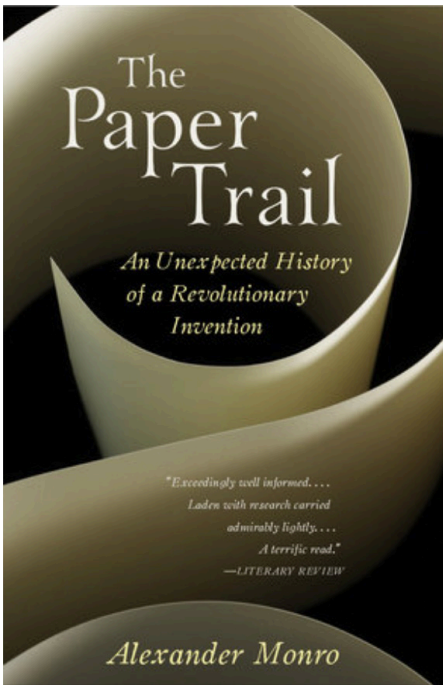
Since Basbanes was first out of the gate, it made sense to start with his 430-page treatise. An investigative journalist and self-professed bibliophile, his hands-on research makes for an engaging read. True to his goal of exploring the *idea* of paper more than its chronological history, he covers a wide range of topics above and beyond the usual paper-history narrative, including its role in the development of art, architecture, currency, war, munitions, and international relations, to name a few.

After setting the stage in the book's first six chapters with an overview of early writing and paper's "relentless circumnavigation of the globe," Basbanes spends the rest of his time weaving a tapestry of history's decisive paper-related moments, some of them quite surprising and little known. A consummate storyteller, he delights in sharing these tales, as well as personal interviews with a host of contemporary scholars and innovators in the field, which will no doubt serve as an important archive for future generations.

Determined to cover the "everything" of paper, Basbanes includes dozens of innovations that irrefutably changed our lives, for good or bad. Who knew that cigarette wrappers, feminine hygiene products, toilet paper, gas mask liners, and munitions cartridges would have such a huge impact? While these less-than-glamorous subjects may seem like diversions, they offer a deeper understanding of just how thoroughly paper has permeated our lives, culture, and history—the very "human factor" the author aspires to.

In his final chapter, "Elegy in Fragments," Basbanes brings this point home with haunting accounts of the paper "rain" that fell from the Twin Towers during the 9/11 terrorist attack. Among them were handwritten notes from victims trapped in the buildings. Discovered later at Ground Zero, these gritty fragments of ephemera serve as a profound example of our close and long-standing connection with paper.

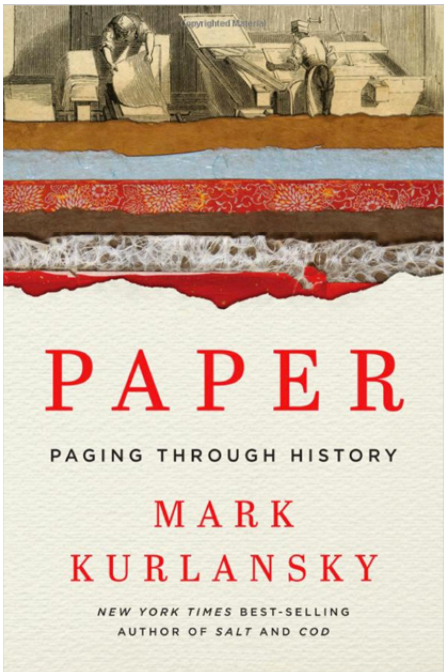
The Paper Trail by Alexander Monro likewise deviates, in its 368 pages, from the usual Western narrative by providing in-depth examination of Asia's paper, writing, and printing history, reserving Europe and Gutenberg for the last hundred pages. This makes sense given Monro's background as researcher and reporter for Reuters Shanghai. His nuanced knowledge of China has clearly been influenced by personal travels there. In 2002, for example, he retraced on horseback the route Genghis Khan took through Mongolia.



