

FRANKLIN SERIES

5 POINT OLD STYLE No. 79 ■ 4-4

THE INVENTION OF PRINTING has always been recognized by educated men as a subject of importance: there is no mechanical art, nor are there any of the fine arts, about whose early history so many books have been written. The subject is as mysterious as it is inviting. There is an unusual degree of obscurity about the origin of the first printed books and the lives and works of the early printers. There are records and traditions which cannot be reconciled of at least three distinct inventions of printing. Its early history is entangled with a controversy about rival inventors which has lasted for more than three centuries, and is not yet fully determined. In the management of this controversy, a subject intrinsically attractive has been made repulsive. The history of the invention of printing has been written to please national pride. German authors assert the claims of Gutenberg and discredit traditions about Coster. Dutch authors insist on the priority of Coster and charge Gutenberg with purloining the invention. Partisans on each side say that their opponents have perverted the records and suppressed the truth. The quarrel has spread. English and French authors, who had no national prejudices to gratify, and who should have considered the question without passion, have wrangled over the subject with all the bitterness of Germans or Hollanders. In this, as in other quarrels, there are amusing features, but to the general reader the controversy seems unfortunate and is certainly wearisome. It is a greater misfortune that all the early chronicles of printing were written in a dead language. Wolf's collection of Typographic Monuments, which includes nearly every paper of value written before 1740, is in Latin; the valuable books of Meerman, Maittaire and Schoepflin are also in Latin. To the general reader these are sealed books; to the student, who seeks exact knowledge of the methods of the first printers, they are tiresome books. Written for the information of librarians rather than of printers, it is but proper that these books should devote the largest space to a review of the controversy or to a description of early editions; but it is strange that they should so imperfectly describe the construction and appearance of early types and the usages of the early printers. The mechanical features of typography were, apparently, neglected as of little importance, and beneath the dignity of history. A failure to present accurate illustrations of early printing is not the fault of modern authorities. Many of them are full of fac-similes bearing the marks of minute and conscientious care; but they are in foreign languages, and are seldom found in our largest American libraries. There are, it is true, a few books in English on early printing which have accurate fac-similes; but high prices

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11 POINT OLD STYLE No. 79 ■ 1-9

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