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The Evolution of Prize Bindings 1870-1940: Their Design and Typography

LAUREN O'HAGAN

Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century, schools and Sunday schools commonly awarded books to children in recognition of good behaviour or attendance. The widespread distribution of prize books grew chiefly as a direct consequence of the 1870 Education Act – the first piece of legislation to deal with education in England and Wales – which saw the awarding of books as a new, formalised measurement of competency.

Initially, the only feature that distinguished a prize book from a normal book was the premium *ex libris* pasted on the endpaper that outlined the child's name, the awarding institution and the reason for the prize. However, the downward spread of schooling, as well as the Victorian obsession with Britain's growing 'vanity trade', was the catalyst that led publishers to create the concept of prize bindings – a new type of book marketed explicitly at teachers and superintendents and moulded to the requirements of the organisations which gave them away.

Little attention was paid to the quality of the text itself, which publishers saw as disposable. Indeed, denominational magazines of the time described most prize books as 'second-rate tales' and 'innocent rubbish in the shape of wishy-washy stories' with 'namby pamby elements'¹. Instead, publishers concentrated on making the outside of the book as aesthetically appealing as possible, leaving the inside with thin paper and highly compressed print. This was made possible by the introduction of mass-production newspaper print methods and machinery, which enabled decorative cloth covers to be printed at a very low cost.

The decorative boards of prize bindings were said to transform the relationship between publisher, bookseller, customer and reader, as books could now be sold based on their external properties over their internal contents. Furthermore, those responsible for the purchase of prize bindings recognised that making them appear as valuable as possible would reflect well on their institution, and consequently, on their supposed generosity, both of which could potentially bring benefits, such as increased membership or monetary donations.

The first publishers to produce prize bindings were religious organisations such as the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, the Religious Tract Society and the Sunday School Union. Following the introduction of compulsory education in 1880, commercial publishers also began to acknowledge the benefits of tapping into the prize book market. The first commercial publishers to do so were the large London houses, such as Thomas Nelson & Sons, Cassell and Ward, Lock & Co. However, as the practice of prize-giving spread from the sphere of education to social clubs, associations and organisations, the provincial publishing houses

¹ Taken from Sunday School Chronicle, 30 December 1897, p.771, 'Function of the Sunday School Library', Methodist Recorder, 15 March 1915, 'Wesleyan Methodist Sunday School Department' and Methodist Recorder, 15 April 1894, 'Books for the School Library' respectively and cited in Dorothy Entwistle's 1990 PhD Thesis entitled *Children's Reward Books in Nonconformist Sunday Schools, 1870-1914: Occurrence, Nature, and Purpose*.

also began to take part. By the beginning of the twentieth century, prize bindings had become a lucrative trade that brought vast wealth to publishers.

Up until now, the prize bindings that have been described are those that were largely bought by faith, board and Sunday schools to award to working-class children. These books were typically religious fiction and were used by teachers acting *in loco parentis* to convey moral messages as a form of protection against undesirable models in working-class children's lives. At this point, it is also worth briefly mentioning in the paragraphs below another form of prize binding that was specific to children that attended grammar and boarding schools.

Books awarded by these institutions were not selected from the standard list of books categorised by publishers as rewards or prizes; instead, most grammar and boarding schools allowed their largely middle- and upper-class pupils to select their own book from a shortlist of appropriate titles that the headteacher had prepared. These books typically included works from the literary canon, such as Shakespeare, Dickens and Scott, in addition to well-established history, biography and science books. Unlike the head teachers of schools attended by working-class children, who were largely concerned with using prize books to instil habits of obedience, the headteachers of grammar and boarding schools recognised their responsibility to promote classic texts to pupils based on tradition and prestige. Although the content of prize books varied considerably according to the typical attendees of each awarding institution, one common factor was shared across all: they were used by each school to present their pupils with a worldview that suited the role they were expected to play in class society. For this reason, the giving of prize books is often viewed as a deeply ideological practice.

The greater disposable income of the grammar and boarding schools also meant that more money could be invested in the outward appearance of their prize books. Unlike working-class prize books, which were bound and decorated in-house by publishers, the middle- and upper-class prize books arrived at a local bindery unbound. They would subsequently be bound with full calf leather boards and stamped or embossed with the school emblem in gilt on their front cover. The title and author of the book would be printed on the spines in gilt. In contrast to the working-class prize books, these bindings also had far greater attention paid to their internal properties. Text was printed on high quality vellum or Japan paper, endpapers were marbled, and the turn-ins of the boards were decorated with a roll in blind. Grammar and boarding schools considered it important to uphold tradition; thus, it was no coincidence that these editions were made to resemble the fine bindings of the eighteenth century.

