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You Can Come Home Again

W. Thomas Taylor

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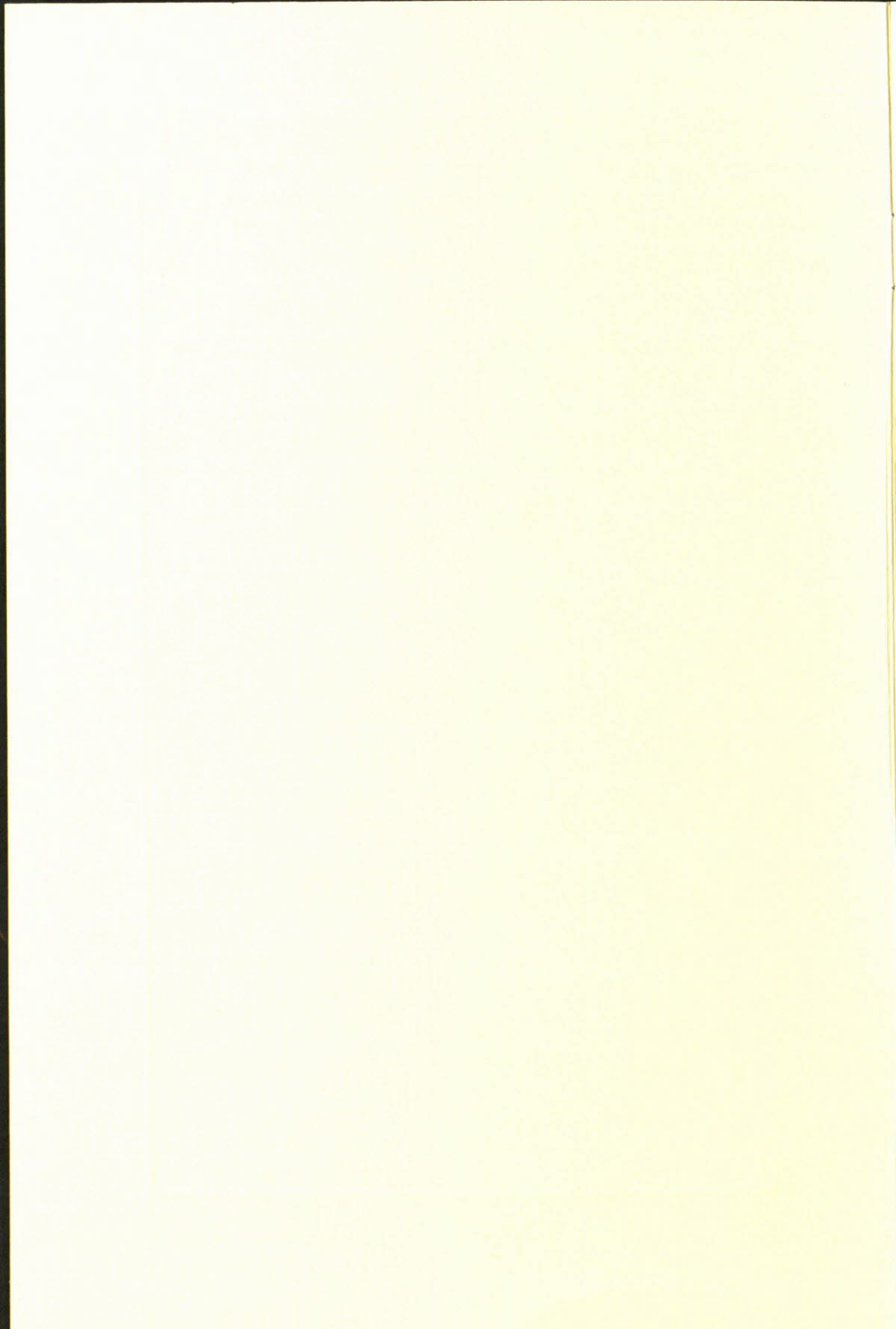
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Carl
Hertzog
Lecture Series



You Can Come Home Again
by
W. Thomas Taylor



Carl
Hertzog
Lecture Series



The University of Texas at El Paso

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The Carl Hertzog Lecture Series

The Hertzog Lectures, inaugurated on February 5, 1989, and presented annually in the month of his birth, honor the memory and life work of the "Printer at the Pass," J. Carl Hertzog (1902-1984).

