Further fragments of Dutch prototypography
A list of findings since 1938*

‘Johann Gutenberg, as nowadays we all agree or ought to agree, was the inventor of printing from movable type in Europe.’ So begins a recent article by George D. Painter, in which the author gives a quite spectacular analysis of the available documentary evidence and the bibliographical and typographical facts concerning the earliest printing in Mainz, marshalling them with great originality to form a total picture far removed from the traditional one, but nonetheless entirely plausible and convincing1. Only the above-quoted opening strikes something of a militant note, harking back to the age-old controversy about the invention of printing.

As the art of printing began to spread through Europe in the second half of the fifteenth century, it very soon became apparent that the course of civilization had been radically changed. Initially, the method whereby large numbers of copies of any text could be simultaneously produced, by means of lead and various mechanical aids, was a closely-guarded trade secret. But the circle of initiates quickly grew so wide that it became very much an ‘open’ secret. And with the increasingly wide dissemination of the products of the printing presses, considerable curiosity came to surround the actual origin of this intriguing phenomenon, whose effects were so pervasive. Germany figured most prominently in published opinions on the subject, and the town of Mainz was in the great majority of cases regarded as the oldest printing centre. The name of Johannes Gutenberg was soon being mentioned, but there were other names besides his: first Jenson, and later Fust and Mentelin. As a result of this continuing debate the various accounts could still not be pieced together into a single unambiguous version at the close of the fifteenth century. In the latter half of the sixteenth century Haarlem and the name of Laurens Janszoon Coster entered the discussion, and by the end of the century the dispute had resolved itself almost entirely in terms of Mainz versus Haarlem, and Gutenberg versus Coster2.

* The introductory section of this publication previously appeared in a modified and illustrated Dutch version, intended for the general reader, in Spiegel Historiae, 5 (1970), pp. 11–17, and subsequently in English in Delta, 14 (1971), pp. 24–42. The present text was translated from the Dutch by P. F. Vincent.


2 For literature on the subject, see D. C. McMurtrie, The invention of printing. A bibliography, New York 1942 [1963]. The extensive literature which has appeared since McMurtrie has not been collected in published form. Still an excellent factual exposition is that given by J. H.
If we wish to approach the problem of the earliest printing activity in the Netherlands today, the question of the inventor should be kept separate from that of the spread of printing throughout the world from a particular centre. It is perhaps best to work from the assumption that the former question, that of the invention, simply cannot be conclusively answered at the present stage of research. A new interpretation of the available material or of any further material that might possibly come to light, could well have the effect of reviving the old controversy, without really contributing anything to our insight into the history of printing. From the point of view of historical bibliography, however, the 'conflict' has completely died down, and one can to that extent endorse Painter's above-quoted pronouncement. For there cannot be the slightest doubt that it was from Mainz that the art of printing was transmitted through Europe and thence throughout the world - namely as a result of the activities of Johannes Gutenberg - whatever the basis for the traditional version of events in the Haarlemmerhout.

In Holland a working party, set up in 1965 on the initiative of the Librarian of Haarlem Municipal Library and subsidized by the Netherlands Organization for the Advancement of Pure Research (Z.W.O.), is at present taking a fresh look at the whole question. The project is in two main parts: firstly, an investigation, covering both archival and published material, of the elements constituting the so-called 'Coster legend', as this relates to the essential nature of the whole body of Dutch tradition surrounding the invention of printing; and secondly, a bibliographical and typographical analysis of various groups of editions which are in any case the earliest products of printing in the Netherlands - what are known popularly as the 'Costeriana'. In bibliography they are described less suggestively as 'Dutch prototypography'. It is in fact incorrect to associate these publications with the name of Laurens Janszoon Coster, since no tangible link has been established between the Coster legend and the surviving early Dutch editions: the name does not appear in any of them as that of the printer, and in no case where the name Laurens Janszoon Coster occurs in archive documents can it be brought into direct relationship with particular editions.

Hessels, himself an advocate of the Haarlem theory, in *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th edition (1910–1911), vol. 27, columns 509–42, under 'Typography'. Columns 520–22 contain a list of fifty 'early testimonies' on the place of invention, extending as far as 1628.

1 Nederlandse organisatie voor zuiver-wetenschappelijk onderzoek. The working party is led by C. van Dijk, Librarian of the Stadsbibliotheek, Haarlem, and comprises the following members: Drs. J. Dommisse, archive research; Mr. S. L. Hartz, for historical typography; Drs. L. Hellinga-Querido, for bibliographical research. The late Dr. Allan Stevenson carried out research in this context in 1965 on the paper used in a number of blockbooks and editions of Dutch prototypography. The projects of the working party were described by L. Hellinga-Querido in *Het onderzoek van de Nederlandse Prototypografie* in: Z.W.O.-Jaarboek 1966, pp. 109–11, and in *Bibliotheekleven*, 52, 1967, pp. 387–9.