Although publishers did not directly advertise prize book series for grammar and boarding schools, many did promote series of ornate gift books ranging between 10s and 20s in price; the specific prize book series aimed at working-class institutions cost just 1s or 2s. The use of a price tier system, coupled with the difference in quality of each book, supports William St Clair's view that external packaging became an essential aspect of situating texts in the market in the late nineteenth century². The marked difference between the colourful

² William St Clair, 2004. *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

pictorial boards of working-class prize bindings and the minimalistic gilt-embossed leather of middle- and upper-class prize bindings influenced the transformation of the prize book into a class-based tool and suggests that it may be useful to reframe the practice into two distinct categories: the prize book and the book as prize. The sections below focus specifically on the evolution of the working-class prize book between 1870 and 1940, given that the middle- and upper-class prize book remained largely unchanged during this period.

The Birth of the Prize Book

Nothing changed more obviously than the outward appearance of books between the beginning of Queen Victoria's reign in 1837 and that of King Edward VII's in 1901. In the 1830s, most books were still published in plain wrappers or brown paper-covered boards with the assumption that a stronger binding would be supplied subsequently by booksellers. The development of machine binding resulted in publishers taking responsibility for the entire book-making process for the first time. This brought about the introduction of cloth covers, which enabled books to be printed more quickly and in larger numbers.

The introduction of cloth marked a period of experimentation in book design whereby grains were impressed into cloth to give the surface a distinct pattern in order to disguise its weave, or ribbon embossing was used to stamp additional designs onto the cloth from blocks cut to size. The new potential that cloth offered as an attractive and marketable device for publishers strongly influenced the development of the prize book genre. The genre was also boosted by the creation of new methods that enabled gold and black ink to be blocked straight onto cloth, resulting in eye-catching layouts.

As the prize book evolved into an established part of British religious and secular education, it became more uniform in design: from 1870 onwards, all prize books featured symmetrical patterning and gold and black title blocks on their covers and spines (prior to 1870, the spines of most books simply featured a pasted label of the title and author). Covers from this period make heavy use of symmetry on their borders, imagery and typography. Symmetry was believed to constitute a canon of beauty and served to emphasise the book's supposedly high monetary worth. Similarly, the combination of gold and black gave the impression that the book was valuable and important, thus making it more likely to be purchased by awarding institutions who were keen to be viewed as benevolent by parents and guardians.

The 1880s marked the arrival of increasingly more productive rotary machinery, which further reduced the production costs of books and enabled more new printing techniques to be implemented. Prize books from this decade show more complicated cloth grains, patterned endpapers, coloured book edges, embossed vignettes and decorative lettering. Even more importantly, whereas previously only black ink could be blocked, now any colour could be blended, thereby providing prize books with a new elegance. No longer was the book cover a simple page protector; rather, it had become an object of design that could be used to advertise the book and communicate information about the text inside.

Towards the end of the Victorian era, prize bindings reached new levels of sophistication through the rise of artist-designers who created stylised designs and ornamental layouts. Late-nineteenth-century covers showcase a wide range of styles and

reflect the growing popularity of the Arts and Crafts movement, Art Nouveau and Anglo-Japanese prints, both in terms of their design and typography. Titles are written in lettering with embellished stroke endings, high and low waistlines and top and bottom weighted stresses, while decorations feature the whiplash curves of the natural world – all characteristics of Art Nouveau. At this time, decorations also began to extend from the front cover across the spine, showing artistic leaves, vines and flowers. These features stimulated a modern renaissance in book cover design and provided schools and Sunday schools with highly ornate objects which were held in high regard by working-class children not only for their aesthetic appeal but also for providing visible evidence of an achievement that could be displayed in the home.

The Early Twentieth Century

The Edwardian era began with the continual growth of elaborate prize book covers influenced largely by Art Nouveau. During this period, new and decorative typography continued to develop, leading the typefounder, Talbot Baines Reed, to bemoan, “Herod is out-heroded every week in some new fancy which calls itself a letter, and which, in response to a voracious demand, pours into our market, either from native foundries or from the more versatile and supple contortionists of America and Germany.” However, while the outside of the prize book boasted artistic typography and colourful designs, the inside of the book marked a stark contrast. After thirty years of trade, publishers had come to realise that the prize book was primarily purchased based on its external appearance. As a consequence, they began to invest as little money as possible on its interior, using low-quality chemical wood pulp paper on which writing was printed in a highly compressed format and no longer decorating page edges with gilt. In order to ease legibility, they favoured the use of Bodini, Century, Baskerville and Garamond typefaces used due to their relative clarity even when printed in small-scale. This change in production strategy led to increased profits for publishers, providing the book trade with a language for self-advertisement and marking a high point in the history of prize bindings.

Not one to rest on their laurels, as Britain entered the reign of George V in 1910, the publishing industry began to capitalise on the prize book’s popularity by offering different coloured covers of the same edition. This provided consumers with choice and encouraged a growing commodity trade as institutions became influenced by the notion of purchasing all binding varieties for their pupils. Nonetheless, further cost reductions took place in the production of the book’s interior. This can be seen in the transition from decorative to plain and unmarked endpapers and the replacement of wood pulp paper with the cheaper and lower quality esparto (a type of grassy fiber). In addition, less care was taken to ensure that writing was set properly on the page, thus often resulting in skewed or warped print. Awarding institutions gradually came to accept that the more ornate the book’s covers, the poorer the quality of its pages. However, this did not dissuade them from continuing to purchase prize books in their thousands: as long as the recipients were happy, they were too.