A premiere typographer and book designer long before his association with the University of Texas at El Paso, Mr. Hertzog brought his international renown to the then Texas Western College in 1948 and launched Texas Western Press in 1952, serving as its director until his retirement in 1972.

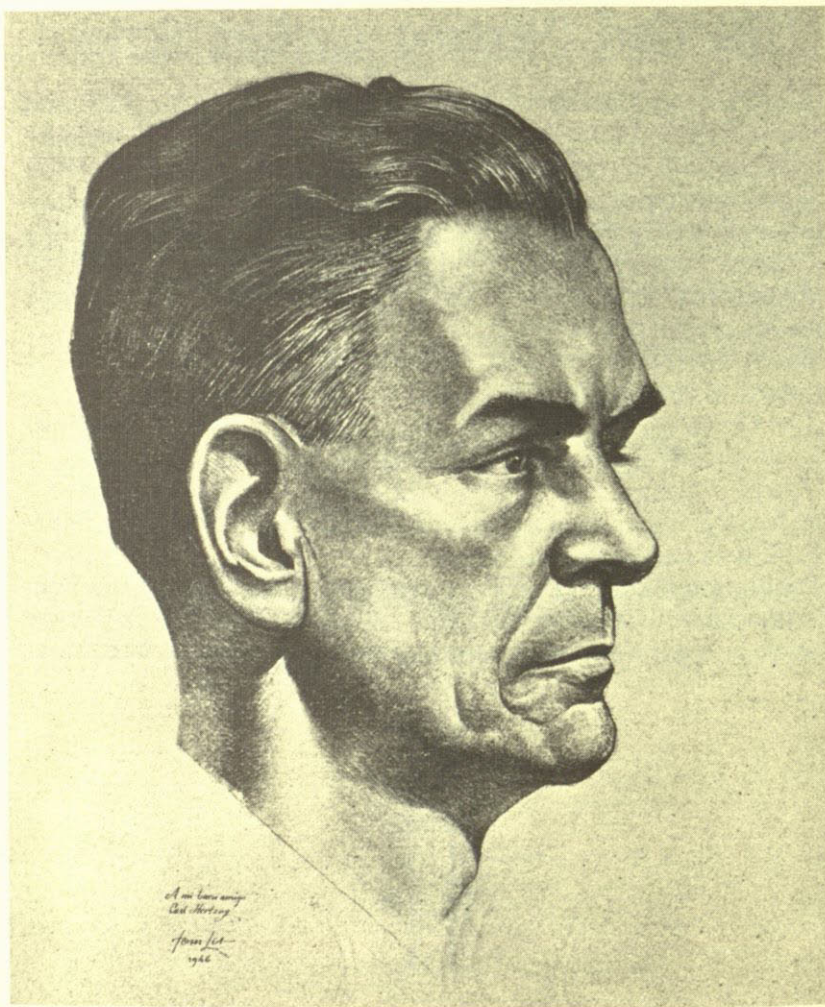
Books bearing the distinctive Carl Hertzog colophon reached a standard of excellence that is unexcelled to this day.

The University Library's Special Collections section is the repository of the extensive Hertzog Collection of books and papers.

The Carl Hertzog Lectures and the annual Carl Hertzog Prize for Fine Book Design, are sponsored by the Associates of The University of Texas at El Paso Library.

Publication of these Lectures is made possible through a grant from the Associates to Texas Western Press; the Carl Hertzog Prize is made possible by a gift from Mr. Joseph Goodell, Jr., of Buffalo, New York.





(Drawing by Tom Lea, 1946)

