BY LARRY FISHER

The Fine Printers of Santa Cruz

There will be harvest, harvest. We freighted the handpress
Out of the hills. Mounted at last in the little room
It waits for the black ink of its being;
And the rich paper, drawn out of Europe, it too hand-fashioned;
The work of the hand, all; the love of the hand in its sure sweep
When the bar pulls over; all about it the touch of a hand
Laid on it with care. And borne like fruit, a perfect page,
That testament to the heart's abundance
All work of wholeness executes in the enlivened eye: a godly issue.
– William Everson

When William Everson came to Santa Cruz he brought with him a new art form and an old California craft. Fine print; the handcrafted book. Everson had just emerged from eighteen years in a Dominican monastery, had just married his wife Susanna. After securing a reputation as a fine printer while still a young man, Everson abandoned the craft during his years as the poet/monk Brother Antoninus. He credits Rita Bottoms (curator of U.C. Santa Cruz's archives) with bringing him to Santa Cruz and back to the handpress, a reunion he has never regretted.

Ten years at UCSC with the Lime Kiln Press has reaffirmed Everson's status as a master printer and introduced several generations of students to the art. But Everson has Parkinson's Disease. Feeling that he lacked the stamina for further projects, he released his last book with Lime Kiln last June.

Entitled *American Bard,* the book grew out of Everson's conviction that the preface to Whitman's original edition of *Leaves of Grass* was in reality a poem. Using his experience with long lines in his own poetry, Everson restructured the Whitman piece in verse.

American Bard combines Everson's meticulous craftsmanship with a looseness of typographical design which further serves Whitman's forthright native theme. The deckel-edged handmade paper, and hand-set, hand-inked type come together in a binding of slate-grey pigskin and raw India silk for a book as pleasing to the touch as to the eye.

"I realized I had a masterpiece," Everson says, "and I moved towards the printing of the book to achieve a masterpiece." Everson likens a major work of printing to the architectural process, complete with plans, blueprint and model. "You enter every part of the process with a prayer," he says, "because the vision of a book is in your mind and the methods to get there are well-known. But in every part of the run you see the errors

that have crept in and these form a cumulative burden on your back. But those faults have a way of turning out to be part of the charm and originality of the work. Perfectionism is the death of the aesthetic; nevertheless, you have to strive for that perfection."

One hundred copies of *American Bard* were offered to the public in June (at $450 each) and sold out immediately. Booksellers are asking as much as $2500 for a copy now.

Everson's announcement that he was retiring from printing was greeted with skepticism, and soon rumors were flying thick and fast. There was another project coming, still more epic in scope. Recently Everson felt it was time to make his intentions public.

There will be one more book, to be printed at Everson's home with a small group of friends and former students. This will be an eight-hundred-page handpress edition of Everson's own life's work and of his own collected poems. Look for it in two to three years.

Many of Everson's students have gone on to start their own presses. One who has achieved national recognition is Richard Bigus, whose innovative typography and book design have also made him the object of constant controversy. Bigus has issued three volumes under his own imprint, Labyrinth Editions, and has served as printer/designer for many other letterpress operations. Particularly striking is a series of broadsides Bigus produced for Two Pears Press, an offshoot of Bookshop Santa Cruz. Though he has departed for a teaching position at Ohio University, Bigus is still considered a catalyst for the growth of fine print in Santa Cruz.

Tom Killion illustrated Bigus's most recent book, *Eastward the Armies,* an edition of Everson's anti-war poetry from the forties. Killion has written, illustrated and printed three books of his own with a fourth on the way.

The most recent offering from Killion's Quail Press is *The Coast of California: Point Reyes to Point Sur.* It is a large, ambitious work. Killion's text in poetry and prose is interspersed with the distinctive linoleum block prints in various shades of blue ink that have come to be his trademark.

In Killion's work it is not hard to trace the love of land and devotion to the central coast to Everson and even more strongly to Everson's own mentor, Robinson Jeffers. "The Coast of California unfolds its long poem," Killion writes in the book's introduction, "wrapped around the points and coves, rivermouths and shifting sandbars, fingers slipping between the hills, written

on the floating world of wind and sea. The artist struggles to capture this ever-changing poem, to impress it in his memory with carved blocks and ink, but it is part of the living world, whose only reality is in the moment of its experience."

Killion works on a proof press, which fundamentally differs from Everson's antique handpress in that the paper travels over the type on a cylinder rather than a plate. Like Everson, Killion uses handmade paper which he carefully dampens before printing. Disclaiming any love of what he calls "archaic tradition" in following these time-honored methods, Tom says, "I'd print on an offset press if it could give me the results I want."

