

Note

A NOTE ON THE HOGARTH PRESS (1917–21)

Material studies and Woolf studies intersect notably in the context of the Hogarth Press. But while there have been important studies of Woolf's engagement with bookmaking and the materiality of the press, there appears to be a significant gap in addressing a foundational question: what precisely was the first Hogarth Press? The name refers to the original hand-press purchased by Leonard and Virginia Woolf in 1917, which they used until they acquired a larger Minerva press in 1921.¹ This initial press was not merely a tool but the cornerstone of the Woolfs' printing enterprise, facilitating the hand-printing of their first six works. These include *Two Stories* (1917) by Leonard and Virginia Woolf, parts of Katherine Mansfield's *Prelude* (1918), T.S. Eliot's *Poems* (1919), Hope Mirrlees's *Paris* (1919/1920), parts of J.M. Murry's *The Critic in Judgement* (1919), and Woolf's *Kew Gardens* (1919). While the content, material qualities, and aesthetic significance of these texts have been extensively analyzed, little critical attention has been directed toward the material conditions of their production—specifically, the role of the hand-press itself in shaping their physical appearance and, by extension, their broader cultural and literary impact.

Scholars have observed that the size constraints of the Woolfs' original letterpress required them to reposition the sheet containing four pages four times, printing each page individually.² However, there is no specific discussion of what these size limitations entailed or the exact type of press they were using. Therefore, understanding the specific model of the hand-press utilized by the Woolfs is imperative for discerning the rationale behind the printing methods employed in their early works. Factors such as page dimensions, ink application consistency, and edition print quantities were

contingent upon the capabilities and limitations of their chosen press. Frustratingly, the only indication of what possible model they were using comes from a very vague letter Leonard Woolf wrote to Majl Ewing in 1957, in which he candidly writes he 'thinks' their first handpress was an Excelsior 'Eclipse', bought from the Excelsior Printing Supply Company in 1917, but that he can't fully remember, stating, 'I am not quite certain of this. I doubt if it is now in existence'.³ Since this is the only information given, scholars have since taken this statement as fact, and have assumed that the first hand-press was an Excelsior Eclipse table-top hand-press.⁴ The problem, however, is that the 'Eclipse' press is not documented within Excelsior's records. Instead, the sole documentation of an Excelsior 'Eclipse' is linked to a different company bearing the same name.

The confusion arises from the overlapping use of the term 'Excelsior' within the printing industry, linked to W.A. Kelsey, who established the Excelsior Press and Kelsey Press Co. between 1872 and 1923, which both marketed 'Excelsior' printing presses. These enterprises, primarily targeting the American market, operated without physical storefronts. Kelsey's correspondences reflect the challenges of international expansion and a business model focused on low-cost products sold directly to end-users, stating that 'every attempt at dealing with the trade, to sell outfits, has failed'.⁵ The Woolfs, however, acquired their printing equipment directly from a storefront, including an undisclosed quantity of Old Face Caslon type, a sixteen-page instructional pamphlet, and necessary implements and materials.⁶ This indicates that they did not purchase the American Excelsior press associated with Kelsey.⁷ This consideration is crucial, given the tendency to associate their initial press ventures with this American brand, especially with the presence of an 'Eclipse' model in their catalogues.

³ Leonard Woolf to Prof. Majl Ewing, 13 July 1957, *Leonard Woolf Papers*, University of Sussex Library.

⁴ See Claire Battershill (2018), Tony Bradshaw (2012), Helen Southworth (2010), and S.P. Rosenbaum (1995).

⁵ W.A. Kelsey, 'Kelsey's Own Story, 1924,' *Kelsey's Press History* ed. Glover Snow (privately published), 3.

⁶ L. Woolf to M. Ewing.

⁷ Leonard Woolf, *Beginning Again: An Autobiography of the Years 1911–1918* (New York, 1964), 234.

¹ Donna E. Rhein, *The Handprinted Books of Leonard and Virginia Woolf at the Hogarth press, 1917–1932* (Ann Arbor, 1985), 5.

² John Carter, *The ABC for Book Collectors* (New York, 1972), 5.

The American Excelsior 'Eclipse' table-top hand press, classified by Elizabeth Harris as a 'rail press' with a single long foot or rail support structure, was primarily considered a toy, often marketed to children.⁸ The only other recorded mention of an 'Eclipse' model by Kelsey dates back to 1872, with Kelsey deeming the model 'unworkable', further ruling out the possibility that the Woolfs acquired this press.⁹ This directs our attention to the Excelsior Printing Supply Co. Ltd, an independent establishment on Farringdon Street in London. Archival materials, though incomplete due to losses during the Second World War, indicate that this company also produced 'Excelsior' presses and marketed them as comprehensive starter kits for novice printers, similar to what the Woolfs purchased. A 1908 advertisement features various models of Excelsior presses and kits, though not individually named. As Harris notes, 'unless the name is on the press itself, the press-names given are derived from the box or some similar source, and are not guaranteed'.¹⁰ Therefore, it is plausible that the Woolfs acquired an 'Eclipse' press from this source, but it would probably be listed by its model number rather than its brand name, making formal identification difficult (Figure 1).