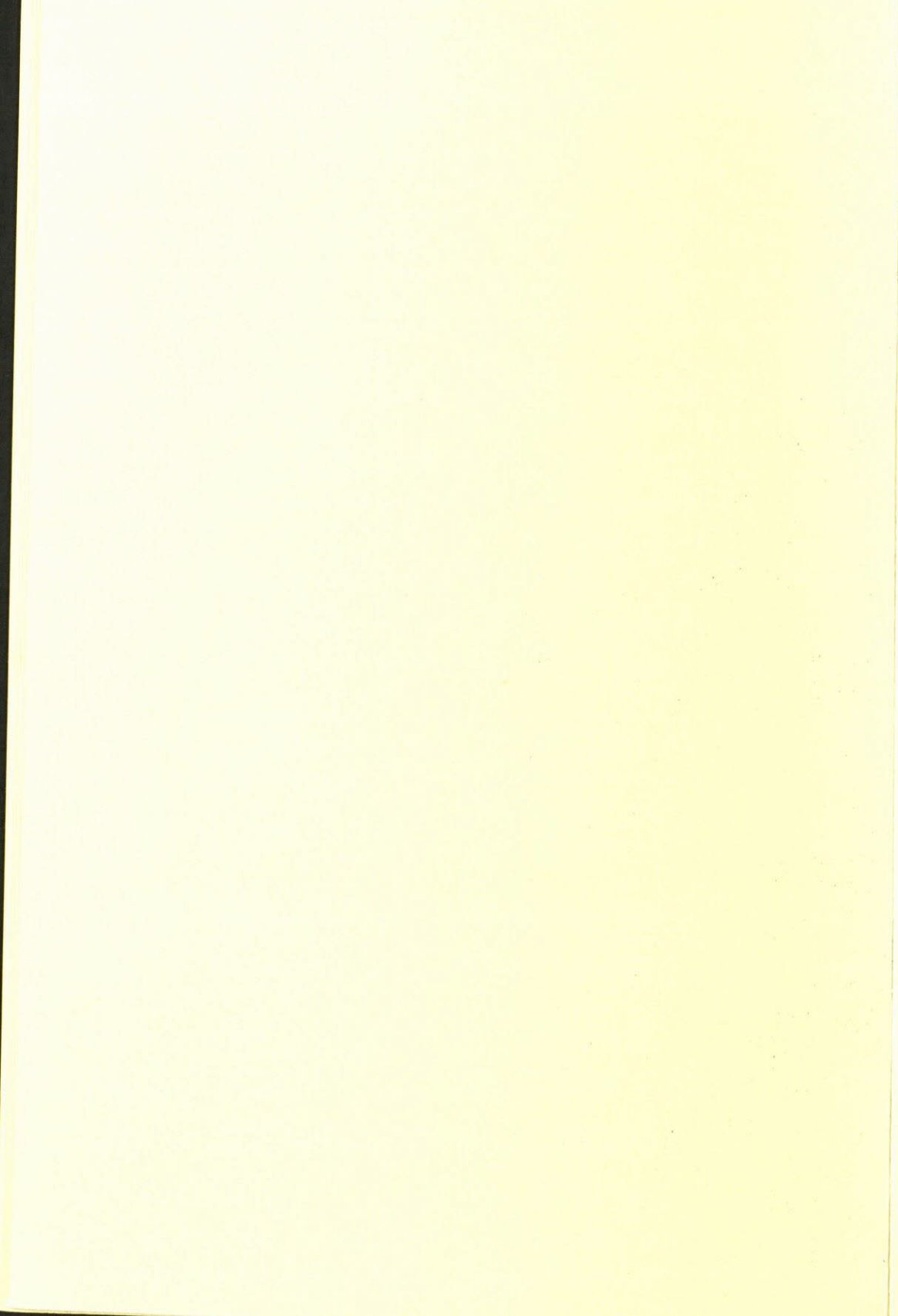
J. Carl Hertzog
1902 - 1984

You Can Come Home Again

by W. Thomas Taylor

February 9, 1992

Carl Hertzog Lecture Series, No. 4



A DECADE AGO I WOULD HAVE SCORNE THE NOTION of being anywhere near West Texas and enjoying it. Austin was close enough, thank you. I was an east Texas boy, raised with the sweet scent of pine, accustomed to the deep moaning of hundred-foot trees in winds you could hear coming towards you through immense stands of timber. It was a somber place, and being young and romantic and subject to what our ancestors would call "bouts of melancholia," it suited me. If you want to brood over dark matters, there is no better place than the Big Thicket.

Beyond that I was never quite comfortable with the idea of Texas as a place apart from the rest of creation, endowed with a mythological past and an expansive present. It seemed to me young and raw and uncivilized, and I found myself traveling more and more to England, and occasionally to France, seeking rare books for my business and other pleasures for myself. I crossed over four or five times a year, for a couple of weeks each time, living in the same rented apartment in London. I was there so often that food I bought on one trip would still be in the pantry when I arrived again, and forgotten umbrellas, hats, pens and pencils, were as safe as if in my own home. The streets and lanes of the Royal Borough of Chelsea became as familiar to me as those of my neighborhood in Austin.

