

Comment: The Future Role of the Printing Historical Society

James Moran

When I founded the Printing Historical Society in 1964 I did so in the belief that the study of printing and typographical history and the preservation of records and equipment were not only valuable in themselves but that they were internationally indivisible. I cannot believe, for example, that type design can be comprehended on anything but a world basis, and even, say, a purely local type specimen, no matter how interesting, cannot be fully appreciated without knowledge of its antecedents in other parts of the world. The whole culture and technical development of printing has to be viewed internationally.

It is true that the Society was formed initially in London, but that was because the founder lived in London, one of the great printing centres (although declining somewhat today). This was one of those historical accidents with which we are all familiar. The Society could just as well have been started in Paris or New York, and have expanded outwards as it has done. The point I am trying to make is that the P.H.S. is not a purely British or London organization, although superficially it may sometimes appear to be. It has members in more than twenty countries, and in the United States in nearly every state of the Union.

At first, lectures, visits, and other activities were certainly confined to members living in and around London; and for severely practical reasons the administration was carried out in the metropolis. But soon, active members in the North of England formed their own group and the reports of their work and activities makes interesting reading. There is no reason why their example should not be followed.

On the other hand, there have been suggestions that an American Printing Historical Society be formed. There are sound reasons behind this suggestion, but I think that if it were carried out it could lead to the formation of other national societies and the fragmentation of what has proved to be a worthwhile international organization. While it is clear that it benefits every student of printing and typography for there to be localized

activity and research, the object should be to share the knowledge so obtained throughout the world, as far as it is practically possible.

A much better development, in my view, would be for P.H.S. members—in any region where the conditions are suitable—to form a semi-autonomous organization as part of the P.H.S. To this end the P.H.S. committee recommends the following:

1. Membership should be drawn from a geographical area small enough to allow meetings to be held without too much difficulty, but large enough for there to be sufficient numbers for a reasonably-sized group.
2. Groups should be run by a committee elected at an annual general meeting. The chairman of the P.H.S. might be considered an *ex officio* member of such a committee. Activities should be arranged in consultation with the P.H.S. committee to avoid working at cross-purposes.
3. Activities might include meetings and visits; production of a local newsletter; research into local printing history and support for local printing museums. Publications should bear the imprint "The . . . Group of the Printing Historical Society." Where keepsakes or books are given to a local group or to the whole Society, they should bear a statement as to their origin; but local committees should make sure that only work of real merit has the name of the P.H.S. on it.

The P.H.S. committee does not at this stage feel the need to proceed further. If and when regional organizations begin to grow, then will be the time to consider a more appropriate form of international organisation. At the moment the P.H.S. is governed by an annual general meeting held, for practical purposes, in London (although this is not laid down as the venue). Every member is entitled to attend but obviously this is not possible for most members outside of London and the nearby counties. The tendency is therefore for the elected committee to reflect the composition of the annual meeting.

This situation might change, but it is not thought desirable to impose an artificial constitution from above, even though it might appear to meet international requirements. It would be preferable to see how far regional groups do, in fact, develop, and at an appropriate stage consider how their representatives could be drawn into the running of the Society internationally. In the meantime, as an experiment, an international convention might be held for an exchange of views.

As suggested, as P.H.S. chairman I will act as the link between the committee and those who wish to form groups. My address is: 208 Elm Tree Court, Elm Tree Road, London NW8 9JT, England. This is my private address so correspondents should simply write to me by name.