

The History of the Book and the Study of Literature

Thematic Cluster / Groupe thématique d'articles

Edited by

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T.H. HOWARD-HILL

The History of the Book in Departments of Literature

The situation of the history of the book in pedagogical settings is very similar to that of the "traditional" bibliography, which I discussed in a previous paper (1993-95). Although courses on "the history of the book" are currently displacing what remains of "bibliography" in departments of literature, the field of the history of the book shares its predecessor's ambiguous situation. By way of transition to the present topic, a short passage from my previous article will be useful:

Hanging on the coat-tails of critical theory ... *l'histoire du livre* offered blandishments almost irresistible in departments avid to theorize and historicise their course offerings in the most fashionable modes.... *L'histoire du livre* ... found a ready acceptance that had not been accorded to Bowersian bibliography For traditional bibliographers, the fashionable "new" discipline supplied an authorizing umbrella under which the previously marginalized historical bibliographers could shelter and flourish. But far more influential for the institutionalization of the history of the book were social historians and the students of literature who sought to historicise their studies in the wake of New Criticism. Many of these were critics who wanted to do cultural history without having to know much about books.... Already the history of the book promises to become institutionalised in a manner that bibliography never achieved. It will flourish because it makes accessible on a level of generality and relevance studies (or the products of studies) that were perceived as technical, obscure, irrelevant or unnecessary to many people in academe. (185)

So it seemed then from a bibliographical point of view. Here, however, my concern is with the study of literature and the history of the book. Having recently shared the teaching of the first departmental offering in my university on "The History of the Book in Britain" with my colleague Patrick Scott, and having spent the following semester as a fellow of the Center of the Book in the British Library reading the bibliographical literature of previous centuries, my interest in the situation of the history of the book in departments of literature is influenced as much by pragmatic as by theoretical considerations.

First, we should recognize that the history of the book for departments of literature in English, American, and Commonwealth universities is essentially Eurocentric. A case for the relevance of the history of the book in China or India

for our students is hard to conceive and difficult to make. Then, Eurocentrism is followed and accompanied by nationalism, the specialization of the book industries in the European countries and their colonies and their increasing self-sufficiency giving apparent cogency to such courses as the history of the book in "Britain" or "the United States" or even "Postcolonial Countries." A course on the history of the book in Britain can scarcely avoid commencing with a continental orientation — as even British Medieval literature is more comprehensively European than merely British — and similar courses for formerly colonial countries like the United States necessarily involve consideration of book-related technologies and activities that were originally European or British rather than native. This diachronic aspect of the historical study of the book underlies its interdisciplinarity while at the same time it emphasises the practical difficulties of organizing nationally-based courses on the history of the book.

More specifically, a course devoted to the history of the book in Britain traverses nearly a thousand years of European history and a correspondingly large number of significant developments in the history of the book. Such a course must deal at least with the production and circulation of manuscript books from pre-Norman times through the eighteenth century, acknowledge the impact of the new printing machine in England from 1476, document the rise of the professional author from the end of the sixteenth century, describe the earliest attempts at the regulation and control of the powerful new medium from the sixteenth century onwards, discuss the struggle amongst authors and publishers for the rights in copies from the seventeenth century, relate the movement towards nearly universal literacy to the history of education and the establishment of many different kinds of libraries, outline the development of public libraries from the end of the sixteenth century to the triumph of the public library movement in the nineteenth century, cover the developing specialization of the book trade in terms of the functions of printers, booksellers, publishers, etc., and the dispersal of printing presses and publishing into the provinces from the late seventeenth century, describe the social effects of such technological innovations as the steam printing press and mechanical typesetting machines and the social movements that brought about the increasing employment of females in book industries in the nineteenth century, together with the whole movement of Britain from a net importer to a net exporter of books, and so forth.

It seems reasonable to note that the above sketch of the content of a course on the history of the book in Britain does not contain much (beyond mention of the professional author) that transparently relates to the interests of students of literature. That, precisely, underlines the significant benefit of a history of the book course in literature departments as well as identifies one of the reasons why such courses are difficult for students. Setting aside the fashionable confusion between these two terms, the business of literary students is with *texts* more or less detached from the material conditions of their existence, whereas (as we all

know) the history of the book deals with *books*, the text carriers, within "the whole socio-economic conjuncture," to employ Robert Darnton's expression (see Adams and Barker 5-43, esp. 11, 14). Most literary students find that endeavouring to master literary history while reading the texts of the masters and mistresses of world literature gives them little time to spend on "the whole socio-economic conjuncture." A history of the book course is, as it should be, significantly different from any other course in their experience.