One summer I wandered around Great Britain with the *Good Beer Guide*, a volume devoted to the pubs and inns that still served what the English call "real ale." I can't tell you, in polite company, what they call American beer. I can tell you about lunch in a pub across a village square from the rare book department of Blackwell's, near Oxford. A dark place with low timbers, the very postcard image of an English pub, they served Old Peculiar, a powerful English brew from a keg that shot its cork to the ceiling when tapped for the first time. They drew me a pint, then another, possibly even a third, and I must say it is a mystery to me how the staff at Blackwell's got anything done in the afternoon after entertaining for lunch.

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The difference between Old Peculiar - a dark, rich and potent beer — and the pale, weak, and insipid stuff served ice-cold in this country, typified for me the difference between the two cultures. I had become a devoted Anglophile. I was on the brink of moving to London. So why, ten years, later, am I in El Paso?

The route home was along a road paved with passion and crime. Judy and I had four teenagers between us when we married and the middle of the desert was the only place we could find any peace and quiet. The dry, open brightness of the country west of Austin is well-suited to the pursuit of happiness, and the sharp clarity of air, water, and the edges of landscape corresponded to an increasing clarity in my own mind about what I wanted to do. I wanted to make books, not just sell them. I was through with brooding, and the piney woods seemed claustrophobic, layered with damp, mold, and rottenness. England also began to lose its appeal. Flying to London was not unlike flying to Newark — it just took longer. The lines at customs were increasingly onerous as the threat of terrorism loomed, and the antiquity of England that had once charmed me now lost its romance. Old was old, antiques were just that, and besides the place was becoming murderously expensive.

But it was a crime — forgery — that finally got me back to Texas professionally. Around 1980 I had sold three copies of the Texas Declaration of Independence — my disdain for Texana did not exclude the possibility of making a profit from it. Eight years later I discovered that two of them were forgeries, and in the process of investigating those and dozens of other forgeries of Revolutionary period Texas documents I had to do a considerable amount of research into the history of the period. Much to my surprise, I found it fascinating. And when the local notoriety of having discovered those forgeries began to bring us a few commissions to print books on Texas history, especially that of West Texas, a new world was opened, a world I rather liked. I now have a project in the works, a book on the spread of printing in Texas west of the Colorado, which will combine this new affection for Texas with an older interest in printing. I'm sure there must be an enormous market for such a book, but thus far no publishers are beating down my door for the rights. And I must confess there are a few things typically Texan that I will

probably never develop a taste for: cowboy boots, country/western music, and, I'm afraid, horses, ever since as a boy an obstinate Shetland pony refused to budge from a dewberry patch when I was riding him bareback and barefooted. But Texas is my home again, even if the fit isn't always neat, and I'm glad for that.

Now that I've been back a while, have had time to settle in and look around a bit, it is interesting to reflect on how Texas compares to the rest of the country, as a place to make books. Since my own education in typography and bookmaking was acquired from long hours spent with great books printed far beyond our borders, I may be able to bring a different perspective to a Texas audience. Texans are stubbornly, proudly provincial when it comes to books: they can tell you all about the most obscure pamphlet printed by Carl Hertzog, the rarest broadside printed by Bill Holman, or the latest screenplay written, perhaps someday to be printed, by Bill Wittliff. The Hertzog Award is remarkable in that it is one of the few instances I know of that an institution in Texas has acknowledged that books printed anywhere else, by anyone else, are worth considering seriously.

However, I do have one concern: for the first two years of the Award, the winner has been a printer from Los Angeles. Los Angeles is a fine place if you want movie stars and mudslides, but if you want fine books, L.A. is suspect. In fact, all of California is suspect. Perhaps you don't know about the sorts of things that printers do in California. They print round books in California. They print books contained in coffin-like cypress boxes in California. They even print books in the shape of Chinese food take-out containers in California. They have a Club with a thousand members, The Book Club of California, the sole purpose of which appears to be the quest for the true heir. You see, there was once a press in San Francisco called the Grabhorn Press, that between 1916 and 1974 produced over 650 excellent books. Robert and Edwin Grabhorn were the undisputed Kings of west-coast bookmaking. Now, every time a fresh-eyed graduate of some collegiate printing program produces a pamphlet and two broadsides, he or she is immediately seized upon as the new crowned prince. The corpus of the new star expands to three pamphlets, five broadsides, and a menu for a North Beach Italian