Monro's substantive overview of paleography and early calligraphy in central and south Asia is greatly appreciated, as are chapters 8–12, in which he covers papermaking in the Arab world and the monumental influence it had on Islam and the Koran. He expresses justifiable amazement at how a book-based religion evolved from a long-standing oral culture and ultimately spread over half of Asia.

Similar care is given to an enlightening section about Martin Luther and the seismic shift that resulted from his vernacular German text printed and disseminated on paper. I have studied the Reformation in several history courses, but Monro's narrative brought this moment to life.

Last but not least, Mark Kurlansky's 389-page *Paper: Paging Through History* makes an interesting contrast to the other books. Dispensing with any attempts at warm, fuzzy introductions, the author greets the reader with an apparently ongoing debate about the idea of the "technological fallacy." He insists, "technological inventions have always arisen from necessity," then spends the first few pages of his prologue trying to convince us that "technologies do not change society but instead society develops technology to address the changes that are taking place within it."



Taken aback by this sweeping generalization, I chose to withhold judgment. For one thing, it's a chicken-and-egg argument and beyond the scope of this essay, though it provides much food for thought. Thankfully, chapter 1, "Being Human," is less strident, beginning with a question instead of a manifesto. Asking what humans do that other animals do not, Kurlansky answers with the observation that only humans *record*. He then launches into a captivating historical overview of this uniquely human compulsion—a nice segue to the history of paper.

While covering much of the same territory on early writing systems and languages, the book offers plenty of new material to absorb. The history of Arab-world paper is less robust than Monro's, but its presence is an indication that it is finally gaining the respect it deserves. He also deserves credit for including the history of paper in Mexico's Aztec and Mayan cultures, which, like Arab-world paper, deserves much more attention and scholarship. All three authors discuss paper in Mexico briefly, but Kurlansky dedicates the most space, which will hopefully inspire more scholarship on the topic.

Printing-history enthusiasts will appreciate the detailed accounts of the evolution of European printing in chapters 6 and 7, including a section on musical notation and a lengthy discussion of Albrecht Dürer. Several later chapters proved favorites that I will revisit again soon, as they provide an expanded look at paper's influence on art, including a number of contemporary Asian paper artists, something touched on only briefly by the other two authors (although Basbanes does an equally nice job with Leonardo da Vinci and a number of contemporary origami artists).

Some minor points of contention in Kurlansky's narrative bear mentioning, however. Several times, I stumbled across assertions that seemed like a stretch, and some were just plain wrong. References to the use of urine for retting fiber (in early European papermaking) may have been confused with techniques used in the wool industry.[1] The author lists silk as a source of cellulose (it's a protein), and describes Fabriano as a city on the west coast of Italy (it's on the east); such inaccuracies are surprising from a *New York Times* best-selling author and distract from an otherwise compelling book.

The good news is that all three authors seem to agree that paper isn't going away anytime soon and is indeed gaining new significance while retaining its original "human factor." As Monro eloquently explains, "Paper may face a very real threat to its use for text in the digital age, but it also has peculiar strengths as a cultural product, strengths which cannot all be replicated. Chief among these is its physical reception by readers as an independent item: a handheld extended piece of writing that can be physically owned."

It's also clear that all three books need to be added to my library; each contains a unique perspective on paper's enormous history, filling in gaps others may have missed, and with much more to offer than I have been able to convey in this short review. ■

NOTE

1. According to University of Iowa scholar and paper specialist Tim Barrett, who has done considerable research on the subject of European paper production from the thirteenth through the nineteenth century, "The idea that various agents may have been used to encourage the retting step, such as sour milk, urine, stale beer, or whatever is very intriguing but I haven't yet encountered any historical references to their use. Lime is the only agent I know of that was sometimes used during the retting step." More on this can be found in Barrett's fascinating research project "Paper Through Time" at http://paper.lib.uiowa.edu/.