This difference diverts attention from the question about what the history of the book can provide students of literature to "what do students of literature bring to the history of the book," the present focus of our attention. Besides the pragmatic difficulties of course design posed by the sheer extent of the history of the book in Britain, for instance, there is a further difficulty for students and teachers alike in the character of the literature to which students should have access. Insofar as the history of the book as an academic discipline is concerned, its literature in English remains undeveloped¹ in those areas that are usually undeveloped when fresh fields of study and teaching are institutionalized. Primary theoretical documents like Feather's "Cross-Channel Currents: Historical Bibliography and *l'histoire du livre*" (1980), Tanselle's essay "The History of Books as a Field of Study" (1981); Darnton's "What Is the History of Books?" (1982), McKenzie's essay distinguishing historical bibliography and the history of the book in *The Bibliographical Society, 1892-1992* (1992), and Adams and Barker's "A New Model for the Study of the Book" (1993) are few in number and not widely available. Most of the important analyses of the history of the book trade are fairly recent but published in bibliographical or book trade society journals and newsletters (an instance is Simon Eliot's *Some Patterns and Trends in British Publishing, 1800-1919*) that are often not widely held in libraries or otherwise readily obtained by students. There is no handy reader on the history of the book in Britain that pulls together the most important writings of the last fifteen to twenty years.² And there are very few books at the moment that can serve as general text books for a whole course or a major part of it: such works as John Feather's *A History of British Publishing* are limited in scope. Finally, students are, generally, unfamiliar with the recent literature of the history of the book in Britain and the means of getting access to it through bibliographies like the *Annual Bibliography of the History of the Production of Books* or the

1 The recently published *International Book Publishing: An Encyclopedia* (Altbach and Hoshino) is a marked improvement of the field, however. In French, for example, see *Estivals* (1993, 1994) and in German see, for example, Wittmann.

2 If Simon Eliot and I are able to proceed with our plans for such a reader, it should become available around the same time as most of the volumes of the *History of the Book in Britain* (McKenzie *et al.*) will appear.

checklist of "publications received" in the *SHARP Newsletter* and similar sources, or even the recent volumes of my *Index to British Literary Bibliography*.

Further, unless students are very advantageously placed — in the precincts of the British Library or Bodley, for instance — they will have limited opportunities to gain experience of original or primary materials or to undertake original investigations of the book trade history. This fact seems to undermine the fundamental basis for a course on the history of the book in Britain. If they are to study the history of the book merely by reading *texts* about books, they are not really much better off than when they read literary texts without knowledge or concern for the material forms in which texts have their being and attain significance. It is not suggested that this deficiency can be satisfied by a token visit to the special collections department of the university library or a demonstration of the working of a common hand press, in the manner of former bibliographical courses (although that would not hurt, either). However, I do suggest that it would be beneficial for students in history of the book courses to gain some firsthand experience of contemporary early writings about books unmediated by modern scholars, in their original form.

Here are some examples. Most major university libraries have original copies of early nineteenth-century general periodicals even if they do not have copies of trade journals like the *British Bookmaker* or the *London Typographical Journal*. Even a cursory examination of the crumbed typography and almost illegible print of *The Critic* or *The Athenaeum* in their early years would convey immediately the conditions of reading for the reading public in that century. The correspondence and editorial columns of such newspapers and journals as well as the trade papers would inform modern students about the scope of contemporary literature as well as the social conditions that brought it into being. Recent statistical analyses of reading preferences compiled from the catalogues of early circulating and subscription libraries are undoubtedly useful and desirable, but literary students may very well receive more lasting benefit from their own explorations amongst the primary materials for a history of the book. For instance, *The Critic*, a newly-established competitor of *The Athenaeum* and *The Literary Register* in the 1840s, solicited testimonials from its bookseller subscribers, and printed the letters in its columns. Many of the booksellers who owned libraries and found *The Critic's* reviews useful for book selection supplied fascinating information about their clientele and their reading tastes. In 1845 a bookseller whose readers were "pretty fairly divided between the poorest and the respectable classes" writes:

Naval, military, chivalric, and humorous works, when spiritedly written attract the great body of readers, and are always popular. The writings of Marryat and James, for instance, are especial favourites. Fashionable novels are sad bores, and I always avoid them: political or religious tales are worse; and satirical narratives are barely readable. The *deep* romances of the Lewis and Radcliffe school still have their myriad of admirers; and the

wild effusions issued by Lloyd and others in penny weekly numbers have a prodigious run. The domestic stories of Mesdames Jones, Ward, Helme, and Roche are in daily demand.... The muses, I regret to add, have comparatively few devotees; still, the standard dramatic works are in constant use. (*The Critic* 2: 106 May 1845)