restaurant. Exhibitions are held, the pamphlets are reviewed with high seriousness in the California quarterlies, the candidate dines at the Bohemian Club, and, at last, comes the great moment: the commission to print a real book, for the Book Club of California. This is the great test, the dragon that must be slain. The Publications Committee waits expectantly for the first copies to arrive; the package is opened. It is a good book, a well-made book indeed; but it is not, alas, a *great* book, not the book that Bob and Ed Grabhorn would have made. The judgement is final; the bright young star is but a new pretender, and although he or she will continue to print books, and will still be welcomed politely for drinks, the sadness, the disappointment, remains: this was not the true heir.

Let us leave this melancholy scene, catch the red-eye special and see what New York has to offer the modern bibliophile. The first thing to remember is that books are not mere lower-case books in the Big Apple. They are Art, with a capital A. In this context, you will find that certain familiar terms will have new and different meanings. For instance, a bound book is not, as common sense would have it, folded and gathered and sewn pages of text between covers that open for reading. No, a bound book, as understood in certain quarters in New York, is a block of paper, preferably blank, with the pages glued shut and the covers bound up in knotted rope: thus the bound book, being one that cannot be opened or read. A pun, a parody, an Artists' Book, ready for display. They call this "challenging the limits of the book form."

Since Artists' Books, bound in rope or otherwise, are not meant for reading so much as for viewing, where you are exhibited as a Book Artist is important. It looks great on your resume to say that you had a one-man show at the Metropolitan Museum, so long as you don't add that it was held in the Watson Library of the museum, in a dim and distant corner where no tourist dares to tread. The remoteness of the Library within the museum points up the ambiguity of the Artists' Book: not wholly art, certainly not a book, it is *sui generis* — the question is, does anyone really care for these things?

I'd better stop here. California printers have been known to laugh at themselves, but New York Book Artists are a serious lot,

and I wouldn't want to be found face down in the East river the next time I visit their city. Flying back towards Texas there are a few other congregations of printers that could be mentioned. There is the group known as the Iowa School, centered at the University of Iowa. There is some good work being done, if you can believe it, in Tuscaloosa, Alabama; Columbus, Ohio; Colorado Springs, Colorado; plus a half dozen other places, mostly centered around university programs. But as I cross the Red River back into Texas, I'm looking at the state of things here, and hoping that Texans have a sense of humor — because we have our own set of peculiarities when it comes to books.

In the first place, it needs to be understood that Texas collectors are not dedicated to fine printing in itself. They love Texana, and will pay extra to own it finely printed because it embellishes or enshrines some aspect of present or past history that they cherish. It cannot escape notice that the Big Three of Texas bookmaking — Carl Hertzog, Bill Holman, and Bill Wittliff — stick pretty close to home in their subject matter. Recently, the Book Club of Texas had the opportunity to distribute on behalf of the King Ranch 250 copies of the famed Saddle Blanket edition of Tom Lea's masterful history of the ranch, designed by Carl Hertzog. We sold 200 copies almost immediately, at a price of \$400. If the Club had a similar opportunity to distribute 250 copies of the Nonesuch Press edition of William Shakespeare, consisting of seven volumes bound in full native-tanned morocco, over 3,000 pages printed letterpress on handmade paper, a masterpiece of modern English bookmaking, I doubt if we would sell 40 copies. Even if the Shakespeare had been designed by Carl Hertzog, rather than Francis Meynell, I'm not sure it would sell much better, unless *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* were renamed *Hamlet, Prince of Edwards County*, in which case a good number of copies could be sold as local history.

