



The Swifts: Printers in the Age of Typesetting Races

Walker Rumble

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On a December day in 1885, Bill Barnes, a journeyman from the New York World, and Joe McCann, representing the New York Herald, faced off in a match race of Swifts, compositors who set type by hand, individually, letter by letter, with incredible accuracy and speed. McCann got off to a slow start, but at the end of the four-hour race, he joined shopfloor legends Clinton "The Kid" DeJarnatt and the "Velocipede" George Arensberg as a working-class hero. It was not the last race of its kind between Swifts, but already looming were changes both social and technological that would cause these gifted tramp printers to disappear.

In *The Swifts*, Walker Rumble, himself a printer and printing historian, follows the trail of these colorful compositors who became famous by winning typesetting races. Tellingly, at the same time that the most celebrated contests were taking place, technological and cultural forces were threatening the Swifts' way of life. First women printers vied for shopfloor legitimacy; then, in the mid-1880s, typesetting machines such as Mergenthaler's Linotype arrived, replacing the artisans forever.

With the spread of digital technologies at the beginning of the twenty-first century, we are experiencing a revolution in printing matched only by two previous events: Gutenberg's fifteenth-century invention of movable type and the advent of typesetting machines that replaced the Swifts. Joining narrative historians of technology such as Robert Darnton, Henry Petroski, Dava Sobel, and Ross King, Rumble tells a fascinating story that will entertain aficionados of print culture while explaining the larger cultural dislocations wrought by technological change.

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