At Dumfries, Dugald Cameron's readers were "chiefly among the agricultural classes and tradespeople." He found that

the works of Dickens, Cooper, Marryatt, James, and Lever [are] very popular; Scott, before Cadell's cheap edition commenced, eclipsed every other, except Hogg, for whose works, especially his *Brownie of Bodsbeck*, there is such a run, that from New Year's Day till New Year's Day it scarcely ever rests in the library.... Ferrier, Galt, Hall, and Carlton are much sought after. Wilson's *Tales of the Borders*, when publishing in weekly numbers, sold immensely, but have fallen off greatly since they came into the library. Fashionable novels, even Hook's, adhere tenaciously to the shelves. Histories and travels are also in fair demand, but Novels are the favourites beyond all measure. (*The Critic* 2: 207 July 1845)

James C.W. Kie in Kilmarnock reports that the books most in demand among the better class of readers (the quarterly readers who borrowed books on the old penny a volume system) were

all of what is vulgarly called the *crack* kind. The "O'Malleys," "Lorrequeers," "Hintons," "Handy Andy," "Arthur O'Leary," "O'Donoghues," and all that class.... Miss Edgeworth, Miss Martineau, nobody will have; and you dare hardly mention the name of Mrs. Radcliffe, Mrs. Meeke, Monk Lewis, or any of that *wonderful* class. My shelf of Galt's works is very seldom touched, although I often recommend that best of all novels that ever was written, viz. "Laurie Todd".... Of poetry I have little or none in the library; but the less the better, although the respectables in and around this district patronize literature exceedingly well, witness 1,000 and 1,500 subs. [subscriptions] for the last three years for the "Ayrshire Wreath," and this year nearly 1,000 for a poetical work immediately to be issued, "The Home of the Heart," by Miss Aird. (*The Critic* 2: 630-01 November 1845)

And G.H. Hough of Tenby writes:

The works of Bulwer, James, D'Israeli, Marryatt, Dickens, and Lever are the favourites. Mrs. Gore and Mrs. Grey have many admirers; Mrs. Trollope but few. Fashionable novels are little sought after here, and I don't know that historical ones are preferred in a general way to others. Travels and biographies are often inquired for, but by no means so generally as novels; neither are they so well adapted for circulation. Much more *time* is required for the perusal of such books, and this circumstance... renders them very unproductive to such libraries as are obliged to be limited in their selection. (*The Critic* 2: 168 June 1845)

He goes on to provide an interesting insight into the economics of proprietary libraries:

I do not think that if novels were published in the small form at 4s. or 5s. they would be generally purchased by the public. There is always an objection to small print. But if they were half the present price, I have no doubt the sale would be amazingly increased, because *all* the libraries would then purchase books *new*, instead of waiting, as numbers at present do, to pick them up second-hand at a reduced price, only buying a new one here and there. (*The Critic* 2:168 June 1845)

Literary students must be interested to observe that, first, most of the names mentioned in such accounts are unfamiliar and, second, sometimes, recognized names are not treated with the respect suggested by their place in the present literary canon. In short, the bulk of popular reading did not involve — as it does not today — authors who figure in courses of literary study. This reminder of the difference between the history of literature and the history of books is particularly salutary when connected with another distinctive element of teaching book history in literary environments, the priority of authors.

It is for this reason that I am advocating a properly historical approach to the history of the book. This cannot be achieved so long as students confine their reading to modern books *about* the history of books. We have inherited a generally "whiggish" disposition to believe that things change inexorably to the better, that all right-minded people favoured the movements that have led to present conditions, and that the public was always enlightened and politically-active where their masters were repressive and adverse to change. Again, it would be advantageous for students to read, for instance, the contemporary literature on the freedom of the press, or the rights of authors and publishers in relation to copyright, or the debate on the taxes on knowledge. For example, when the Society for the Abolition of the Taxes on Knowledge (i.e., the excise duty on paper, the import duty on foreign books, the duty on advertisements, and the penny stamp on newspapers) was established in 1849, no less a figure than the publisher William Chambers — one who apparently stood to benefit from the success of the Society's campaigns — wrote the following chastening words:

So frequently ... have we petitioned parliament on this subject, and with so little practical avail, that we have made up our minds to petition no more. If the public desire to get cheap newspapers, cheap literary journals, and cheap advertisements, they must say so and take the trouble of agitating accordingly. This they have never yet done. They seem to have imagined that the question is one exclusively between publishers and papermakers and the government; whereas, in point of fact, it is as much a public question as that of the late taxes on food, and should be dealt with on the same broad considerations. We are, indeed, not quite sure that publishers, papermakers, and other tradesmen intimately concerned in the question are, *as a body*, favourable to the removal of the stamp, the Excise, and other taxes on their wares. Generally speaking, only a few of the more enterprising, and the least disposed to maintain a monopoly, have ever petitioned for the abolition of the taxes. This will seem curious, yet it can be accounted for. A papermaker, to pay the duty on the goods he manufactures, must have a large command of capital;

comparatively few can muster this capital; hence few can enter the trade. London wholesale stationers, who, by advancing capital to the papermakers, acquire a species of thralldom over them, are, according to all accounts, by no means desirous to see the duties abolished; for if they were abolished, their money-lending and thirlage powers would be gone. So is it with the great monopolists of the newspaper press. As things stand, few can compete with them. But remove the existing imposts, and let anybody print a newspaper who likes, and hundreds of competitors in town and country would enter the field. There can be no doubt whatever that the stamp and advertisement-duty, particularly the latter, would long since have been removed but for the want of zeal shown by the London newspaper press.... But on the public the great burthen of the agitation must necessarily fall. Never would the legislature have abolished the taxes on bread from mere complaints of the corn importers; nor will the taxes on knowledge be removed till the tax-payers show something like earnestness in pressing their demands. ("The Taxes on Knowledge" [*Chambers's Edinburgh Journal* 12 no. 307: 318 November 1849])³

Generally speaking, students of literature do not have a deep or comprehensive knowledge of social history. What they know has usually been received from the literary works they have studied, and since all teachers of literature lament the impossibility of teaching everything their students should know, the likelihood that specialists in American literature would know much about the social organization of the Middle Ages, for example, is not great. The teacher of a history of the book course in literature departments, then, has a two-fold responsibility: to communicate not only the outlines of the history of the book but also of "the whole socio-economic conjuncture" that makes it meaningful.

The dispositions that students of literature bring to the history of the book are, first, a necessary concern with the cultural "high spots" of literary history, second, a profound interest in the individual creative spirits who originate the literary masterpieces of any literary culture, i.e., authors, and third, a pragmatic concern for the relevance (or more likely, irrelevance) of book history courses to the written comprehensive and oral examinations that intervene between their education and accreditation. These are not favourable to the successful conduct of history of the book courses.

Adams and Barker objected to Darnton's formulation of "The Communications Circuit" as a model for the history of the book because "it deals with people, rather than the book" (12), but their alternative model, which established "Publication" rather than the "Author" at the beginning of the circuit, encountered much resistance from literary students oriented towards authors as the originators of texts. They were not ready to allow the wide variety of publications that Adams and Barker included in their definition of "bibliographical documents" ("anything from a multi-volume set to a slip of paper," 13), many of which scarcely have authors in any literary sense, to distract their attention from the

3 I have attributed the passage to William rather than Robert without special knowledge.

books that were at the centre of their literary preoccupations, the carriers of high cultural texts. To them, newspapers and periodicals, for instance, were important not as publishing phenomena within a broad socio-economic context relating to literacy and reading but because they were the conduits by which the great Victorian novelists reached their publics. "Patronage" implied the Countess of Pembroke rather than the activities of the stationers and their Grub Street minions. They found that intense involvement with the book itself led them away from their central occupation, the study of literature. In short, the literary students reacted to the course on the history of the book in Britain as if it were, in fact, an auxiliary course in a literature program. It is difficult to fault them for this. Adams and Barker write:

If ever there were a subject (in modern academic jargon) "interdisciplinary," it is the study of books, since they are the most important and (next to coins) numerous of human artifacts; they are vital witnesses to the progress of civilization. The subject is important enough to be recognized as something that stands by itself. (7)

If this is true, it should not be taught in literature departments as if it were the more acceptable face of bibliography, institutionalised as an optional, background area of study peripheral to central concern with literary criticism and history. Because the diminishing numbers of library schools are not deeply interested in the history of books, the best place for the history of the book would seem to be colleges of liberal arts, probably in departments of history. This does not mean that the history of the book does not have a place in departments of literature. There is a place for specially designed courses, and seminars on history of book subjects (e.g., patronage and the conditions of authorship) that draw on knowledge and interests the students already have and amplify them in a way that enables students to integrate the knowledge in their literary course and examinations. One could call these courses "applied history of the book." But the history of the book in Western culture — as Jonathan Rose's article shows — belongs in a broader pedagogical context.

As mentioned above, I argue that bibliography was not successfully institutionalised in departments of literature because, being interdisciplinary in character, the discipline contained more than departments of literature could or should accommodate. My conclusion in this article for history of the book courses is similar but more optimistic: the more humane appeal of "history" holds out the possibility of a beneficial institutionalisation in an essentially interdisciplinary context.

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