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Frederic Warde:
New York State of Mind

by Simon Loxley

Frederic Warde

The book and type designer Frederic Warde (1894–1939) divided opinion among those who knew and worked with him, which may be one of the reasons no one had seriously tried to tackle his story before. The initial spark for my interest in writing about him was the interviews that Paul Bennett conducted with Stanley Morison and Beatrice Warde in the early 1960s on the subject of their former partner – in both senses of the word. It is no exaggeration to say that it is really only through his connection with them that Frederic Warde's memory survived at all – but also that because of that connection, and the enormous influence that both Morison and Beatrice subsequently wielded, as makers of their own public images and personal mythologies, Frederic was relegated to a half-forgotten status.

The Grolier Warde archive is big; surprisingly so in view of its subject's semi-obscurity, and his own determination during his lifetime to conceal his personal history. If Warde was, as Rudolph Ruzicka concluded, an enigma, it is because he wanted it that way. But despite that, a remarkable amount of material connected to him has survived. His great friend and correspondent William Kittredge, of Chicago's Lakeside Press, had a special box made after Warde's death to keep his letters in, and reading them you can see why. Warde's letters could be irritating, informative, funny, even offensive, but rarely if ever dull.

Having begun my research in the Club library on a Monday morning, by Wednesday evening I no longer felt I was drowning in a sea of old invoices and letters I could make little sense of, or connections to. It looked like there was going to be a good thread of narrative I could develop, which I thought might well be of interest to others too. But with only half an eye so far on the shelves of Warde's books, I wasn't immediately confident about what I could write about *them*. Nothing seemed to jump out and, visually, grab me by the throat.

But that in itself was significant, an indicator of the essence of the Warde style. As I looked closer and longer at his book designs the best of them started to cast a spell, with their sometimes surprising color combinations and their subtle, understated typography. Sebastian Carter of the Rampant Lions Press said to me "He had such a distinctive way of placing type," and I thought how true this was. It is probably bad for a biographer to admit to falling under any sort of spell in relation to their subject. Objectivity is paramount. But as a designer, looking at Warde's work made me come back to my own tasks with a fresh eye and sometimes a reappraisal of approach.

The part of Warde's story I want to look at in this article is the period covering the last twelve years of his life, from 1927 to 1939, during which he lived, and died, in New York. Warde would not have identified himself as a New York man in the mode of say, Lou Reed or Woody Allen; indeed when there he was frequently wishing himself elsewhere. As he wrote to William Kittredge: "I wish I had had the stability to stay planted in New York and not quiver when I hear the Mauretania blow its whistle and move out of the dock down the bay and head across the Atlantic to Europe."

Such was his nature. But although previously published outlines of Warde's life tended to write these years off as ones of failure and creative decline or inactivity, I took away a different impression – that despite professional and personal trials, it was a period during which Warde developed his skills and produced some of my favorite pieces among his printed output. His early death at 45 left hanging the question of just what else he might have done and where he might have gone.

It is worth briefly summarising the course of Warde's life up until late 1927, when he arrived back in New York after nearly three years spent in Europe. He was born in 1894 in Wells, Minnesota, but the death of his father in 1903 possibly prompted or necessitated a move to live with or near his grandmother in Massachusetts. The earliest recorded sighting seems to be a recollection by the illustrator Rudolph Ruzicka, who remembered Warde coming to see him in 1911 or 1912 in New York on the supposed grounds of wanting to commission a design or illustration, of which, typically, Ruzicka said, nothing ever came. If Ruzicka's dates are correct, it suggests Warde was working at an early age in the design or advertising industry. But America's entry into World War I in 1917 found him in Los Angeles, enlisting into the air service, his draft card giving his occupation as medical student.

Days before the armistice in November 1918, Warde, in uniform but not yet having seen active service, appeared in the company of a family friend on the New York doorstep of the teenage Beatrice Becker and her mother May. The moment has an almost cinematic quality, a scene easy to visualise and script in a screen drama as a pivotal moment. And pivotal it certainly was for Warde, meeting his future wife and,

with the help of her mother, getting connections in publishing and advertising that meant any thoughts of a medical career were permanently abandoned.