DREAMING ON THE EDGE: POETS AND BOOK ARTISTS IN CALIFORNIA

Alastair M. Johnston
Oak Knoll Press, 2016

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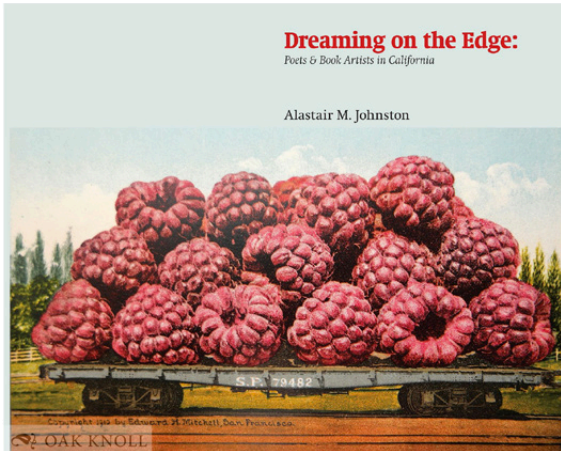

DREAMING ON THE EDGE takes the reader on a circuitous 150-year "biblio-tour of California," with a focus on how artists, printers, and poets shaped the development of the book across time. The journey begins with the boomtown era of San Francisco during the gold rush and after, followed by a view of twentieth-century art, poetry, and printmaking from San Francisco to Los Angeles. It ends with a brief history of the second wave of book artists and the academic programs supporting book arts. The book is beautifully illustrated. The front cover presents a chromolithograph postcard by Edward H. Mitchell (1912), and the endpapers are from the John Henry Nash type-ornament collection in the Bancroft Library. It is laid out, loosely chronologically and thematically, in thirty chapters, with photographs throughout documenting early printmaking and the book as art from the 1960s to the present.

In the preface, Alastair Johnston argues that "self-publishing is a key component of creative growth in California" and that this unbound creativity has been influenced by multiple social movements, politics, and a rebellious spirit against social conformity. The synergy between printers, artists, and writers over 150 years provides a context for understanding the unique diversity of California's history, culture, and politics. Indeed, to examine the role of "the form of the book as a vehicle for self-expression" is to study Californian identity—or the geography and culture of shaped poetry through book art.

Johnston traces the diverse history of book arts, presenting an eclectic cast of radical characters: conscientious objectors, anarchists, pacifists, feminists, hippies, beatniks, and Buddhists. Among writers and printers, the usual suspects from the twentieth century are well represented: Rexroth, Duncan, Everson, Jeffers, Ginsberg, Burroughs, Spicer, Patchen, Ritchie, Nash, Hoyem, the Grabhorn brothers, Black Sparrow, White Rabbit, Ruscha, and others. While the narrative focuses dominantly on men, Johnston weaves in the roles played by women, including Idah Strobridge, Florence Lundborg, Joanne Kyger, and Frances Clark Butler. The creation of academic and nonprofit programs provided a training ground for female and male printers and artists that influenced the second wave of book artists from 1960 to the present. Academic programs and organizations at University of California Santa Cruz, University of California Santa Barbara, Mills College, California College of Arts and Crafts, Claremont College, and the Pacific Center for the Book Arts are examined among others.

The first four chapters focus on the early history of San Francisco, providing the literary context that shaped demand for newspapers, periodicals, photo books, chapbooks, postcards, and ephemera. The oldest of the periodicals of this period, the *News-letter*, featured

the stories of Bret Harte and was followed by the *Wasp*, the *Argonaut*, and the *Lark*, among others. Johnston provides a rich narrative, with local character and color in his prose, providing a fascinating look at this period. While San Francisco dominates as the hub for fine printing, Southern California, once considered a wasteland in this regard, is rescued by the likes of Ward Ritchie and Lawrence Clark Powell and enhanced by SoCal transplants, among them wood engraver Paul Landacre. One can easily see the interplay between East and West Coast talent in creating a very unique culture of printing in California.

One of the book's strengths is its focus on the birth of the postmodern era and underground publishing, starting with Henry Miller, Anaïs Nin, Bern Porter, Kenneth Patchen, and Kenneth Rexroth. Patchen's *Journal of Albion Moonlight* represented the intersection of poetry with an articulated typography as a linear bound book. As Johnston so elegantly describes, Patchen's "presenting text in complex ways" prepared the way for a new printing aesthetic that included variety of scale, white space, and dramatic illustration (64).

