

Story **Barnaby Rogerson** Photographs **Thomas Brown**

COVER VERSIONS

Over a hundred years ago, British booksellers James and Mary Lee Tregaskis set master craftsmen around the globe an intriguing challenge – to prove to the public that “modern” bookbinding skills were just as good as those of the past

Each of the 73 volumes is stored in its own padded, black leather conservation box, identified by a simple number and its place of origin. I had seen them many times before, illustrated in catalogs or cited in book histories. But handling them, even in the dim light of a curator’s office, brought out an explosion of color and invention, as one by one I opened the boxes – and carefully put them away again, to rest the eyes and not make invidious comparisons, before opening the next one. For each was created in its own workshop, without any awareness of the others – though ultimately they would be displayed together and judged by the simple expedient of each visitor voting for their favorite. Each time, I felt like a child extracting a present from a Christmas stocking or an archaeologist unearthing treasure.

The collection was commissioned in 1894 to appear in an international bookbinding exhibition held at a London bookshop. At least 76 bookbinders from 27 countries were sent an identical printed text: William Morris’s translation of *The Tale of King Florus and the Fair Jehane*. All but three copies made it back (one was lost in a Greek earthquake, one destroyed by a fire in Saxony, one merely lost in the mail). The fact that the books share the same text dimensions and form helps to draw attention to the variant skills of the craftsmen. It also helps that they are pocket-sized (roughly the dimensions of a modern paperback), so one could imagine a life for these ornamented volumes outside a library, on some treasured bedroom shelf or being read beneath a fruit tree.

What the various binders did with the text was entirely their own judgment, and the results (even some 120 years later) still sizzle with inventiveness, while also celebrating a tradition that was already at least two thousand years old. Each of the 73 books is part of a line of unbroken craft that stretched back over 60 generations: of masters teaching apprentices their craft, and

each generation respecting the past, but also striving to add its own finesse to the tradition while essentially using the same tools and materials.

In our day, the work of a small press or bookbindery is typically centered around a single proprietor master craftsman with an apprentice-assistant. But a hundred years ago, a trade bindery would be composed of a number of quite separate processes. The text blocks coming in from the printers would often be disbound and then re sewn to the binder’s specifications by women, though the main structural work on the text block, “the forwarding,” was the responsibility of a man. The gilding of the edges of the pages was the function of a different male workbench, while the silk headbands were customarily woven by women. The design may have been the responsibility of a freelance artist, though the leather-clad boards, the gold-tooling, and the interior endpapers were each made by different master craftsmen. Not to mention the sourcing, tanning, and coloring of different grades of Morocco leather, the Turkish endpapers, the silks, the casting of the metal blocks of the panel stamps. But even in this nineteenth-century heyday there were traditionalists who looked back lovingly to the “real days” when the binder of a parchment Bible of the first rank would call in two thousand calf skins in order to select 250 without blemish.

The Tregaskis collection is exceptional for a number of reasons, but the first “accident” of its history is that it remains intact and in near mint condition. This is due to the philanthropy of one patron (the widowed Mrs. John Rylands), who bought up the entire collection immediately after the exhibition closed. She then promptly donated it to the charitable foundation that she was patiently building to be one of the great libraries of the world (located in Manchester, in the U.K.). Its second distinction is that it was created at that turning point



in the ancient craft tradition of bookbinding before single artisans took over. The third distinction of the Tregaskis collection is that it was a “working project,” not one put together by a committee on the board of a national library. Instead it was the brainchild of the Tregaskises of the Caxton Head bookshop at 232 High Holborn, London.

It was Mary Lee Tregaskis who came up with the idea of having periodic exhibitions to publicize her shop. She both knew and loved the book trade, and was one of the first book dealers to encourage collectors to purchase modern first editions, issuing a catalog by post every three weeks to her private clients. Her first exhibition had been a modest shelf of six bindings (of Charles Kingsley’s *The Water Babies*), followed in 1891 by a much larger display, featuring the work of 36 European binderies, which attracted two thousand visitors. But her 1894 exhibition was her biggest project yet. For this she expanded her remit to include the bookbinding traditions of the entire world. Her good taste is revealed in her choice of text, the product of the brand new Kelmscott Press, which was reviving the old print skills – such as the use of real woodcuts to hammer a thickly inked impression

onto the page – in contrast to the tired lithographs and cramped pages of small type then being churned out by commercial printers. Behind this new enterprise was the hand of William Morris, the artist-designer-writer, who worked alongside the artists of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood to re-inject soul, craft, and the dignity of labor into industrialized society. Mrs. Tregaskis bought up around 80 sets of flat sheets and despatched them to her carefully researched list of craft binders, asking them to keep their costs to below £2 (around \$300 today). They were responsible for collating and sewing the sheets and creating a traditional hardback spine (which tied the binding to the sewn block of text). This was against the flow of the modern trade that since 1820 had been dominated by the hollow back – which allowed the new literate classes to own books that looked magnificent, could be opened and read more easily, but would not survive more than a century of use due to the fundamental weakness of their paper and card joints.

Some of the binders clearly scented publicity and poured heart and soul, or rather gilt and silk and lavish endpapers, into the finished work. Others dutifully kept to the £2 threshold.

As a publisher, writer, and book collector, I have my own watch marks when judging a book’s cover: relevance to the interior text, the endurance of the chosen materials, and clarity of title. These though have to be balanced against the traditions of each culture (which in the case of Asia are centuries older than the first codex of the Western world), the desire to innovate, to express artistic individuality as well as to create a unique product. The different ways in which the bindings appeal – from Japanese embroidered silk butterflies to moccasin beadwork from Canada – is what gives the Tregaskis collection its enduring relevance and allure. It was also a spectacular success in its day, boosted by the added publicity of Queen Victoria requesting a private viewing at Windsor Castle. During the subsequent rush to catch the exhibition before it closed, Mary Lee laughingly complained of having to buy a new carpet due to the increased footfall.

As I left the John Rylands Library (which is a cathedral to books and a university of book lore) I marveled at the conjunction of the influence of three women that allows us to appreciate these works today. A widowed Queen-Empress in her castle, a philanthropist who used the fortune from her cotton-milling husband to create a world-class library, and the bustling figure of Mary Lee Tregaskis, alive with ideas to promote her shop. ♦

Previous page: Canada’s beaded, ermine-tipped bookmark is a nod to the country’s fur trade and the trade beads worn by Native Americans. Below: the entry from Tehran, Persia, with a varnished papier-mâché and silver-leaf cover. Opposite, from top, left to right: the Tregaskises commissioned covers from 27 countries including

inlaid leather from Sweden; Italy’s gold-tooled design; embellished satin crafted in Delhi; embroidered silk butterflies from Japan; two covers by London binders; Denmark’s entry featuring the “Fair Jehane”; fawn calf leather from Germany; silk from Madras; stitched satin from London; Chinese braided silk; a hand-painted vellum cover from Leipzig



ADDITIONAL PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF JOHN RYLANDS UNIVERSITY LIBRARY, MANCHESTER