Given this single-mindedness in the matter of texts, it is not surprising that most collectors have been uninterested in fine printing done outside the state. The entire universe of fine printing has been encompassed by the three printers mentioned before, with the result that price and desirability are thought of solely in terms of this small cosmos. I can remember in the

heyday of Bill Wittliff's Encino Press, before he was lured from books to the silver screen, each new issue was evaluated and purchased by the trade rather like a stock; piles of the better books would be acquired by every dealer, with the self-fulfilling effect of instant scarcity and rising prices. The value of a given book was determined entirely in relation to the other books by that printer, or by other books printed in Texas; what such prices might look like in terms of the larger world was not a consideration. Believe me, this is not a myopia unique to Texas collectors. Collectors of modern first editions seem to think that nothing worthwhile was written in English before William Butler Yeats and James Joyce, and that it is therefore reasonable to pay at auction \$88,000 for a copy of Yeats' first book, a terrible undergraduate effort at drama called *Mosada*. (You will not suppose, I trust, that my grumpiness about this has anything to do with the fact that I sold that same copy of *Mosada* two years earlier for a fourth of that). Likewise, I understand that Dorothy Sloan will soon be offering the Dudley Dobie copy of the rarest of Carl Hertzog's books, *The Notebook of Nancy Lea*, for \$17,500. Assuming it sells, and it probably will, this will make it the most expensive 20th century press book in the English language, bar none.

Or consider *The Instinct Never Dies*, written and printed in the 1930s by Ed Bateman, a West Texas wildcatter. Another black tulip among Texas press books, Dorothy had a most desirable copy of it, with a letter to Dudley Dobie in which the printer describes his book as the product of "the Bateman age of extravagance." Her price on the book was equally extravagant — \$2,500.00 — and one must wonder whether anywhere else in America this book would fetch over \$100. The price is wild — yet I must confess I bought the book myself, and am now offering it at an even crazier price. Such is the potency of the Texas mystique.

Finally, I can't help remarking on the conservatism of Texas book buyers. There is a certain code of design and typography, and if you traduce it with even a hint of innovation, there will be much sputtering and huffing and hrumping as the collectors try to decide if such an aberrant object can qualify as a proper book. I was once accosted at a party by someone unhappy that I had

used a non-Texan artist to illustrate a Texas book. I explained that while much of the book was set in Texas, a good part of it took place in Chicago, at the end of the book the heroine was sailing from Seattle for Russia, and the text was originally published in Paris. I'm not sure my inquisitor was appeased; in general conservative Texas collectors are strange bedfellows with ethnic and economic groups that believe only one of their own can legitimately interpret their experience. Happily, I can qualify as a genuine Texan, my family having entered the state in 1853 at Lick Skillet, a now forgotten crossing on the Sabine.

I take it as part of my birthright to poke a bit of fun at my native land, but I don't want to leave an unduly critical impression. Because if you are willing to live within the confines of the *desiderata Texana* — that is, print Texas texts, in the accepted style — Texans will do something for you that the unfettered printers of California and New York and everywhere else in America will mournfully envy. They will buy your printing. All the exhibitions, all the reviews, all the dinners and other idle forms of flattery that are heaped upon the printers of other regions pale before the pleasure of a manuscript, a check, and the words "turn it into a book, the best way you know how." Fortunately I enjoy the prescribed subject, and generally admire the accepted style, and have found Texans more willing to pay for your best, and let you do your best without cutting corners, than clients from any other part of the country.

I am acutely conscious of the fact that we owe this almost entirely to Carl Hertzog. He came to a place where good printing was unheard of, and by his skills and tenacity he blazed a trail for others to follow. He created a genuine appreciation for excellence in bookmaking, and if that appreciation has remained rather tightly focused, at least it is there, something with which the next generation of printers can work. Work is, after all, the whole thing. When you strip away the romance and mystique, it is paying work that keeps fine printers fed and happy. And there is a gratifying amount of such work to be had in Texas.

Stripping away the veneers of mystique and myth is very much the fashion these days, and Texas heroes have not been exempt. New histories of the revolution paint Stephen F. Austin, W. B. Travis, Jim Bowie, and others as deeply flawed individuals

