

Recreating the Multi- Coloured Verve and Glamour of Medieval Manuscripts

Guests at Yarnton Manor recently heard about a distinguished project in the world of books that owes much to the Oxford Centre and which is attracting increasing notice.

The lecturer, Michael Falter, affirmed that there is perhaps no publishing house today that treasures the ancient craft-skills needed to recreate the multi-coloured verve and glamour of medieval manuscripts than the family-run firm set up by him and his wife, Linda.

From a specially designed garden studio at their London home, they supply an international clientele of art-lovers, connoisseurs, great libraries and scholars, with limited editions of facsimiles of unique Hebrew handwritten books, the originals of which are stored out of reach of the public and subject to restricted access.

A Tribute to the Centre

Michael Falter's lecture was a tribute to the role of the Oxford Centre in founding "Facsimile Editions" about a decade ago. He described how the President, Dr David Patterson, first pointed out to him that one of the most stunning of medieval Hebrew Bibles, the **Kennicott Bible**, is in the holdings of the Bodleian Library, and he introduced the Falters to the then Senior Assistant, Ron May. (Mr May is a member of the Centre's Library Committee.)

Dr Patterson and Mr May had immediately responded to the Falter's dream of making this manuscript, packed with illuminations and encased in an unusual box-binding that protects it all around, available to a wider audience than ever before. The fragility of the original makes it necessary to restrict access, and to preserve it in a highly controlled environment. In practice it can never be touched or handled by a member of the public. If one could only reproduce it with sufficient fidelity, the Falters argued, then practically anyone could experience the sensations of handling medieval manuscripts and share in

a world of books printed with the personalities of their ancient makers, and marked by centuries of vicissitudes since many were snatched from destruction.

What the Falters could not have predicted when they began, was the difficulty of matching new materials to ancient ones, just how little was known about reproducing manuscripts to a high quality, and how long it would take them to develop the necessary techniques. In ten years they have completed just two projects: the first is the Kennicott Bible, and the second, an Italian masterpiece, the **Rothschild Miscellany**, one of the finest manuscripts in the collections of the Israel Museum, Jerusalem. They are currently at work on a treasure of the British Library in London – the **Barcelona Haggadah**, which will shortly be available

for the discerning (and the wealthy!) to use at their Passover-eve Seders, as was originally intended.

Printing has been in Michael's family for generations. His grandfather sold printer's type in Prague, and his father qualified at the School of Printing in Vienna, before fleeing to Britain just before War broke out, to set up a business in repairing and renovating the massive presses of those days.

Michael went to the London College of Printing and then joined the family business. His father had saved two antique printing presses, and Michael had the idea of setting up a high-quality traditional printing house to produce finely made books in limited print runs. It was with this in mind that he contacted Dr Patterson. "I suggested that I donate the presses to Yarnton and they



Linda and Michael Falter and their Kennicott Bible facsimile with a background of one of the illuminations from the Barcelona Haggadah.

could set up a press there and use it to reprint old Hebrew works. But they did not have the budget for such a project," Michael said in an interview for this article. A fire later destroyed the presses. But undaunted Michael was determined, as a hobby, to carry out such work. "Something to keep us busy on Sunday afternoons," he said.

Having seen the Kennicott Bible, Linda and Michael wanted to reproduce it and make an exact facsimile copy so that many more people, not just scholars, could see it. The reproductions would be expensive, but, as Michael said, everything is relative, as there is a huge amount of meticulous handwork involved in making them.

They contemplated printing their facsimiles on vellum or parchment, the materials preferred by medieval scribes. But these proved so variable in quality, and so individual in the way they held the precision-coloured inks, that the Falters turned to the idea of finding a paper that would reproduce the tactile qualities of parchment, without any of the problems of shrinkage, expansion and crinkling characteristic of natural skins. They finally devised their own recipe. But their carefully designed paper, produced for them in a small Alpine mill, daunted most printers, due to its low finish and high absorbency.

A Long Search

It took a long search to find the right craftsman printer, and when they at last found Luigi, it was because he had featured in the 1967 Year Book of Italian Printers that Michael's father had given him shortly before he died. Luigi looked on the Kennicott Bible project as the book to crown his long career in printing art books.

And so a hobby became a professional task, with Linda and Michael combining in the firm "Facsimile Editions," both giving up their own occupations to begin this work. Michael had been in the computer business and Linda had studied art in Mexico and France and had lived and worked in America, Switzerland, Iran and Israel.

Each facsimile project begins with the making of a complete set of large-format photographs of the original manuscript from which colour-separations are prepared. In printing a book with illustrations, each colour is printed separately, requiring multiple checkings of colour and ink density, in which Linda is an expert. Due to the separation of colours, each single sheet of paper may have to be guided through a printing machine up to 8 times, each process involving the risk that images might not coincide. A single slip could destroy weeks of work.

Once the page is printed, the gold must be applied by hand. Seven craftsmen spent four months adding gold to the pages of the Kennicott Bible; and still more time was spent reproducing the various mottled and burnished gildings in the Rothschild Miscellany. Then the uneven edges of the parchment pages, and even the marginal prickings used by the scribes to guide their writing, were added. In the Rothschild Miscellany, there were 12 million. Not a detail is missed.

