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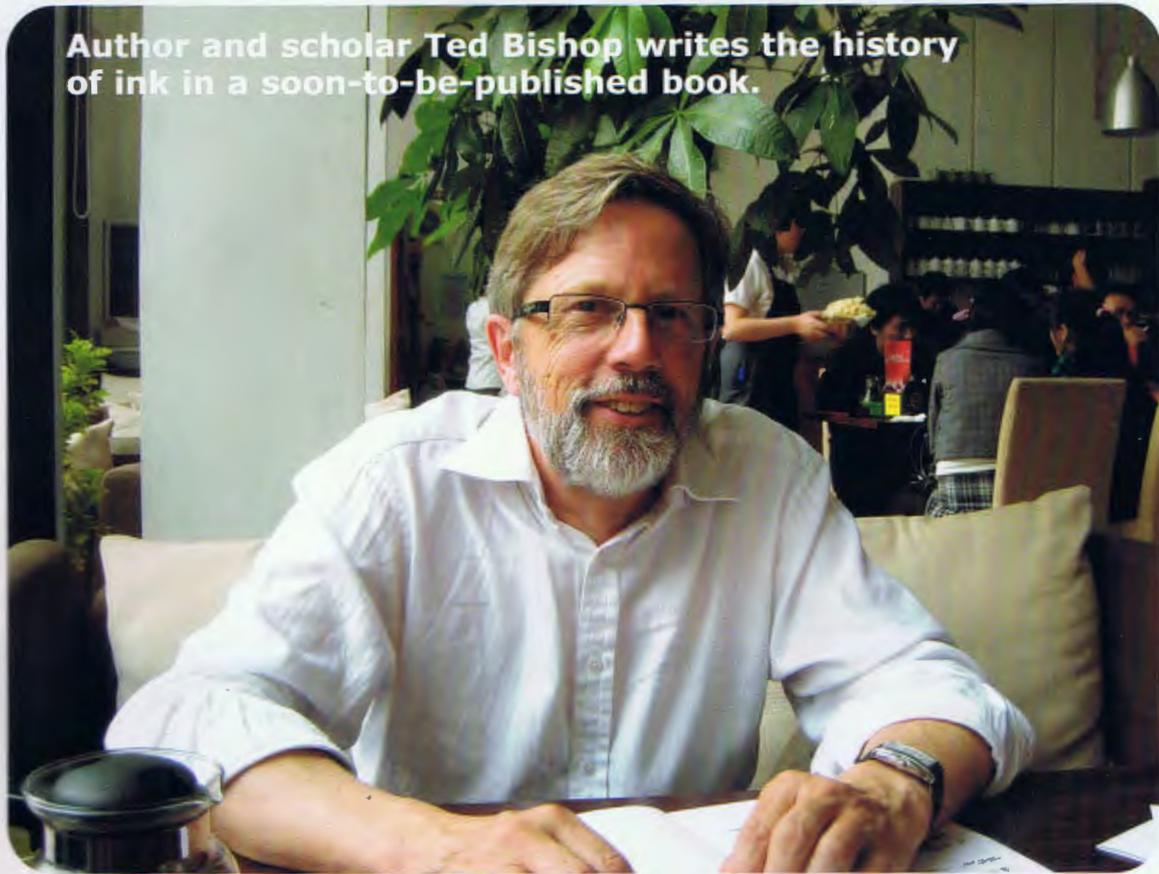
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The Social Life of Ink

BY JIL MCINTOSH

Author and scholar Ted Bishop writes the history of ink in a soon-to-be-published book.



The pen may be mightier than the sword, but even more powerful is its ink. No matter how lovely or impressive a pen is, it is mute without ink, unable to communicate a single thought to paper.

The importance of ink struck Ted Bishop, an English professor at the University of Alberta in Canada and the author of numerous articles and books, including the award-winning *Riding with Rilke: Reflections on Motorcycles and Books*. One of his courses covers the history of publishing, and so he went to the library for information. "I know the 'go-to' books on typography, paper and presses, but

I asked the librarian, 'Where's the book on ink?'" Bishop says. "She said, 'There isn't one.' So I thought, I'm going to write one."