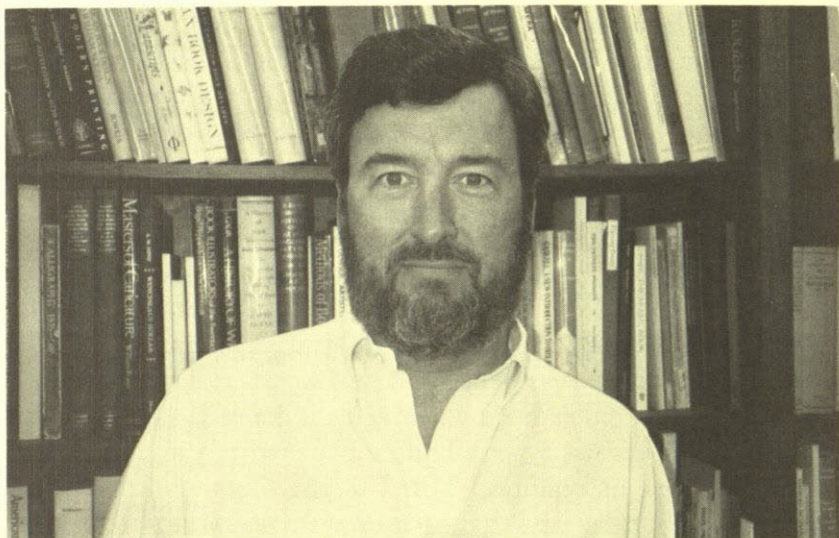
with a dark mixture of motives behind their actions. There is a certain mystique that surrounds Texas printing that could stand stripping away, but unlike those who shred reputations in order to cut old heros down to ordinary size, I prefer to increase the appreciation for the real accomplishment of the heros of Texas printing.

It is a lamentable fact that in most spheres of activity, Americans have taken to elevating the best practitioners to the level of genius, with a capital G, and the products of their labor to art, with a capital A. To excite our admiration a beautiful object must be the artful product of inspiration; it is beneath us to praise common work done uncommonly well. Look at our advertising: almost without exception, it is concerned with image, rather than product. The labor invested to create the object of desire, and the labor required to make the money necessary to acquire it, are nowhere recognized; we have avoided acknowledging these things by having the labor of manufacture performed overseas, and by creating the necessary wealth to purchase goods through the illusion of debt. If American workers have become indifferent, who can blame them? We no longer admire their skills; we do not value the honesty of their work, preferring to reward with riches and prestige those who manipulate, rather than those who manufacture.

Could it be that we too often admire and reward the wrong things in printing, in ways that are simply a reflection of our larger pre-occupations as a culture? Certain printers we call geniuses, creators of flawless art, because those are the terms we have become accustomed to using in praise; anything less would be demeaning. We become ecstatic over the niceties of exquisite design, as if it were created by some manner of hocus-pocus hidden from the uninitiated. There is a wry description of this attitude in an article written in 1941 by D. B. Updike, proprietor of the famed Merrymount Press in Boston. He relates a question asked of him by a young woman applying for employment at the press: "Had I, in completing a beautiful piece of work, ever experienced 'craftsman's ecstasy?'" I assured her that I had never suffered an attack of that nature, and I was ignorant of the symptoms or character of such a seizure. She explained that when one had completed a really beautiful example of typogra-

phy, it was by no means unusual to fall into a trance — apparently swooning (possibly with surprise) at the success of one's efforts. Such, she said was craftsman's ecstasy. When I laid no claim to any such emotional crisis, she appeared disappointed, and shortly departed."

