
Printing's Past

By Frank Granger

John A. Hill – Printer, Publisher

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"I know the taste of the glue-roller and the smell of printer's ink: and some of the electricity in the paper, I imagine, was absorbed into my ego in very early days. I was a printer's devil, and some unkind individual has made the obvious remark that I never recovered."

Elbert Hubbard – *The Philistine*, May 1912

Elbert Hubbard at the beginning of the twentieth century in East Aurora, New York built a reputation on his personal observations of work, ethics, and education. He issued his views, often confidential, in a small publication called *The Philistine – A Periodical of Protest*. He gathered a following of workmen who printed his magazines and books, crafted furniture, copper, and leather goods in the Arts and Crafts style. His admonition to workers was "Of head, hand and heart" and "Not how cheap, but how good." At the height of his work, Hubbard's Roycroft shops employed over 800 individuals. "I look a payroll in the eye every Saturday night."

He romanticized the role of the individual worker and provided very progressive benefits for his employees. His unorthodox views were often called socialistic, but he was still the chief champion of capital and management. "I know the difficulty of hiring men to do certain tasks, and I know the travail and turmoil of educating people to do things in a way that they have never done them before."

Along with his own views in his publications, Hubbard praised people "who got the thing done!" He praised those whom he admired, who had written, painted, organized, or done business. Most were people of history. Less often, Hubbard's lavish praise was directed to the living, especially reserved for advertisers of his on publications. In a rare instance; Hubbard praised a living peer, a printer-publisher doing business as it would please Hubbard.

One printer he praised was John A. Hill. The Hill Publishing Company was a trade magazine publisher for the engineering, mining, machinist, and power industries. Hill printed five weekly magazines. In the May 1912 issue of *The Philistine*, Hubbard phrased Hill's publications, his business practices, and the man himself.

Hubbard said, "I have know of this concern for several years . . . I became interested, because I am a publisher by prenatal tendency and a printer by job." Hubbard added "(Hill) is a self-starter, and runs on ball bearings. Hill is a graduate of the University of Hard Knocks, and has taken good many post-graduate courses. He has personality like a Tipperary terrier; and wherever he is, he is always present. And my hope is that anything I say here will not queer his chances of becoming President of these United States."

"Like most well-known men, he began life at and early age. When he was fourteen the print-bug bit him and he started to pi type as a type-louse in a small shop. He is a learner, a doer, and a teacher. And he is learning most and best by giving his knowledge away."

Hill ran his business with few rules. "Rules is nix!" said Hill. Hubbard pointed out that Hill concentrated his energy in each of his five publications, one per day and Saturday and Sunday were days

off. In a day when business bartering was commonplace, Hill insisted on receiving and paying cash for all goods and services. Hubbard called this “the New American idea!”

Regarding the business Hubbard said, “They are building to an ideal down there, with a sensible idea that they have to make a profit doing it or there’ll be no money to build with. The ideal is to publish the best papers possible . . . and the answer to it all is that each of the Hill papers has a bigger circulation and lower advertising rate per thousand than any of its rivals.”

On his tour of Hill’s printing plant, Hubbard said, “These magazines are all of one size, all printed on one kind of paper, with similar type. The presses are all sheet-fed rotary Cottrells, made exactly alike, with interchangeable parts. So that, if one press breaks down, there is another one right at hand to do the work.” After examining the assembly-line process of putting the magazines together, Hubbard wrote, “Few people do more work in this printing establishment than in any other that I know of in America, and I think I know them all, at least all of the big ones, and the others don’t count!”

Hubbard added, “And these people are better paid and better treated, I believe, than in any other shop. All machinery is enameled white, and the quarters are light, clean and well ventilated. . . (The) slap-dash of the average printing-shop is far away on fading horizon . . . Printers are usually poor. Also, I trust the fact will not be disputed that, in the good old times, printers as a rule were beautifully unreliable. They knew so much and had so much to do and had so little time to do it and covered so much territory that they were spread out very thin-morally and financially. To be too small is to be a pismire and be stepped on. . . To grow too big is to have your dirth exceed your chest measurement and die of fatty degeneration of the ego. The Hill publishing company has hit the balance.”

John A. Hill continued to print and publish. He entered into a partnership with James H. McGraw to form the McGraw-Hill Publishing company. How close John A. Hill was to becoming a printer President of the United States is lost to history. Hill died in 1916, four years after the Elbert Hubbard article.

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The purpose of Printing’s Past is to preserve the motivating spirit of pride in the printing heritage, the ethic of work and craftsmanship and the appreciation of the contributions of a free press.

Correspondence is welcome and appreciated.

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