Johnston enhances the narrative with some insightful firsthand accounts by printers and artists. For example, he describes the experience of those working with William Everson and recounts a story told to him by Graham Mackintosh: "Mackintosh recalled helping him print at St. Albert's, unaware that Everson was a 'shouter'—given to spontaneous ejaculatory praise. Mackintosh was carrying a galley of hand-set type when Everson claimed 'OhmyGod!!' shattering the silence, causing Mackintosh to pie the type all over the floor" (109).

The postwar years produced a cultural mecca in California that inspired creativity in poetry and printing. Johnston presents well the emergence of the beatnik generation and the conflicts between the old guard that included Jack Spicer and Robert Duncan. He also traces the emergence of the White Rabbit Press and the Black Sparrow Press, highlighting John Martin's unique marketing strategies, which included targeting libraries, forcing an all-or-nothing purchase requirement, with no review or return policies.

While the bulk of this history is heavily male, snapshots of women printers and poets do emerge. Chapter 22 explores the life of Joanne Kyger and her contributions as a poet and writer, and her journals present her insider view of the anti-beatnik sentiment of the Spicer-Duncan circle. Chapter 27 is focused on women and begins with a description of the Women's Co-operative Printing Union established in Oakland in 1868 and run by printer Marietta Stow, and moves on to the production of *Carrier Dove*, a feminist publication edited by Julia Fish Schlesinger. The anti–Vietnam War movement and the second-wave feminist movement inspired a new collective movement in printing. Kathleen Walkup, a self-taught printer, opened her first letterpress shop Five Trees Press, and in 1976 with Cheryl Miller opened Peartree Printers, the first letterpress shop run by women in San Francisco since the 19th century. Five Trees Press represented a women's collective that included Kathleen Walkup, Cheryl Chaney Miller, Jaime Robles, Eileen Callahan, and Cameron Bunker. The second-wave feminist movement would inspire a new collective movement in printing.

The last three chapters address the second wave of book art production, which is illustrative of the role of women as printmakers, bookbinders, designers, and artists. The birth of academic and nonprofit centers is also prominently described, including the formation of

the Codex Foundation and the CODEX Book Fair and Symposium by Peter Koch. Johnston opines that "CODEX fails to engage a larger audience" where "they too often focus on one aspect of the book [text, illustration, structural concept]," thus guaranteeing rarity. Although CODEX has created an artist environment that is grounded on traditional and postmodern interpretations of the meaning of the book, it seems equally true that the fine press movement is similar in creating intentionally rare, finely crafted limited edition works. Despite Johnston's critique of CODEX, he has a strong appreciation of the book arts ability to transform our thinking about the "intrinsic nature of the book" (202). In these final chapters Johnston teases out his favorite artists while revealing the diverse landscape of the book as art. He provides a critique of the meaning of the book and playfully embraces the deconstruction of book arts as mastered by many seasoned book artists, such as Julie Chen and Mark Head. Head defines his approach using multimedia stating "it's a rift between illustrated mind and map of consciousness . . . poetic inspiration" (202). Hedi Kyle's "creatively engineered structures" and those by Julie Chen represent both bound and unbound books and are indicators of the new genre and the creativity and diversity of the book arts in the twenty-first century.

Dreaming on the Edge is a welcome addition to the history of the book, printmaking, and book art in California. Johnston's extremely dense narrative is presented circularly, bringing a nuanced approach to the fine press movements across time and making connections to the early master printers and writers. The last two chapters slimly address the birth of the contemporary artist's book movement, while offering an interesting perspective on the "intrinsic nature of the book" and the role of novelty, surprise, and visual representation in postmodern book production. I was happy to see many of the great masters recognized, including Harry and Sandra Reese, Carolee Campbell, Johanna Drucker, Julie Chen, Gaylord Schanilec, Peter and Donna Thomas, Felicia Rice, Kitty Maryatt, Peter Rutledge Koch, and many others.

As much as I enjoyed Johnston's prose and research, as a historian I was disappointed by the lack of footnotes and found the index difficult to use. Still, this book should be considered as a text for college courses in book arts, history, and interdisciplinary studies. I am certain that printers, writers, and artists will also enjoy this delightful narrative. ■