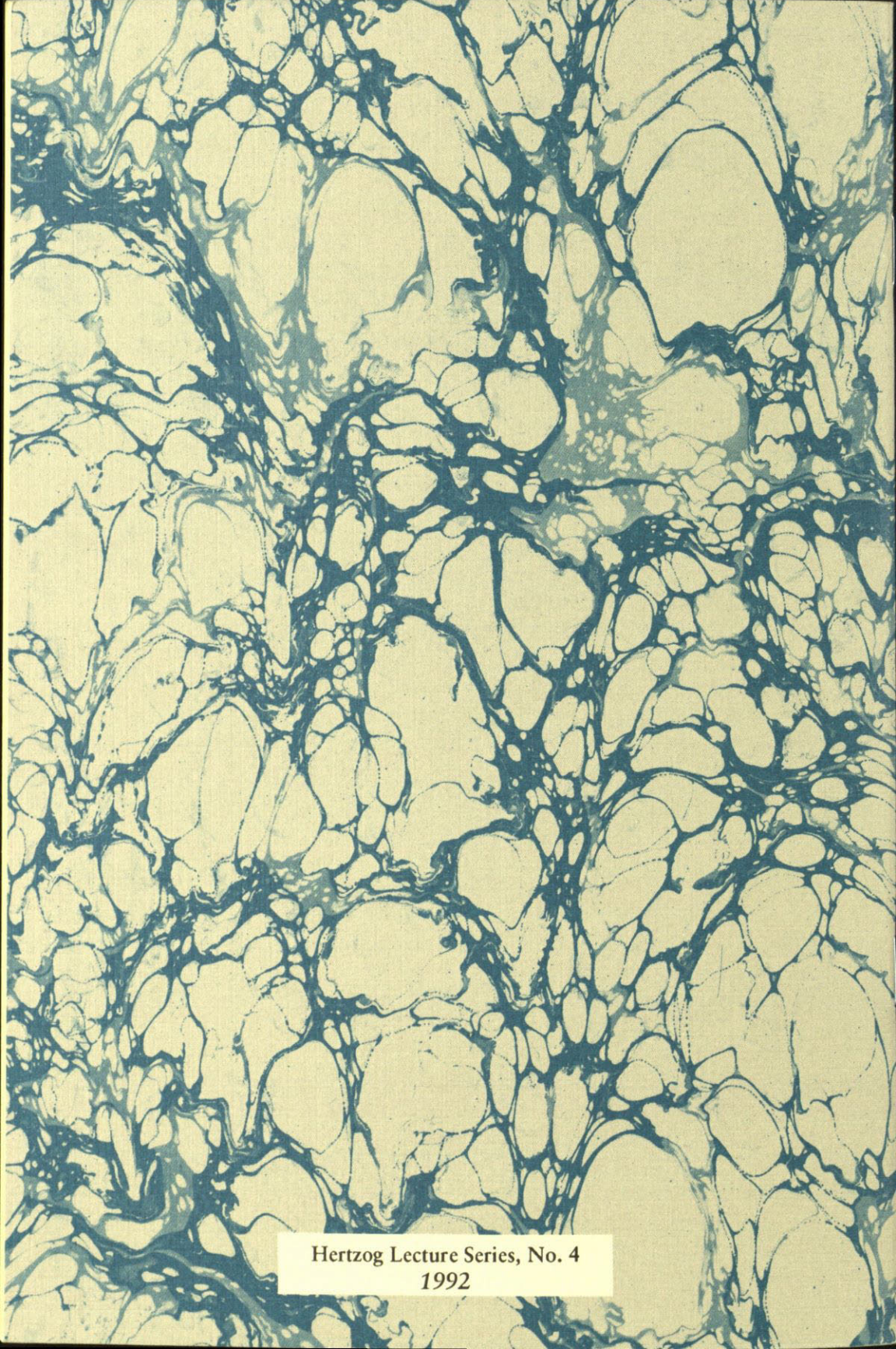
We do a lot of swooning over fine books these days, but when I look at a book printed by Carl Hertzog, or the book printed by Patrick Reagh that you are honoring today, what is visible is not wizardry, but workmanship; what is marvellous is not the Midas touch of genius but the consistent, indeed unrelenting application of patience and skill to difficult typographic problems. For some reason we imagine it depreciates the uniqueness of the people we especially honor to credit them with such ordinary-sounding qualities. I offer to you that these traits are by no means common; and that each time we neglect to honor the value of workmanship, skill, patience and tenacity — not just in printed books, but in all the objects that inhabit our lives — the rust sets a little deeper in the rod that supports the back of this country's wealth and greatness. So when you pick up a printed book, search for the supposedly ordinary qualities that are in fact so very rare; be prepared to pay a bit more for them; honor them with discerning praise. This is what the best printers, from D. B. Updike, to Carl Hertzog, to Patrick Reagh, live for; and it is a comfort to recall that most good printers live to a ripe old age.



W. Thomas Taylor

W. Thomas Taylor is a publisher, printer, and antiquarian bookseller in Austin, Texas. He began his business in 1972. Since opening his printing office in 1986 he has designed and printed over fifty books, on subjects as diverse as renaissance bookbindings and West Texas buffalo hunts, both for his own imprint and for other publishers. He is the author of *Texfake*, a book which exposed the theft and forgery of early Texas documents in the 1970s, and he recently launched *Bookways*, a quarterly devoted to bookmaking in all its aspects.



The background of the entire page is a traditional marbled paper pattern. It features a dense, organic network of dark, branching veins in shades of blue and black, which meander across a light cream or off-white base. The overall effect is reminiscent of natural stone or biological tissue.

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