The birth of the California Book Club in 1912 and the founding of the fine presses of San Francisco signaled California's final emergence from the frontier. Edwin and Robert Grabhorn formed the nucleus of a community of fine printers still active in San Francisco today.

Felicia Rice has worked with many of those fathers of fine print as well as with Everson and Bigus. She is unique among Santa Cruz printers in having also had extensive experience in commercial print shops, and her peers all concede an envy of her thorough nuts-and-bolts knowledge.

Though she owns a Vandercook proof press, the majority of her work is done on a 1908 Colt platen press. This marginally automated device was the standard workhorse of the great San Francisco printers.

Rice received public acclaim with her first publication at Moving Parts Press when she published and printed Ellen Bass's *For Earthly Survival.* This book of poetry captured the 1980 Ellison Book Award from the University of Cincinnati. A second book, *In the World's Common Grasses* by William Pitt Root, is about to be released.

These are both small chapbooks. For her next project, Rice is planning to produce a larger limited-edition work. She hesitates to describe it too thoroughly early in the process. "Books take a long time to materialize, two to three years, by which time the idea seems very old. Yet you want to retain a feeling of spontaneity. It's hard to be anything more than elegant, and there's lots of pretty books. I want to do something beyond that."

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She taught printing at UCSC and continues to offer a weekly workshop at Moving Parts. "I'm working to create a community of printers," she says. "Through the workshops good relationships form, we tap into other writers' energies and the network widens."

Rice spent a year working with Sherwood Grover (original pressman for the Grabhorn brothers) on a letterpress edition of Roby Wentz' *History of the Grabhorn Press.* Recently while house-sitting for Grover, she invited her class to meet at his home. With the walls lined with rare books and his press in the basement, Grover's Aptos home is like a living museum of fine print. A half century's presswork lines the walls downstairs; from the opening pages of Andrew Hoyem's letterpress *Moby Dick* to elaborate handpressed dinner invitations. In the mixed atmosphere of nostalgia and ink fumes, it's not hard to imagine the kind of community Rice hopes to create.

Printers traditionally resist describing their work as "art." They insist it is a craft and will often substitute the term craft printing for fine printing. But these distinctions are weakening as people explore new possibilities for letterpress printing.

Gene Holton and Elizabeth Sanchez of Green Gables Press print posters, using a Vandercook proof press. They also print a series of whimsical postcards using an antique platen press. As Holton puts it, "We are running against the wind, trying to do something singular in an area where singular things don't show up."

There is a precedent for the kind of work Green Gables does, but you have to look back to late 19th century England. William Nicholson and James Pride (aka the Beggarstaff Brothers) produced letterpress posters and illustrations which are still the standard against which printers measure themselves.

Holton feels a poster has to advocate something; it should do something more than puff up the artist or it won't be interesting for long. "On the other hand," he points out, "posters are not so precious as paintings; when you're tired of a poster you can give it away or throw it away without any guilt."

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"We use obsolete equipment because it's accessible," Holton says, but the old presses are also better suited to his experiments with different print materials, wood blocks, linoleum and masonite carvings. "I am interested in what ink can do when it hits a piece of paper. Consequently what attracts me is technique; subject matter becomes a vehicle." The old equipment determines a mode of work which Holton says defies efficiency. "Each press has its own personality and you develop an affection. My press doesn't ink evenly and getting the ink on results in a kind of dance; an agreement we have."

The term fine print bothers Holton. "Fine print suggests that the work is done

superbly well. I want to do it exactly as I wish; is that fine printing or just fussy? Printing guarantees flaws; something always goes wrong, but if you let someone else print your work you've lost all jurisdiction, the right to change your mind. It all coalesces on the press and you're left alone, cursing or kissing."

Holton describes his friend Gary Young as a poet first, a publisher second, and a printer third. Young agrees, but feels the distinctions are not so absolute. He sees the act of printing as a natural extension of the act of writing, and both as essential parts of himself. "I really feel that I was born to be a poet," Young says, "I feel the same way about printing. I was born to print. If there hadn't been printing presses I probably would have had to invent them. It's like great baseball players: what would they be if there wasn't baseball?"

Poet and master printer William Everson

Several promising poets have first come to the public eye through the broadsides and chapbooks of Young's Greenhouse Review Press. Young prints on two old platen presses and works with handmade and mould-made paper. As a publisher he intends his books to be affordable and accessible, and to be read. He avoids the large, and costly, limited editions, yet his books show much the same attention to craft.

Young feels this dedication communicates to the reader. "Here's someone who does something well and believes in the value of his labor. And of his imagination. And of his reason and choice: I choose to write this, I choose to publish this, I choose to print this."