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How Historians Teach the History of the Book

The short answer to that question is: we usually don't. The 1994 Modern Language Association in its San Diego convention sponsored several panels on book history, and the Library History Round Table always offers a full program of historical papers at American Library Association meetings. In dismal contrast, book history papers are a rarity at the American Historical Association: none were presented at the January 1995 meeting, for example. I recently wrote a review essay of ten recent monographs on book history, and was rather ashamed to discover that only one was written by a professional historian: Leslie Howsam's *Cheap Bibles* (Rose 1994, 463). In fact, one does not find many historians in the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing: my sampling of the 1994 SHARP membership directory reveals that 37% of all members teach modern languages and literature, 28% are library school faculty or working librarians, while historians run a very poor third at only 11%, nearly pushed into fourth place by publishing educators and publishing professionals (10.5%). If we open any historical bibliography, we will find it subdivided into social history, intellectual history, cultural, political, religious, military, economic, demographic, and gender history, as well as every imaginable variety of ethnic history. But it will not list the history of printing or the history of publishing (which are organizing categories in the *MLA International Bibliography*).

How did this disgraceful situation come about? To put it very briefly and simply, back in the late nineteenth century, when academic disciplines were organizing and carving up territories of knowledge, what we now call book history fell between the cracks: disowned by history departments, it was shuttled back and forth between its foster parents, librarians and literature professors. It is possible to imagine an alternative future, in which book history may have become as solidly institutionalized as art history or the history of science. After all, when Oxford University set up its School of Modern History in 1873, there were proposals that it hire a professor of English: if you were going to teach literary history, that seemed to be the logical place to do it. But the historians would have none of it: Regius Professor William Stubbs warned

that to have the History School hampered with dilettante teaching, such as the teaching of English Literature, must necessarily do great harm to the School.... There is no special connection between English Literature and Modern History, and the subject might just as well be connected with theology or language. (Palmer 70-71)

As far as Stubbs was concerned, the sort of history he taught — constitutional history — was the only kind of history worth teaching.

Of course, nowadays historians are far more broad-minded. They produce monographs on the history of menstruation, the history of anger, the social history of the potato, and the history of buggery in the Royal Navy. But if all that is within the proper sphere of historiography — and it is — what justification is there for overlooking the book? This is a truly astonishing blind spot: historians seem to write about the history of everything except the raw material of historiography, texts. When I stumbled into this field in the late 1970s, and communicated my excitement to one of my dissertation advisors, he tartly remarked, "It sure beats doing history, doesn't it?" That kind of attitude began to soften after 1979, with the publication of Elizabeth Eisenstein's *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* and Robert Darnton's *The Business of Enlightenment: A Publishing History of the Encyclopédie, 1775-1800*. But a graduate student in history who wants to enter this field is still likely to be told, "Right, you want the English Department — across the quad and on your left."

So how did we historians of the book — we happy few — break into this racket? As far as I can recall, I never heard the words "book history" uttered during my entire graduate training from 1974 to 1981, although I did once take a course with Robert Darnton. But like many young historians, I was being trained in the sociology of knowledge — the social history of intellectual life. We were taught that thought could be shaped by class structure, education, technology, professionalization, and the literary marketplace. And once you began to address those sociological questions, you were inevitably driven towards the social history of the printed word. Some of the most innovative practitioners of book history, such as Lucien Febvre and David Vincent, entered the field via social history. And let me offer myself as a microhistorical illustration. In an early draft of my dissertation, I argued that religious concerns in Edwardian Britain were gradually eclipsed by a growing interest in social and economic issues. My advisor quite rightly demanded that I should support this impressionistic generalization with some concrete and unselective evidence. So I groped about for some way of verifying this trend, until I hit on publishing statistics: if you broke them down by subject then, sure enough, the graph for religious titles published sloped gently downwards, and was ultimately overtaken by sociology. Then again, I noted the proliferation of intellectual humorists in this period — Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells, G. K. Chesterton, Hilaire Belloc, Max Beerbohm, and so forth. Was there some structural economic cause behind this flowering of wits? I plunged into journalism history, considered the editorial demands of some

important Edwardian periodicals, and found that there was in fact a growing literary market for Shavian cleverness and Chestertonian jollity.¹

So, when I took my degree in 1981, I was already used to thinking about canon formation, reader-response, the economics of literary production, and the politics of literary criticism. In other words, I was addressing many of the concerns of literary theory, though I had read nothing about it and was not even aware of its existence.² You might conclude, then, that once I and other book historians became aware of literary theory, we would plunge into it head first. In fact, in his 1986 manifesto "First Steps Toward a History of Reading," Robert Darnton looked forward hopefully to a fruitful collaboration between reader-response critics and historians of reading. But right from the beginning, there were serious problems with this relationship. What theorists trumpeted as revolutionary discoveries were often fairly obvious to historians. When Fredric Jameson proclaimed "Always historicize," historians understandably responded like Jack Webb: "That's my job, ma'am." Deirdre Phelps notes that theorists who claim to have progressed beyond the conclusions of Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* (1957) in fact "tend to reinvent them in rhetorical abstractions without the concrete book and trade detail" (91). Likewise, the notion that different readers in different political and social situations might read the same text differently, was hardly news to intellectual historians — or, for that matter, to old-fashioned constitutional historians who had traced evolving interpretations of Magna Carta. And when theorists talked about situating authors and readers in terms of race, class, and gender, intellectual historians asked: Why stop there? Why not also consider how literary culture is shaped by religion, politics, education, ethnicity, professionalization, technology, communications, economics, and any number of other sociological variables?

