

**H. D. C. PEPLER***obit September 20, 1951*

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**H**ARRY (HILARY) DOUGLAS CLARKE PEPLER was born on January 14th, 1878. His father, George Henry Pepler, who came of an old Wiltshire family, was a partner in Messrs Diplocks, Brewers, of Eastbourne. The family were Quakers, and Hilary and his brother (now Sir George Pepler) were educated at Bootham School, York. At the age of fourteen Hilary was apprenticed to Sir Reginald Hanson, Bart., as a Merchant Taylor in London; but after a time he entered the tea trade. Then followed a post with a firm of wholesale grocers in Cannon Street. With £250 inherited from his grandfather, he next bought a pewterer's business and set up as a maker and caster of pewter, employing eight men. But his machines were out of date and eventually he sold the business to a competitor from the United States. During this time he shared rooms in London with Harry Mennell (one of the Quaker branch), through whom he became very friendly with the children of Wilfrid and Alice Meynell at Palace Court, where he often saw Francis Thompson.

In 1903 Pepler met Clare Whiteman, who was studying art under Herkomer at the Bushey School of Art, and they were married in the following year. For some reason, he then decided that his vocation was land surveying, and after his marriage he spent a year at Tunbridge Wells learning this business. His own comment, in some manuscript reminiscences, is: 'Good heavens, I *was* a rolling stone'.

After the year at Tunbridge Wells he decided on a return to London. A former schoolfellow, T. Edmund Harvey, had just been appointed Acting Warden of Toynbee Hall, and he proposed that Pepler should become his secretary. Nothing came of this, as it proved quite impossible for Harvey to use a secretary or for Pepler to be one. But it did lead to his taking up social work in London; one of his colleagues for a time being William (now Lord) Beveridge. When the L.C.C. started an organisation for the provision of school meals for children, Pepler was appointed their first organiser.

In London he settled at Hammersmith Terrace, where he became the friend of Edward Johnston, through whom he was brought into contact with Eric Gill, Roger Fry, and Cobden-Sanderson. Gill he did not see much of at first, though he actually had some lessons from him in stone carving.

'At this time', says Pepler in some reminiscences printed in *The Register* magazine, 'I was, alas, an uplifter, much concerned to change the habits of the people in their appreciation of art and attempting to do so by organising exhibitions at a working men's club next . . . to Kelmscott House, once the home of William Morris. I called upon Frank Brangwyn because he was a fine painter, had been an apprentice of Morris, lived a few minutes' walk away and might possibly help in the club.' Curiously enough, Pepler and Brangwyn were both eventually to settle in Ditchling; his verdict on Brangwyn, with whom he formed a lasting friendship, is that he is 'a very generous man'. In later years Brangwyn did a large and very fine lithograph portrait of Pepler, showing the artist himself in the background.

Pepler stood as a Socialist candidate (unsuccessful) for Hammersmith Borough Council and developed an enthusiasm for Quakerism and Adult Schools. In 1912 Messrs Constable published his first book, *The Care Committee, the Child, and the Parent*, which was followed in 1915 by *Justice and the Child*. The statistics in these two books are now of interest only to the social historian, but in other respects these books retain their value. At the instigation of Dick Sheppard he joined the Cavendish Club, where he met the then Head Inspector of Borstal and Industrial Schools, at whose suggestion he visited Vienna and Budapest in 1914 in order to see something of continental penal institutions. The Chief Inspector wished Pepler to enter his department at the Home Office, and he it was who suggested that he should write *Justice and the Child*. But the war put an end to this idea.

In 1917 Pepler, together with two neighbours in Hammersmith Terrace, Fred Rowntree and Warwick Draper, had founded the Hampshire House Club, for working men, mentioned above. The Club was intended to be a pleasant place of resort for the working people of Hammersmith, Hampshire House itself being a panelled manor house with half an acre of garden, situated between some slums and Kelmscott House. Among those whom Pepler enlisted to help the Club in various ways were G. K. Chesterton, Hilaire

Belloc, and William Rothenstein. During the 1914-18 war, as an offshoot from the Club there developed the Hampshire House Workshops, in Hampshire Hog Lane. Pepler, Rowntree and Draper founded these workshops to give employment to Belgian and other war refugees. They continued as a Company after the war. When Pepler set up as a publisher in 1915, the first titles over his imprint were issued from the Hampshire House Workshops. These were his own sociological satire, *The Devil's Devices* (the first book for which Eric Gill provided woodcut illustrations), *A Carol and Other Rhymes* by Edward Johnston, and a reprint of Cobbett's *Cottage Economy* with a preface by Chesterton. These books were printed at the Westminster Press by Gerard Meynell.