A post at the creatively highly-regarded printers William Edwin Rudge as assistant to Bruce Rogers was followed a year later, in 1922, by a move to Princeton University Press, where Warde began to make a name for himself – with his designs, and for being a volatile, highly temperamental personality to work with. "He made no clear friends, or if he did, I haven't found them," wrote P. J. Conkwright, a later successor to his post. "Most of the people in the plant regarded him with a mixture of resentment and respect." Conkwright went on:

> One man, a pressman at the time, tells how he was given a final OK by Warde on a certain job. To get this OK he had laboured with makeready until sweat and uncertainty stood blended all over his face. He ran the job with more care than he'd ever exercised in his life. Then, Warde took one look at the top sheet of the pile and ran a pencil down the side of the whole job. There are many stories in the plant about jobs revised and reset under his direction. One letterhead was reset eleven times. But all these people eventually began to respect the quality of work which began to come from the Press. Most of them could see faint glimmerings of his intense desire for perfection.

Warde's work, and an artfully-worded letter of self-introduction to Stanley Morison, typographical advisor to Lanston Monotype in Britain, made their impact. This letter contains probably the best-known of Warde's epistolary writing, a verse mocking a recent celebration given in honor of Frederic Goudy. It was clever, funny, and showed the quality of Warde's mind, as did the rest of the letter, which must have impressed Morison with the typographical knowledge it displayed. When Morison made a trip to America in 1924, he didn't waste much time. He invited Warde and his now-wife Beatrice to relocate to England for a professionally uncertain future. It was an offer Warde couldn't resist.

It was to be a creative, explosive partnership. Together Warde and Morison brought the Arrighi typeface into being, and produced *The Tapestry*, a collection of the poems of Robert Bridges that saw the type's first appearance. But Warde was drawn towards mainland Europe, and working with Hans Mardersteig at the Officina Bodoni in Switzerland. His relationship with both Morison and Beatrice imploded in a sea of jealousy and mistrust, and he moved to the continent to continue his own imprint, The Pleiad. But after producing four editions, Warde suddenly abandoned the venture and returned in October 1927 to New York, once again with no clear prospects.

Help was to come from Bruce Rogers, still working, although not for much longer, at Rudge. Soon Warde was reinstalled in the company. It could be judged a retrograde step, in the light of all his experiences since 1922, to return to where he had previously worked. But in terms of his design output, the late 1920s and early 1930s were busy and creative ones for Warde.

Despite his return to America, Warde hadn't heard the last of Arrighi, which was about to enjoy a new lease of life. Stanley Morison wrote to Daniel Berkeley Updike in February 1928:

> Mr. Bruce Rogers, it seems, has made an arrangement with Mr. Best [Harvey Best, President of Lanston Monotype in Philadelphia] by which the Centaur is to be cut as a Monotype face; but Mr. Rogers would not allow this to be done in the United States, having insisted that it be cut here… I gather that Warde is accompanying him on some sort of typographical Wanderjahr.

Rogers' idea was that Arrighi, created as a foundry type with hand-cut punches, should be adapted to serve as a companion italic to his roman face, Centaur. To fulfil this role, considerable revisions were required: a new set of capitals, sloped for the first time, an enlarged x-height with shorter ascenders and descenders, and some new characters including, at the insistence of Harvey Best, lining numerals, an essential prerequisite for his American customers.

Attention was drawn by John Dreyfus in his 1987 article on Arrighi in the journal *Fine Print* to the weakness of Warde's draughtsmanship for the characters for this new version, evidenced by surviving drawings at Monotype. Certainly Warde experienced considerable difficulties; the lower case letters were photographed from the type, from which an enlarged print was made to about 16 times the size of the originals, the negative reversed to give a correct image of the letters. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Warde struggled to reproduce the characters accurately from this imprecise image, as evidenced by the use of much process white paint around his unconfidently executed black-inked letters. Eventually it was decided to send the punches to England as further reference, Warde pleading extenuating circumstances. "I should be willing to let them use the punches… The type may not be entirely new and such characters as have been worked with will be worn down to some degree," he wrote.

With the new characters, such as $, £, and the lining numerals, Warde fared better. Although not an expert draughtsman, and still having to call frequently upon the services of process white, his drawings were sufficiently accurate for the women in Monotype's drawing office to work their magic; not for the first or last time, their

intelligent interpretations and adaptations of less-than-perfect working drawings were called upon.

