

# Harry Duncan '38 and The Cummington Press



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# The Art of the Letterpress

Harry Duncan '38 and The Cummington Press, 1939-1997

“Perhaps to conceive of useful things as objects of integrity rather than of traffic is old-fashioned, but surely it isn’t completely unheard of even in this age of rapid communication and utility.”

*Doors of Perception* by Harry Duncan '38

After graduating from Grinnell College in 1938, Harry Duncan received a scholarship to attend the Cummington School of the Arts in Cummington, Massachusetts. Founded by Katharine Frazier, the school was in session during the summer to teach writing, painting, and music.

Although he set out for Cummington with the intention of becoming a poet, the timing of his arrival at the school changed the course of his life. In 1939, Frazier bought a Gutenberg-style Taylor hand press for the school with the mission to master the art of hand printing. The press was a manual, two man operation that required tireless work to keep a project in motion.

Quickly, a contingent of dedicated students, including Duncan, began to print student writing and archived public letters. Their first publication was a student work called *From This Hill*, which Duncan called “ugly.” Armed only with a new passion for printing, the Taylor Press, and the camaraderie of a shared goal, the printing team decided to try again, this time with a collection of letters from a whaling captain entitled *Incident on the Bark Columbia*. This was the first hardcover book bearing the imprint of the Cummington Press.

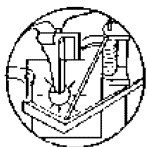
In another serendipitous sequence of events, The Cummington School developed a conference program that Duncan cited as a turning point for the life of the press. Under this program, five accomplished writers, including R.P. Blackmur and Wallace Stevens, taught summer writing sessions at the school. These

writers saw promise in the young printers, and entrusted them with original poetry. Without these contemporary manuscripts to print, Duncan said that the press may have remained a “local interest,” printing Christmas cards and concert programs. Instead, the young printers were able to establish themselves as a serious literary small press printing relevant contemporary manuscripts.

Over the next fifteen years, Harry Duncan continued printing, sometimes in barns and unheated houses, often living in uncomfortable, impoverished conditions in order to pursue his calling. After fifteen years of diligent work and following the death of Katharine Frazier, Duncan moved from Massachusetts to become director of the typographic laboratory at the University of Iowa School of Journalism, bringing the Cummington Press imprint with him.

In 1956, Duncan set up a Washington Press in the basement of 428 Fifth Avenue, Iowa City. During his time in Iowa City, Duncan taught typography, book design, and production at the typographic laboratory, and rose to the rank of professor. At the same time, he remained devoted to perfecting the art of letterpress printing through the Cummington Press. When he married in 1964, Duncan moved to West Branch, Iowa, and set up his Washington Press on the converted porch of his new house. Longing to devote more time to the practice of printing, Duncan accepted a job at the University of Nebraska, Omaha in 1972.

At University of Nebraska, Duncan devoted half of his time to teaching and the other half to printing. Though he continued printing under the name of the Cummington Press, he also founded the imprint Abattoir Editions, printing three to four books annually. In 1985, Duncan officially retired from the University, but carried on printing from his office on campus. Harry Duncan died in 1997 at the age of 80, leaving behind a reputation as a master printer and a legacy of connecting people with books as art objects.



“A good page of letterpress *is* an original. It is not a picture of a page of type, it is not a reduction, it is an impression made from the type itself.”

Harry Duncan, *Doors of Perception* 30.

**To page through more of Harry Duncan’s work, visit Special Collections.**

References:

Duncan, Harry. *Doors of Perception*. W. Thomas Taylor, 1987.

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<http://www.lib.uiowa.edu/scua/bai/richmond.htm>.

Acknowledgements:

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