

BOOK REVIEW

RECOLLECTIONS - A Life in Bookbinding

Bernard C Middleton

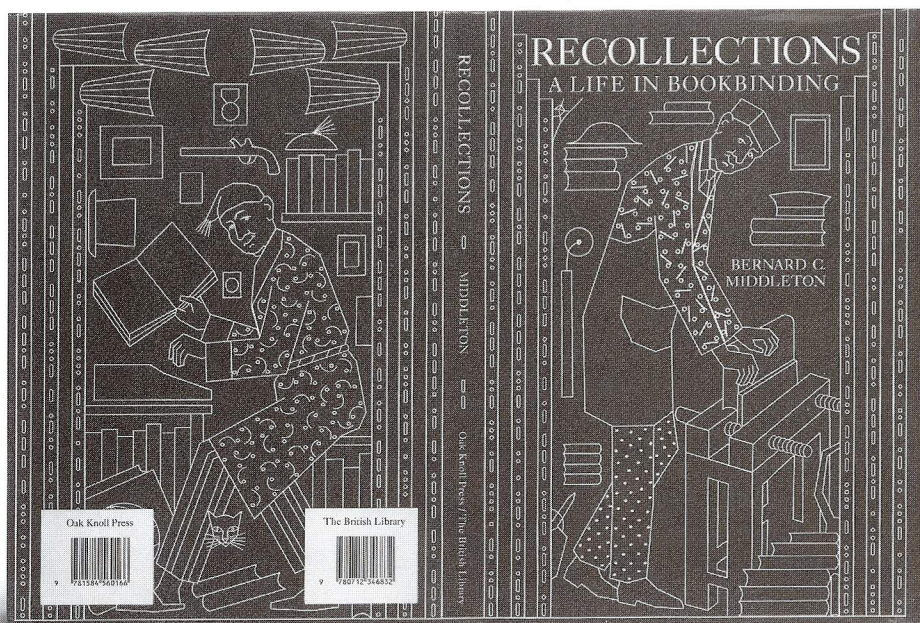
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The essence of this book has appeared before in the form of a limited edition book published by the Bird & Bull Press (1994) and an extended article in *The New Bookbinder* (1998). This, however, is a very welcome reappearance, not only because it has been expanded and updated, but also as it underlines a notable concern of Mr Middleton, namely that works in the field should not be placed beyond the reach of the student or 'little man'.

This is a story of remarkable personal development and will stand as an inspiration to anyone with the determination and resource to make a career within the craft. Mr Middleton charts his progress with some detachment, from 'dull' schoolboy in a comfortable lower middle class home in North West London, through the Central School by way of a scholarship, the Home Guard and wartime service in the Navy, to an apprenticeship at the British Museum Bindery, as it then was. The narrowness and rigidity of the trade binder (himself no exception) is highlighted, but not laboured. It seemed quite possible that, at this time in the late 1940's, he might become just another highly skilled bench worker.

However, Mr Middleton took up teaching, doing battle with his intense personal reserve, on a part-time basis, and in 1949 became a craftsman/demonstrator at the Royal College of Art, working under Roger Powell. This expanded his horizons and brought him into contact with specialists in other related fields with open and enquiring minds. So taken was he by this liberating environment that he took to wearing corduroy trousers and remodelled his handwriting in the now distinctive italic style.

The author and his wife, Dora, whom he married in 1951, took to visiting Thomas Harrison, an experienced binder from a trade background, at his home bindery in north London. It is clear from Mr Middleton's account of these visits that he had a high regard for the skill and resource of Harrison and states that one of his greatest regrets is that he was not able to make a permanent record of Harrison recounting his binding innovations and anecdotes.

After two challenging years as manager at Zaehnsdorfs, Mr Middleton set up his own business in two garret rooms in Broadwick Street, Soho; premises not best suited to the task. He benefitted from sterling support from Dora, who gave up good prospects, to take on the tasks of sewing, bookkeeping and many more besides. Mr Middleton traces lightly over the drawbacks which he faced, not the least of which, although he didn't fully appreciate it at the time, were his limitations as a book restorer. He remembers with fondness the period when he was establishing himself in business and recounts an uneasy cohabitation with a Maltese film extra/night security guard, with typical restraint but with great humour.

There is little said of Mr Middleton's relationship with his parents and, in particular, his father, Regent. This is a significant omission in that he, Regent, was a talented bookbinder in his own right who spent the greater part of his working life at Sangorski & Sutcliffe. Bernard says that it is, "almost certain that if my father had gone into silversmithing, say, I would now be hammering metal", although he does not state whether this was due to transmission of parental enthusiasm or filial duty. Although both generations shared a house for almost all their lives, there is no reference to the influence of his father on his bookbinding career after he secured an apprenticeship at the British Museum, in which Regent was instrumental. There can be no doubt, however, that to follow in the footsteps of an able father and to be trained by his colleagues and contemporaries must inevitably have cast a daunting shadow, particularly on one so evidently sensitive.

Besides covering the standard ground: career milestones (of which there are many), triumphs and setbacks (the latter given greater emphasis), notable achievements and celebrity clients (of which little is made), the book also throws up the unexpected, such as an interest in cricket and a voice of some authority on Roman glass.

The book is well produced with a good smattering of photographs to accompany a lively and flowing text, in which instances of Americanized spelling appear mercifully infrequently. The colour plates in particular highlight Mr Middleton's creative work. A witty jacket design, gold-tooled on leather by Michael Wilcox, after the famous etching of Roger Payne at work in his bindery, achieves in its simplicity a surprising facial resemblance to the subject, and is complete with many visual signatures (such as cobwebs, cats etc.) of his identity.

Demand for this book will justify the creative input underlying it and in so doing will disprove the author's self-effacing view that no one would be sufficiently interested in his life to merit the undertaking. It is a book that I thoroughly enjoyed reading and have great pleasure in recommending.

Alan Isaac