John Dreyfus' implication was that Warde was not really qualified or fully capable of designing a typeface. But despite any shortcomings on the drawing board – hardly surprising in that this was not a talent Warde had had any call to develop – it is very apparent from his correspondence with Monotype that he understood the characters intimately and knew what needed to be done in their modification.

Rogers made the trip to Britain as part of a larger scheme to relocate once more, but Warde conducted his dealings with Monotype from New York.

Crosby Gaige was a Broadway producer who, with the success of shows like "The Butter and Egg Man" and "The Enemy," had by 1929 amassed a fortune worth $50 million in today's values. In March 1928, he announced that he was founding "the first press in [America] to be devoted exclusively to the publication of new or unpublished books of famous contemporary writers in fine limited editions." Warde designed some of his titles that were printed at Rudge.

Soon Warde and Gaige were planning a co-operative venture. Warde wrote to Will Ransom in February 1929:

> We are working and establishing a press which is intended to be for the most part similar to the Ashendene Press at London. We have had and are still having special equipment manufactured for our purposes. The press will be for only hand work in every detail of the composition and presswork and binding. There will not be any wheels or electric motors or anything but the human hand for producing the results we want in the work … we will endeavour to print as many books as we can from unpublished manuscripts … Our types will be uncommon ones and in some cases unique or made specially for the press by traditional punchcutters in Europe. …We desire to let the work do all the talking.

The Watch Hill Press was based in the outbuildings of Gaige's home, the beautiful white-boarded Watch Hill Farm, at Peekskill, NY. Warde would soon also move in from his temporary home in the Shelton Hotel on Lexington Avenue. He occupied one of the house's bedrooms for the next few years. Gaige's 20-year marriage had broken up in 1928, and he had only a very young adopted son, Jeremy, as immediate family. For both Warde, pretty much adrift in New York, and Gaige the company must have been welcome. As well as printing and publishing, the two experimented

with and refined other enthusiasms – cookery and wine, and the distilling of perfumes. Warde also designed and landscaped the garden at Watch Hill.

Gaige described Watch Hill as "a place where laughter dwells, where the flag of hospitality has never been furled." He invited many friends from the world of the performing arts as guests for weekends or prolonged stays. It was a stellar circle that included George and Ira Gershwin, Irving Berlin, Lionel and Ethel Barrymore, Dorothy Parker, Alexander Woollcott and Harpo Marx. Along with Parker, Woollcott was a member of the Algonquin Round Table, the literary set that met at New York's Algonquin Hotel. A theatrical and literary critic, columnist and broadcaster and occasional actor, he became a regular columnist for *The New Yorker* in 1929 with his column "Shouts and Murmurs," and Harold Ross's magazine helped make him a celebrity. Best remembered today as the model for the impossible Sheridan Whiteside in the play and film "The Man Who Came to Dinner," this was to be the beginning of a prolonged and sometimes explosive friendship and collaboration with Warde. Woollcott was a keen croquet player, bringing his personal set of mallets and hoops for contests on the lawn at Watch Hill, sometimes played for high stakes. In his autobiography *Footlights and Highlights*, Gaige claimed that "it was on one weekend visit that dark-eyed, romantic George [Gershwin] felt out with tentative fingers the beginnings of the 'Rhapsody in Blue.'"

The Watch Hill Press's output was mostly very small items, often single poems, sometimes illustrated, beautifully printed and bound, in very short runs – 10, 25 or 100 were typical quantities. The work was done for personal satisfaction rather than commercial gain, amateur in the best and literal sense of the word, and it must have been a welcome counterpoint to Warde's work for Rudge. Gaige described it as a form of personal expression.