In the summers of 1912-14 Pepler took the Hampshire House Club members to the sea and so became known as a pioneer of holidays for working men. This led to his being the guest of honour at a Rally of the Workers' Travel Association held in 1920. The invitation was sent to him at the instance of a high official of the association, his friend the late E. H. Haywood. Haywood had started life as a London postman, and Pepler had been instrumental in getting him sent to Ruskin College, Oxford. He and Pepler always remained firm friends. Haywood rose high in the Labour movement, and though he never entered Parliament he was always very much 'in the know' and was on terms of friendship with all the leading Labour personalities. Although he always described himself as a radical and a free-thinker, in later years Haywood became a prominent figure in the Distributist movement, whose members rejoiced in his unflinching flow of Cockney wit and wisdom.

Right up to Haywood's death during the Second World War, he and Pepler were in constant touch and they were associated in many projected and actual business enterprises. About 1930, for instance, Haywood got Pepler elected to the board of a company which was to float a Labour evening paper, and he and Pepler endeavoured to get G.K.C. appointed editor! When their colleagues would not agree to this, both resigned—and within a year each of their fellow-directors had passed through the Bankruptcy Court!

In 1915, because of the difficulty of bringing up a family in London, Pepler decided on the move to Ditchling—where Eric Gill was already settled. In his book *The Hand Press* (1934) Pepler

says: '... it is not easy to understand how I became involved in type, printing, and publishing. The answer is that I wanted to escape from the town and earn my living in the country. The hand press, though a thing of the city, can be moved to a place where gas and electricity have not penetrated. Moreover, in my ignorance I thought any fool could print. And there were books I wanted to print—books about crafts which machinery threatened with extinction. . . . So I left Hammersmith and set up in a Ditchling stable which had been recently occupied by Eric Gill and Joseph Cribb.'

Gill had already become a Catholic (in 1913); Pepler was received into the Church by Fr Vincent McNabb at Hawkesyard in 1916. Both men looked to Fr Vincent in a special way as friend and teacher, and both became tertiaries of the Dominican Order. Both were frequent visitors at Hawkesyard, and Dominicans were frequent visitors at Ditchling. As well as setting up their workshops, Gill and Pepler were now attracting other men to their way of life, which they were expounding in lecture-tours, undertaken together, at places as far afield as Dublin and Glasgow. (Cf. Eric Gill's 'Diary in Ireland', printed in the posthumous volume of his essays, *In A Strange Land*.)

In 1918 there followed the foundation of the Guild of St Joseph and St Dominic at Ditchling—a fraternity of Catholic craftsmen, bound by their common faith and philosophy of work and owning land, chapel, workshops and houses in common. Here Pepler drew on his Hammersmith experience of the Hampshire House Club and Workshops, and without his co-operation the Guild would hardly have come into being; he bore the major part of the financial strain, as he did in the critical time in 1924 after Gill had departed to the Black Mountains in search of greater seclusion.

Hilary Pepler was a versatile personality, with remarkable talents. In later years he used sometimes to feel that he had tried too many things and succeeded in none. He was a very humble man at heart. Yet he did feel that the Hampshire House Club was something that he could be proud of; in his last years he looked back on those days with singular pleasure. But it will be chiefly for what he did to further the revival of craftsmanship that he will be remembered, as Mr James Norbury said, speaking of Pepler together with Eric Gill and William Morris, in a lecture to

the Royal Society of Arts in January 1951. And his name has a special place in the story of the English typographical revival.

The St Dominic's Press which he founded was not strictly a 'private' press, since it would print anything for any customers that might come along. Nor was it strictly a 'fine' press, since its work lacked the deliberate, and proper, 'preciousness' that one associates with 'fine' printing. Pepler's printing has a special quality of its own, a kind of 'home-spun' beauty. He rather prided himself on not catering for the rich, while in no wise criticising those great presses, such as The Golden Cockerel, the Ashdene, the Doves, and the Gregynog, whose magnificent achievements were, in some degree, made possible by the support of wealthy patrons. Also, it must be admitted, he had not the ingenuity necessary for such interesting experiments in typography as those of his friend Mr James Guthrie, at The Pear Tree Press; nor the patience necessary for the attainment of such technical perfection as was to appear later in the books printed by Hague and Gill at Pigotts.

Pepler always remained, in both senses of the word, something of an *amateur* of printing; and it was just this fact that gave his work its special and delightful quality. For him printing—or indeed whatever he might be doing—was always something of a game (hence the title of the occasional magazine which he and Gill edited from 1915 to 1923, *The Game*). He lacked the high seriousness of approach which would have made him a typographer of the very first rank; and in the same way he was always rather amused by the collector's and bibliophile's interest in his productions. It was very typical of him that at no time did he have more than a handful of his own Press's books in his house, and that he gave away liberally books and engravings that in later years he could have sold for large sums.