In a letter to her friend Margaret Llewelyn Davies in February 1915, Woolf subtly suggests her contemplation of purchasing a press, noting that it 'only costs 17.17'.¹¹ Given the cost, the 'Excelsior Outfit no. 5' emerges as a probable candidate for their initial procurement. This comprehensive package, inclusive of the press and necessary accessories, was priced at £15.15s. Adjusting for inflation from 1908 to 1915, with an average annual inflation rate of 2.27%, the equivalent price in 1915 would approximate £17.7. Hence, it appears that this model, or one akin to it, piqued Woolf's initial interest. This inference gains further support from the Woolfs' subsequent purchase of the first Hogarth Press in 1917 from the Excelsior Printing Supply Company, documented by Leonard as costing £19.5s.5d.¹² While a catalogue from this specific year is unavailable, the price suggests a similar press model and package, especially considering their need for a comprehensive set of equipment. Assuming the packages had remained consistent since 1908, the initial price of £15.15s would have translated to approximately £20–£26 in 1917. Though these figures do not align precisely, it is worth considering that their press arrived damaged, necessitating repairs, which may have warranted a discount.¹³

The figure shows four pages from the 'Excelsior Printers Supply Company, Ltd.' catalogue, 1908. Each page lists various printing equipment and accessories with their prices in guineas and shillings. The items listed include Excelsior Presses, Furniture, Registers, Leads, Galleys, Composing Sticks, Brass Rules, and various typesetting tools. The prices are listed in guineas (£) and shillings (s). The pages are numbered 1, 2, 5, and 6.

Figure 1. Excelsior Illustration Catalogue, 1908. TS2iX, 10163 (Reproduced by permission of the St Bride Foundation).

⁸ Elizabeth Harris, *Personal Impressions: The Small Printing Press in Nineteenth-Century America* (Dover, 2004), 27.

⁹ *Personal Impressions*, 140.

¹⁰ *Personal Impressions*, 28.

¹¹ Virginia Woolf, '22 February 1915,' *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume II: 1912-1922*, ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (New York, 1976), 59.

¹² *Beginning Again*, 234.

¹³ *Letters II*, 150.

Alternatively, slight variations in the package contents could account for the price discrepancy. Further examination of the books produced by the Hogarth Press between 1917 and 1921 (after which period they acquired a larger ‘Minerva’ press) strengthens the likelihood of their ownership of a 6 × 10 platen hand press.¹⁴ It is widely known that their initial press could only accommodate ‘one demy-octavo page at a time, perhaps two crown octavo pages’,¹⁵ and given the dimensions of a demy octavo page (8.75 by 5.6 inches), the next size down offered by Excelsior (8 × 5) would have been too small, while the larger 9 × 13 option would have been both impractical for demy octavos and likely exceeded their budget. Moreover, according to a 1910 Kelsey Co. ‘Excelsior Press’ advertisement, a 6 × 10 platen press would have yielded the best results for printing ‘small paper,’ or demy octavo pages.¹⁶

While J. Howard Woolmer’s seminal bibliography *Checklist of the Hogarth Press* provides dimensions of publications, it does not specify whether these measurements apply to the covers or the pages, which is a notable oversight given the potential discrepancies between page and cover sizes in these texts.¹⁷ When cross-examined with the first six Hogarth Press publications, it becomes evident that the sizes listed in this bibliography refers to the covers, not the actual pages. The size of the covers do not provide bibliographic insights into the printing process; rather, such information has to be derived from the dimensions of the pages themselves. Based on my measurements, the page sizes of the first six texts are as

follows: *Two Stories* (5.75 × 8.5 inches), *Prelude* (5.5 × 7.5 inches), *Critic in Judgment* (5.5 × 8.5 inches), *Poems* (5.5 × 8.75 inches), *Kew Gardens* (5.5 × 8.75 inches), and *Paris* (4.5 × 5.3 inches). These dimensions support the hypothesis that the Woolfs are likely to have employed a 6 × 10 platen hand-press to print the early works, as most of these works (with the exception of *Prelude*, which involved partial outsourcing for printing, and *Paris*, in which Mirrlees heavily influenced the material form of the text) conform to the demy octavo page size typical of a 6 × 10 platen hand-press.¹⁸

These findings not only refine existing bibliographic records but also provide a more precise framework for understanding the material constraints that shaped the early publications of the Hogarth Press. By establishing the probable specifications of the Woolf’s first hand-press, this research offers a methodological model for future studies seeking to recover lost or obscured aspects of small printing press history. This reassessment invites further inquiry into the interplay between textual production, literary aesthetics, and the contingencies of early twentieth-century print culture.

REANNA BROOKS 

University of Oxford, UK

<https://doi.org/10.1093/notesj/gjaf039>

© The Author(s) (2025). Published by Oxford University Press. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted reuse, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

¹⁴ *The Handprinted Books*, 5.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ TJ LYONS’ TYPE ‘Prices for Complete Printing Outfits, (1910).’ 24 April 2010. Online Image. *Flickr*, 8 April 2025 <<https://excelsior.whiskerfishprint.com/kelsey.html>>. As indicated in the advertisement, the next size up (9 × 13) ‘does cap sheets,’ a contracted form of ‘foolscap folio,’ which typically measures around 8 × 13 inches. This exceeds the dimensions of the paper used by the Woolfs.

¹⁷ I understood that the checklist sizes relate to the covers when I noticed differences between the checklist measurements and those I gathered from different archival sources.

¹⁸ J. Howard Woolmer, *Checklist of the Hogarth Press, 1917-1945* (Philadelphia, 1986), 7.

© The Author(s) (2025). Published by Oxford University Press.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted reuse, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Notes and Queries, 2025, 00, 1–3

<https://doi.org/10.1093/notesj/gjaf039>

Note