Gaige's personal favorite of the Press' productions was *Letters to Master Jeremy Gaige from His Uncles*, the uncles being Gaige's friends and associates. The book was "completed," read the colophon, "in accordance with the best traditions of the hand press, some time after the event," Jeremy's second birthday in October of 1929. Each uncle wrote a short piece giving reflections on life or advice for the future. It is a delightful little book, with contributions from, among others, the writers Hugh Walpole and Arnold Bennett, Woollcott, and the playwright and screenwriter S. N. Behrman. Warde, although an uncle, confined himself to designing and printing. Two contributors recorded typically conflicting impressions of him. The illustrator and cartoonist William Cotton described him as "suave, elegant, cosmopolitan," while Behrman humorously exhorted the infant Jeremy to show more ambition by leaving "that sleepy rural atmosphere," unless he wanted to be "a type maniac like Freddie Warde, obsessed with facts, blinded to all the gay uses of life?"

One problematic volume was *Unser Kent* ('Our Kent'), an amusing – if mildly obscene – satirical poem written by the painter dubbed 'the American Renoir,' Waldo Pierce. Himself a considerably larger-than-life character, Pierce chronicled the Rabalasian exploits, real or imagined, of fellow artist Rockwell Kent, who in turn drew the lithograph of Pierce that served as frontispiece. Gaige reflected: "It is a pity the book's content is so masculine that it cannot be reproduced in a volume intended for fireside consumption."

Contents notwithstanding, the first edition was cancelled by the Press on account of numerous textual inaccuracies. "I have a copy of the *Unser Kent* for you," Warde told Kittredge, "but you must keep it dark as to where it came from. We are recalling all the 14 copies out and will reprint the whole thing with perhaps another poem. The present 100 copies will be put in a theoretical corner stone." A revised edition was published in 1930.

Warde's output with the Watch Hill Press came largely to a halt after 1930. One reason may have been Gaige's loss of most of his money in the Wall Street crash. In his autobiography he cited debts of $400,000 in the 1930s. Another undoubted factor was Warde's increased freelance activities outside Rudge, which would take him back to Europe for several months in early 1930. The man financing the trip was George Macy. He founded the Limited Editions Club in 1929, for which he would later earn the soubriquet "the world's leading impresario of the fine book." The Club, with its avowed aim to give the public "fine books, in limited editions, at reasonable prices," had a roll of 1,500 subscribers, each of whom received every month for the cost of $10 a specially designed and illustrated edition of a classic title. The policy from the outset was to approach an illustrator and ask what book they would like to illustrate, "so long as it is a generally admired classic which has not been similarly done before." An impressive roster of designers and printers were brought into play, including, over the years, T. M. Cleland, Jan Van Krimpen, Bruce Rogers, Hans Mardersteig, Daniel Berkeley Updike, and Hans Schmoller.

Warde's first task was to design the LEC edition of Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, which was printed at Rudge. Macy reported in the Club's newsletter that several members had written to say they didn't like the edition (how Warde must have appreciated him mentioning that). One of these included "the well-known wife of the president of one of America's largest banks" who only wanted brown books in her library, and cancelled her subscription – unpardonably, the *Leaves of Grass* binding was green. But on a more crucial level, Macy later commented: "I now know that Fred was not the man to translate Walt into type: the binding and the pages of type are very, very pretty, and that is the trouble, that the barbaric yawp of Walt Whitman

is hushed by the meticulous, delicate, charming and inappropriate typography of Fred Warde." The criticism is valid; the binding and title page are indeed beautiful in their delicacy, but the text lacks impact, the lines of verse set on a long measure, seemingly in an attempt to fill space on the large page. Possibly, in Macy's desire to produce an impressive edition at this fledgling stage of the Club's existence, too large a format had been chosen. However, *Leaves of Grass* was selected as one of the Fifty Books of the Year by the American Institute of Graphic Arts, so it had contemporary admirers too.

Notwithstanding, Macy extended his relationship with Warde, appointing him Typographic Consultant in the Club's second year. The plan was that alternate seasons would be designed, illustrated and printed in the United States and in Europe. Warde commissioned in person all the design, artwork and printing for the whole of the LEC's second, European season.

How could such a fruitful relationship go wrong? *The Dolphin* is how. In 1931 Macy had written "it has been our intention for some time to establish a semi-annual or annual magazine which would contain general articles about types and papers and bindings, discussions of old types, reviews of new types, reviews of interesting fine books published in the various corners of the world, general essays about printing history and the makers of printing history, general essays about book illustration and book illustrators, and random articles about book collecting. We hoped to have Mr. Frederic Warde serve as editor, with the possible collaboration of Mr. Updike."