The project sounded simple enough, but it ultimately took Bishop halfway around the world as he researched ink's history and its importance in culture and religions.

It also became deeply personal. Bishop comes from a long line of readers and has many of his grandfather's books. "He read enormously, but he didn't write letters or keep a journal," he says. "All I have is his graduation photo, and all of his books with his signature in them, or occasionally a

note. I realized that my grandfather exists for me as a signature. The ink lasts forever."

When Bishop teaches his students about ink, he has them crush gall nuts and make their own. This was the ink of the Dead Sea scrolls, of the world's oldest Qur'an, and up until the end of the Second World War, of U.S. government documents, since it forms a permanent bond with the paper. "Our history is predominantly written in ink," he says. "Nobody's going to hand down a Kindle in 100 years, and even if they did, there's no direct connection, as there was with my grandfather's books."

Bishop's travels began in Hungary, where he met the daughter of ballpoint inventor László Bíró. "I figured the ballpoint pen would be the least interesting and I'd get that out of the way first," he says. "Instead, I discovered how revolutionary it was. It took years to develop this very simple product." It was also an instrument of democracy, he says: as ballpoints became cheap and reliable, anyone could buy and use them.

That wasn't so in China, where he visited Anhui Province, known for making the finest traditional ink sticks. Writers ground the domino-shaped sticks each morning to make fresh ink. "During the Ming Dynasty,

these became so elaborate that they came stamped 'not for use,' and they were gifts for the Emperor. Some cost thousands of dollars and were as long as your forearm. What started out as completely utilitarian became these very exclusive luxury items."

He also went to the edge of Tibet to see the oldest functioning Buddhist print shop. After three days of eight-hour bus rides, he discovered that while the monastery was open, the print shop wasn't! The trip wasn't wasted, though. As the bus crossed an overpass, the Buddhist passengers threw paper charms out the windows. Print shops make billions of these, adorned with printed symbols. "That's

another aspect of how ink is significant in other cultures," Bishop says. "It's part of sacred rituals that we don't use any more in the West."

In the U.S. he researched printer's ink, an oil-based type that, unlike water-based, can be used in presses. Gutenberg's genius wasn't just in his machine, Bishop says, but in his revolutionary use of linseed-based ink that he adapted from his oil-painter friends. Bishop visited a Utah craftsman who makes it the old-fashioned way—and don't try it yourself at home.

"You boil down linseed oil to the point where it spontaneously combusts," Bishop says. "We spent a morning following the traditional recipe. It

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was in a big soup pot, and the thing went 'foomp,' and we had a column of flame the entire circumference, like a mini jet engine. It burns a little, and then it's ready. Just warming it isn't enough. Then it's strained through cheesecloth, and you add pigment and other additives. Print shops were always burning down, and it's said that one of the great fires in London was started by printer's ink.

"The recipes were jealously guarded, and every printer had special additives. Gutenberg Bibles are still gorgeous, and the ink is really glossy. Scholars have speculated that the secret ingredient, which they haven't been able to verify, was Gutenberg's urine. Some recipes called for the urine of a young boy to be added, and some said 'don't let women touch this,' especially old women. It was this type of thing that led me to the working title, which is *The Social Life of Ink*." He hopes to have the book published over the next year.

His last trip was to Uzbekistan, where a guide took him to a mosque. In a glass case was the Qur'an of Osman, the world's oldest, dating to 656 and written in gall nut ink. It was compiled by a Muslim leader who was killed while he was reading it, "and this was the beginning of the split between the two main sects, the Shiites and Sunnis, and all of it is related to ink," Bishop says.

"Ink takes you into the character of a society. In China, calligraphy is revered and respected; it's not a hobby. In Islam, it's the handwritten copies of the Qur'an that people value. In the West, we've tended to disregard ink. But when my students who write on computers are stuck, they'll take out a pen, because it's an aid to thought. They're coming in with notebooks and pens. People are thinking about ink again."

JIL MCINTOSH is a freelance writer and pen collector based in Canada.



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