Lastly the bindings. Only the most durable leathers are used for reproducing the ornate covers of these ancient manuscripts. The Falters are aware that their books are made of materials that will last as long as the manuscripts themselves, now treasured in museums. "They will long outlast most books printed in this century," said

Michael. "The yellowing of paper you often see on new books means they will self-destruct before long. Ours are made to last for centuries, so they've got to be right".

Help from Scholars

But Linda and Michael are not content to publish their books merely as very beautiful and important facsimile manuscripts. They know that "Facsimile Editions" are supplying these books to a world largely ignorant of the culture that gave birth to them. "How many people can read even the Bible in Hebrew, let alone some of the medieval poems and stories in them. It was so frustrating that they were literally a closed book to us. We decided to ask for help from scholars" said Linda.

Again it was the Oxford Centre that stepped in with contacts and suggestions for consultants, and when the Kennicott Bible facsimile appeared, it was accompanied by a comprehensive guide to the cultural background, history and artistry of the book, which took Professor Bezael Narkiss and Dr Aliza Cohen-Mushlin nearly a year to write. Since the companion volume is an inseparable part of the facsimile project, it too was printed on handmade paper, and bound in leather.

The Rothschild Miscellany, a far more complex manuscript, needed to be described not only as a work of art, but as the product of a sophisticated Renaissance view of life. An international team, including Malachi Beit-Arié, Shlomo Simonsohn, Israel Ta-Shema, Luisella Mortara-Ottolenghi and Mirjam Foot, wrote a substantial and fascinating volume describing the manuscript from the points of view of palaeography, history, liturgy, art history and binding research.

The Falter's present project, the *Barcelona Haggadah*, will be accompanied by a volume that contains not only all of these, but also a translation in verse of the extensive anthology of Hebrew medieval poems, some of which have never before appeared in print. The eight contributors, and their editor, Jeremy Schonfield (who also teaches at the Oxford Centre), are producing a companion volume that will fully explain and introduce each aspect of the manuscript.

Linda and Michael are now acknowledged experts in the making of facsimile books, to such an extent that the Library of Congress, Washington, approached them for advice over what they described as "insurmountable problems" in producing a facsimile of the Washington Haggadah. They are "currently helping them out with their predicament".

Their skill in the production of beautiful books will, they hope, shortly lead to them being commissioned to produce a facsimile of the magnificent Spanish *Alba Bible* for the International Jewish Committee for Sepharad '92. The facsimile of this huge Castilian manuscript – a translation of the Hebrew Bible – will be presented to King Juan Carlos of Spain on March 31, 1992 when he will join the Spanish Jewish community in Madrid in a synagogue service at which he will denounce the Inquisition and formally welcome the Jews back to Spain.

It is fitting that the Oxford Centre, which is devoted to interpreting and rediscovering the relevance of centuries of Jewish culture for a modern world, should be associated with projects which bring new currency and life to the most precious possessions of Jewish communities and individuals down the ages – their manuscript books.

'AN IDEAL PLACE FOR RESEARCH'



"The peace and quiet and the wonderful facilities of the Centre's Library are ideal for my researches," declares Professor Ezra Spicehandler, who hails from the United States and is a Visiting Scholar at the Oxford Centre, where he has been many times.

Professor Spicehandler, who is Distinguished Service Professor of Modern Hebrew Literature at the Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati, and who, for fourteen years, was Director of Jewish Studies and then Dean of the College's Jerusalem Branch, is seventy and will retire on June 30.

At Yarnton Manor, he is completing research for a biography of the Hebrew poet Hayyim Bialik (1873-1934), which he started some ten years ago and which will contain some 600-750 pages.

"It is not the first book written about him. I chose the subject because an incomplete biography was published in 1950. There was a popular biography published last year, but it is not academic and it is not annotated. I am producing the first academic biography since 1950", Professor Spicehandler said.

Another attraction about working at Yarnton Manor is that Visiting Scholars can meet informally. This is very valuable, not only because some of the scholars are conversant with the subjects being researched, but also because they can discuss each other's disciplines. "Face to face contact with other scholars is most helpful," he says.

To aid his research, Professor Spicehandler brought with him some fifty books dealing with various aspects of Bialik's creativity. He also brought material to supplement the invaluable collection in the Centre's Kressel Library and Archive.

While at Yarnton, Professor Spicehandler, who arrived with his wife, Shirley, in January for eight months, has been teaching on the One Year Programme, and will continue to do so next term. He is also giving four lectures to Dr Glenda Abramson's students at Oxford University, and he is due to participate in a seminar about Israel in the 1950's to be held at Yarnton Manor in July and August.

Born in Brooklyn, Professor Spicehandler was admitted to Hebrew Union College in 1939, where he was ordained as a Reform Rabbi, before deciding to take up an academic career. Having embarked upon a doctorate at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, he took part in the War of Independence in 1948, serving in the Hagannah, first as a machine-gunner, then as a desk officer with the Air Force. When the war ended he returned to Cincinnati, as the Hebrew University was still closed; obtained his PhD there, and began teaching at the College in 1950. He was elected to a professorship in 1964, before becoming Director of Studies at Hebrew Union College, Jerusalem. He returned to the US in 1980 and was honoured with his Distinguished Service Professorship.

Research Fellowship at Oxford

Dr Alison Salvesen, the Centre's Fellow in Aramaic and Syriac, has been elected to the Hugh Pilkington Research Fellowship in Biblical Studies, from October 1992 to September 1994, at Christ Church, Oxford University.