Warde took on the job. At over 350 pages *The Dolphin* represented a sizeable and at times a frustrating editorial challenge. "You may be delighted that I am trying to edit *The Dolphin* because I am not delighted at all with the task," Warde wrote to Kittredge in August 1932. "I have not been able so far to determine whether I should use patience or dynamite in my efforts to get articles written." By November he was telling Harvey Best: "Because of the many unreasonable requirements of Mr. Macy I have turned the matters relating to *The Dolphin* back to him. I do not know what the results will be."

Writing to the Harvard University Press's David Pottinger, one of his contributors, Warde commented: "For my part I expect that each contributor should receive a copy of *The Dolphin*. Still, I find Mr. Macy of the LEC is a very difficult character and I cannot, in my humble position, guarantee that he will give away any copies."

The design of *The Dolphin* was functional, no more. With Warde having washed his hands of the annual by late 1932, the design and editorial duties may have been completed by Macy himself, quite capable of the task – he designed, uncredited, several

titles in the LEC's list. The title page design, featuring an Aldinesque dolphin, between wavy lines hinting at the aquatic, carries insufficient weight for the page size. With greater consideration it could have been made stronger, more striking. But compared to subsequent issues of *The Dolphin*, the first certainly looks as though it was created under Warde's direction.

Hellmut Lehmann-Haupt, writing in *Publishers' Weekly*, gave the annual a highly positive review on its appearance in the autumn of 1933, calling it "a real contribution to the literature of bookmaking, and we wish it most sincerely a long and vigorous life… One of the outstanding virtues of *The Dolphin* is its consistency from an editorial point of view… It is a great compliment to the anonymous editor (or editors?) that the best way to absorb *The Dolphin* is to read it like a book from cover to cover." This editorial anonymity was a point commented on by David Pottinger when he saw what we must hope was his contributor's copy – he admired the annual, but wondered why Warde himself had received no credit on it.

By 1931, for William Edwin Rudge, Printers, as for many other companies, the glory days of the 1920s were long over. The Depression was biting down hard on the printing industry. Warde wrote to Kittredge:

> I am in no other mood than the one for going to Europe. I want to go… but I am not only broke, I am pulverised, and I have been searching for some time for a job. In many ways I do not know what to do, and I have been worried for so long I do not care to go through with another day of it… Quite confidentially, unless you know all about it, Rudge and the place here is practically bankrupt. No one knows whether it will live from one day to the next… if you know of a job anywhere, let me know about it. I would go to China or Japan or any place any time for a decent wage.

Warde's assessment of the company's situation was accurate. Rudge had never been entirely funded by its own profits. The plant was heavily mortgaged, and no dividends had been paid on stock since the middle of 1930. *The Private Papers of James Boswell from Malahide Castle*, begun in 1928, had run to an originally unforeseen eighteen volumes plus an index and a catalogue, costing over $300,000, and involving a dangerous level of investment by Rudge in both money and working capacity. The staff at Rudge was cut by half, and according to Warde, wages by 'one half or more.' His mood remained despairing. He wrote to a French contact in 1932, "Affairs here are progressively worse, I think. The approaching winter may bring very serious results. Last winter there were some big riots by starving people in New York. The newspapers did not print a word about them. The whole country is getting ripe for a revolution."

In June 1931 a crippling blow had fallen on the company – the death of inspirational founder William Rudge. He had undergone successful internal surgery earlier in the year, but blood poisoning had taken hold, and death swiftly followed. His guiding hand was gone. His sons were judged too young to take over the running of the company. Mitchell Kennerley, auctioneer and one-time publisher of Goudy's *The Alphabet*, took over the helm. Unpopular, Kennerley was forced out in late 1932. The beginning of the end came in the spring of 1934, when Ralph Duenewald resigned as managing director to set up under his own name, taking several of the staff. Warde, who had clearly had enough by now, followed suit.

But economically these were hard times. Work was difficult to come by. After an initial offer as a donation, Warde rethought things and sold the Arrighi matrices and punches to the Metropolitan Museum. One design job he did have in hand was the LEC edition of *Through the Looking Glass*. But Warde-Macy harmony was about to be threatened again.