The Great War

The outbreak of the Great War in 1914 had a massive impact on the book industry as efforts were made to save paper. As a result, low-quality versions of the prize book began to appear, with covers stripped of their characteristic decorative features in favour of simple and minimal details. Covers and spines from the 1914 to 1918 period show no examples of gilt or blocking, typography is far less elaborate, and images are restricted to two-tone or black and white designs. The book's exterior also evolved from a cloth to a more economic buckram weave. This change can be noted specifically in the dramatic decrease in the weight of the prize book from 480g in 1913 to 330g in 1914 – a difference of 150g. Within the book, esparto paper continued to be used, albeit with a reduced thickness and featuring more compressed printed font. The most marked change, however, was the introduction of advertising on the book's endpapers. Typical adverts were for food products, such as Fry's cocoa and Edwards' Yorkshire puddings, but items such as Swan pens and Pears soap were also promoted.

Over the course of the war, the specific marketing of prize books by publishers declined. Whereas prize books had previously been categorised under 'gift and reward' series in catalogues, many became rebranded through a change in the name of the series or by simply dropping the tagline 'gift and reward books'. For example, Ward, Lock & Co.'s 1918 catalogue shows the Lily Series, which previously had the strapline 'Gift Books, Prizes and Rewards', now rebranded as the New Lily series. As there was nothing within a physical copy of a prize book to state that it was one, publishers were able to rearrange their stock easily and produce new lists to give people what they wanted.

While this vast change in the marketing of prize books was likely due to the reduced ability to rely on the book's aesthetic appeal, as well as to the diminished resources and disposable income of institutions, it was also influenced by the fact that the vast devastation and bloodshed of the war meant that people had grown increasingly suspicious of institutions and no longer blindly accepted the messages presented in religious prize books. Accordingly, prize books after the war period show a marked difference in topic, as well as in their physical appearance.

Post-War

Following the Great War, the prize book experienced a transition: now, classics and adventure novels as opposed to religious fiction were marketed as prize books. This is generally believed to have arisen as a result of a burgeoning need for escapism, as well as a recognition that girls did not need so much guidance on how to lead their lives, given the important role that females had played in the war efforts.

Alan Powers describes the prize books of the 1920s and 1930s as "low-grade imitations"³ of their Victorian and Edwardian counterparts. This was largely due to the fact that the aftermath of the war and its effects on production costs meant that commercial binding was heavily influenced by bare necessity only. As the cost of blocking became too expensive, publishers began to introduce the dustjacket. The dustjacket not only gave the prospective purchaser an immediate indication of the book's content, but also protected the book while it was in a shop or warehouse. It also enabled the proper book cover underneath

³Alan Powers, 2003. *Children's Book Covers*. London: Mitchell Beazley.

to remain plain and unadorned, in this way keeping costs low, while not compromising the book's outward appearance. This was particularly important, given that most books were now printed on a low-quality clothette fabric in dull greens, browns or greys, with steadfastly conservative typography. While prior to and during the war, the inside of the prize book was characterised by its thin and low-grade paper, the paper was now artificially bulked with air to make it thicker. This served to make the book look longer than it actually was and to convince awarding institutions that its purchase was good value for money.

Much of the material base of prize books was lost when the centre of English publishing in Paternoster Square was hit during the London Blitz in 1940-41. This marked an end to the tradition of the prize binding. Although books continued to be awarded as prizes throughout the 1940s and 1950s, no longer were specific prize books produced by publishers. The introduction of paperback books for children in 1940 under the Puffin Books imprint facilitated book-buying for children, thus reducing the 'special occasion' that receiving a book once constituted. Furthermore, decreased Sunday school attendance and the push for schools to divert money to equipment for common use (i.e. reference books, paints etc.) also contributed to the prize book's decline. As schools became concerned with the behaviourist idea of small incentives every day as opposed to formal ceremonies, they introduced new more economic ways to reward children, such as stamps, badges, stickers, charts and certificates. While the book as prize continued to be given in boarding and grammar schools as symbols of prestige, it was replaced by the book token in most other awarding institutions – a practice that still survives today.

Since the mid-twentieth century, books have come to be somewhat taken for granted and generally accepted as a part of our everyday life. Yet, for working-class children in the nineteenth and early-twentieth century, the prize book was a source of great pride. The pristine condition in which many prize bindings still survive today stands as a testimony of just how cherished these books were by their owners. Through their designs and layouts, a tangible history of the rise and fall of the British prize book movement can be established. While many awarding institutions no longer exist and recipients have passed on, these prize books remain as evidence of a practice that once played an essential role in the education of young children across Britain.