Pepler opened his printing-office at Ditchling in 1915 with a fount of Caslon Old Face type and a Stanhope hand-press of the year 1790. (Designed by an inventive nobleman, Lord Stanhope, this was the very first iron press to be made.) He later added an Albion and a Columbian press, but the Stanhope remained his favourite. For a long time he used no other type except William Caslon's, which he admired for its eighteenth-century English grace and dignity. His handmade paper he obtained from Joseph Batchelor and Sons, the firm who had supplied William Morris

at the Kelmscott Press; though later he used some good papers from the firm of Barcham Green.

Of the books that he printed, my own favourite is one of the earliest, *The Mistress of Vision* by Francis Thompson, with a Commentary by the Revd John O'Connor, S.T.P. and a Preface by Fr Vincent McNabb, O.P. Fr McNabb held *The Mistress of Vision* to be this poet's 'topmost note of mystic song'; and Fr O'Connor's commentary is a masterpiece of interpretative writing. It has always seemed to me astonishing that this book has never been republished in an ordinary edition. It is beautifully printed on a particularly lovely paper of Batchelor's (of which no more seems to have been made) and is embellished with woodcut ornaments by Eric Gill. It appeared in 1918; only two hundred and fifty copies were printed, and it was sold for the small sum of five shillings.

One of the finest productions of the St Dominic's Press was the crown quarto edition of the Dominican Office of our Lady (*Horae B.V.M. juxta ritum Sacri Ordinis Praedicatorum*), printed in 1923. Mr Stanley Morison, in his *English Prayer Books* (Cambridge University Press) speaks of this book as 'the best example I have seen of English liturgical-music printing'. It was several times placed on display at the British Museum among exhibits of fine printing.

But the most splendid production of the Ditchling Press was *Cantica Natalia*, a massive folio volume of Christmas carols, printed in large type, with plainchant notation, and intended for lectern use by choirs. This noble book sold at the modest sum of eight guineas; today, I suppose, £30 would be a reasonable price for a copy. A very lovely small book was Frances Cornford's collection of poems, *Autumn Midnight*, which was printed for Harold Monro's Poetry Bookshop. It had decorative initial letters by Eric Gill (though the artist was not very satisfied with them) and one of his most beautiful engravings as frontispiece.

A landmark was the printing and publishing in 1923 of the first of Jacques Maritain's works to appear in English: *The Philosophy of Art: being 'Art et Scolastique' by Jacques Maritain, done into English by the Revd John O'Connor, S.T.P., with a Preface by Eric Gill, O.S.D.* Of this book Gill says in his *Autobiography*, 'I hold it to be a merciful and indeed blessed dispensation of divine providence that so precious a book should first have seen the light

in English in the rational and beautiful, even if somewhat inexperienced, printing of the Ditchling Press'.

Pepler's mastery of his medium was shown especially in the posters which he printed for the advertisement of local and other events—dances, flower-shows, exhibitions, etc. A good example was the annual list, with the Cardinal Archbishop's arms at the top, of churches in the diocese of Westminster where the Forty Hours' Prayer was to be held; and another excellent poster, for the Exhibition of the Society of Wood Engravers, used to appear each year on the walls of the London Underground stations. These posters were most striking in their gay and original beauty, and it is a great pity that no one (not even the printer) ever thought of forming a collection of them.

In pursuance of his original intention, Pepler printed a number of useful craft books, among them *Brewing Beer* (a reprint from Cobbett's *Cottage Economy*), Ethel Mairet's *Vegetable Dyes*, which proved a best-seller and was constantly reprinted, Romney Green's *Woodwork*, R. J. Beedham's *Wood Engraving*, which also went through several editions, Fr James Harrison's *How To Sing Plainchant*, Dunstan Pruden's *Silversmithing*, and A. H. Green's *Old English Clocks*.

Pepler printed almost all Eric Gill's writings up to 1924 and most of his early engravings, of which he issued a collection in volume form. Other wood-engravers who made their début through the Press were Desmond Chute and Harold Purney (who both became priests), David Jones and Mary Dudley Short.