This time, Alice herself was the unwitting catalyst. Lewis Carroll's original dream-child was still alive in 1934, and had signed copies of the new edition for $1.50 a signature. Warde wrote to Macy pointing out the work he had done on the book over and above what he claimed he had been contracted to do, some re-engraving work on the illustrations. He had supervised the making of the paper, found the leather for the binding, designed the book and the prospectus and checked the proofs. Warde now suggested, in view of his extra efforts, that he might charge 20 cents for his signature, which Macy was pressing him to make on the colophon sheets. "I am not in any way comparing myself to 'Alice.' At the same instance, if Alice's signature is worth something, do you not think my signature might be of modest worth? It is about all I have," he wrote. "…I have no income of any kind. I have had to sell my books and anything else that could fetch a penny. If I were young enough I would join the Navy."

It was a desperate plea, made more so by Warde's peculiar manoeuvre, asking for a sympathy payment for something that was usually an integral part of an LEC commission, rather than seeking reasonable recompense for the entirety of the work he had done. He had placed himself in a false position, but Macy, probably recognising the underlying justice of Warde's request, replied:

> I know what it must have cost you to send me your letter; I am distressed by it. I honestly don't think it necessary for you to sign the sheets for *Through the Looking Glass*… Since the amount you request totals $100, for your extra work, I am attaching a cheque for that amount. I don't know why there

> should not be some revenue in the graphic arts for a man of your enormous knowledge and ability, and I shall make a definite attempt to save up some suggestions to offer you.

Macy was as good as his word, and Warde's personal Depression had now bottomed out. He rewrote and designed the LEC promotional book *A Code for the Collector of Beautiful Books*, and three titles for the new low-cost Macy imprint, the Heritage Press: *Green Mansions, Lust for Life,* and *The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*.

In late 1936 Warde found another full-time job. G. F. Cumberlege of the Oxford University Press in New York wrote: "We would be very happy to have the benefit of your taste and experience in helping us to create an Oxford style or standard in American book production. In this way, you would be in a position to unify the total printing output of the Oxford University Press in New York."

The Oxford books seem for the most part solid but anonymous productions. If OUP had hoped Warde would give them a distinctive look, they were to be disappointed. Their output was largely technical and academic; it must for the most part have seemed dry, uninspiring fare to Warde in comparison to the subjects he had been working on over the last ten years. But if Oxford weren't getting the best of him, others were. Elsewhere his old passion and attention to detail were still burning. The late 1930s saw a resurgence of Warde's talents, with his sensitive and surprising handling of color coming increasingly into play.

Warde spent much of 1939 in the hospital, and it is a reasonable assumption that a fair part of 1938 must have been spent in failing health. The cause is not entirely clear, but it seems probable that he had cancer. In early June he wrote to Daniel Berkeley Updike:

> … I intend to observe your wise recommendations about recovering from the hospital as well as the illness I have had. I was in hospital all of last March. The first two days after I had been discharged, made me think *Two Years Before the Mast* had been condensed into 48 hours. … After another ten days, I expect to be out of hospital. For a fortnight I do not expect to leave New York, unless the doctor approves.

Warde recovered sufficiently to resume work at Oxford University Press. He phoned their office on July 31, saying he had been called back to the hospital for a check up, and would come into the office later that day. But he would never appear. Frederic

Warde died in the Doctors' Hospital in New York City on July 31, 1939, two days after his forty-fifth birthday. His ashes were buried, and still remain, in the garden at Watch Hill Farm.

Warde's memorial stone was laid in 1943, but there was a sense that his memory, perhaps unsurprising in a world now in flames, was already fading. The date of birth on the stone is a year out. The stone was designed by Bruce Rogers, and the inscription, by Crosby Gaige, reads:

> Here in a garden of his own designing
> among familiar paths
> and in friendly earth lie the ashes of
> FREDERIC WARDE

About the author:
Simon Loxley is a graphic designer and writer on design, typography and design history. He is the author of *Type: The Secret History of Letters*, published in 2004; and *Printer's Devil: The Life and Work of Frederic Warde*, originally published in 2009. He is also the editor of *Ultrabold*, the journal of St Bride Library.

This article is based on a talk given at the Grolier Club in 2010.

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