By 1930 or soon after, the days of (comparative) prosperity for the English hand-printer were over. The economic blizzard was blowing and one by one the hand presses were swept away. At least three families were drawing their livelihood from the St Dominic's Press, and mechanisation became inevitable. A sign of things to come was the introduction of a treadle 'platen' machine—the first step towards the appearance of the Heidelberg power press and the linotype. Handmade paper was less and less in use; the authentic founder's type gave way gradually to the facilities of monotype. Eventually, when the transformation was seen to be inevitable, the Press was moved to more suitable premises in Ditchling village, where it had begun. Soon after, Pepler retired from printing and gave over the control of the Press to his son Mark and to his friend Cyril Costick, who had been with him

almost from the beginning and was his first apprentice.

Pepler's other great interest was the drama. During his early years in London he had joined the O.P. Club (a body chiefly made up of first-nighters), and also a Shakespeare Society with headquarters in Cavendish Square, for whose productions he acted, among other parts, Sir Toby Belch and Don Amando (*Love's Labour's Lost*). He read and thought deeply on the history and significance of the drama, especially in its relation to the liturgy. He came to concentrate especially on the art of mime, of which he became a producer of distinction. His mimed Stations of the Cross, the principles of which he explained in a little book, *The Stations of the Cross in Mime* (Blackfriars Publications) he produced during Lent 1932 in the church of the Sacred Heart, Pittsburgh, and later in the cathedral at St Paul, Minnesota, and again, with Indian actors, at Sante Fé, New Mexico. During the second world war he presented his mimed Stations of the Cross in a London underground air-raid shelter; and he also presented them, with Dominican students as the actors, in the Dominican Priory at Salamanca, during a visit to Spain. In 1936 he presented his mime, *The Field Is Won*, at the Victoria Palace Theatre, as part of the celebrations in honour of the canonisation of St John Fisher and St Thomas More.

At Ditchling he had his own puppet theatre, and in 1930 he presented his puppets at the international marionette festival at Liège. At different times he presented for the B.B.C. mimed versions for television of *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Everyman*, *The Eve of St Agnes*, *The Ancient Mariner*, *Jacob and Esau*, *Aesop's Fables*, and *My Lady Poltagruc* (which Belloc watched at Messrs Alfred Imhoff's in Oxford Street—probably the only time he ever witnessed television).

As a writer Hilary Pepler is yet to be discovered—except by the few who possess the handprinted books of the St Dominic's Press. His *The Devil's Devices* is a lively distributist squib, an entertaining mixture of prose, verse, and Gill's illustrations; probably it is too topical to bear reprinting today. But he wrote a little masterpiece for his series of 'Welfare Handbooks' in *Missions: or Sheepfolds and Shambles by A Sheep* (1922). Fr Vincent McNabb, in his book *The Church and the Land*, describes this as 'an open letter to a Catholic Master-Shepherd set to literary prose'. 'Those who know the hand-printing of St Dominic's Press, Ditchling, Sussex',



he says, 'will find the case for the land put with force and literature in a pamphlet entitled *Missions*. . . More prophetic insight finds its place in this slender book than we have seen since Cobbett.'

Pepler's play *St Dominic* has always seemed to me a moving piece of work, capturing perfectly the spirit of the Founder of the Friars Preachers; as far as I know, it has never been performed. But his passion play, *Pilate*, has been many times acted; and never without making a profound impression. Some of his poems in lighter vein, *The Law the Lawyers Know About* and *Christmas Gifts*, for example, have been many times reprinted in anthologies; but his finest poems are still unknown except to those who have his handprinted books *Nisi Dominus*, *In Petra*, and *Pertinent and Impertinent*.

In the years immediately following Chesterton's death in 1936, Pepler was associated with Mr Belloc and Reginald Jebb in carrying on the editorship and publication of *G.K.'s Weekly* under its new name, *The Weekly Review*.

Pepler was a Liveryman of the Merchant Taylors' Company and a Freeman of the City of London; but perhaps he took more pride in his unique office as Recve of Ditchling Common—a responsible position which brought him into close contact with the local farmers who exercised grazing rights on the Common.

But the privilege that he valued most deeply was that of being a Dominican Tertiary. He was deeply devoted to the Order of Preachers, in which he had the happiness in 1932 of seeing one of his sons ordained priest. (And to how many young men disappointed in their trial of a hoped-for Dominican vocation did he not give work and hospitality while they adjusted themselves to the world anew?—a singularly delicate charity. Some of these young men eventually attained the priesthood by other paths.)

Pepler was a great man, large of frame and large of heart. To describe him is for me impossible. To borrow some words of Chesterton's, 'as a friend he is too near me, and as a hero too far away'. I recall his wonderful spirit of hospitality, the range of his interests in music, literature, and art, his piety and his profanity, his humour and sense of fun.

But perhaps he is best remembered as the much loved father and patriarch of a Catholic family and household in which there prevailed a singular dignity, graciousness, and gracefulness (in the deepest, theological meaning of the word).