Moreover, the more historians studied literary theory, the more they concluded that it was built on a foundation of nothing. "It is easy to issue programmatic statements," Robert Darnton recently protested. "I think we need to work through the theoretical issues by incorporating them more thoroughly in more research of a concrete, empirical character" (Daskalova 3).³ Other book historians — whether or not they teach in history departments — have been less inclined to pull their punches. "Cultural theory is still too reductive, and repetitive, in its schematism and in its polemic, and on occasions cavalier in its logic and its treatment of evidence" wrote Ian Willison in 1991 (106) and Nicolas Barker characterized Jane Tompkins's essay "The Reader in History" as unhistorical and jejune. Other recent studies by Cathy Davidson and Janice Radway show an

1 I published my results in *The Edwardian Temperament* (1, 165-70, 213-222).

2 Very much like the German originated Systemic and Empirical Approach to Literature, increasingly developing since the 1980s (see, for example, Schmidt; Tötösy 1992a).

3 This non-interest appears to be endemic: a good example is Canada (see Tötösy 1992b).

equal absence of any feeling for the documents of contemporary or subsequent response.... It is difficult not to regard the theorizing, the controversy, the construction of elaborate models of response, as activities detached from the texts to which they have been applied" (Barker 199). And when Barbara Herrnstein Smith asserted that Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare were valueless to readers who had not received an orthodox Western education, I argued that Herrnstein Smith was inclined to "dogmatize enormously about the sociology of reading without bothering to study actual readers. [She] really [does] not know what functions Homer, Book-of-the-Month Club selections, comic books, or any other verbal artifacts perform for their respective audiences" (1992, 53).

My graduate students have even less patience with theorists who do not do their homework. They bluntly asked why I was wasting their time with Michel Foucault's "What Is an Author?" It was apparent to them that the idea of the author as we know it, far from being invented in the eighteenth century, was very much present in ancient Rome. Even Elizabeth Eisenstein's *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, which struck me as well documented, did not satisfy these students: Where is her evidence? they kept asking. One student wrote a term paper on the reception of *Jane Eyre*, and concluded that Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar seriously misread the reviews of that book. It was not Jane's feminism that shocked Victorian readers, it was her class resentments — remember, the novel was published as the Chartist agitation approached its climax. So be advised: the coming generation of book historians are not intimidated by unsubstantiated theory, and they will check the footnotes.

That brings us to my main question: How do we teach the history of the book? Here I want to report the results of an experiment. In the fall of 1994 I taught, for the first time, one of the very few courses in book history offered in an American graduate history program. The setting was Drew University, one of the smallest graduate schools in the country. We have an interdisciplinary Ph.D. program in Modern History and Literature, as well as a doctoral program in straight English Literature, so it seemed the ideal place to offer a seminar on the History of the Book in Modern Britain. The course attracted a healthy enrollment among history students, but unfortunately literature students did not sign up.⁴ Until a few years ago, there probably would not have been enough material in print to teach such a course. Now fresh monographs are available (often in paperback) covering all the varieties and methodologies of book history, allowing us to introduce students to the major controversies and historiographical questions raised by this new academic field. (A prototype syllabus is reproduced in the attached APPENDIX.)

4 I am told that some of them were tempted, but felt intimidated by the word "history" in the course title (!).

One concern that did worry me for a time was devising practical topics for term papers. That is not usually a problem with courses in intellectual history, where you can simply turn your class loose among the published writings of canonical authors. But my students had not been trained in historical bibliography. How, then, could they do original research in book history? I could hardly ask the students to work through eighteenth-century printers' ledgers; but they nevertheless managed to produce some impressive work. One got hold of the first English translation of Zola's *Nana*, and discovered that the translator had done some rather revealing rewriting — much more than simply taking out the naughty bits. Another refuted C.P. Snow's theory of the Two Cultures by studying the reading habits of late Victorian scientists, and discovering that they were deeply immersed in literary culture. A third drew on parliamentary papers to examine the abortive Copyright Bill of 1898, and showed how intellectual property came to be redefined by competing interest groups, including publishers, authors, artists, musicians, photographers, and journalists. A fourth criticized Marxist generalizations about the "commodification" of literature by studying readers' reports to the publisher John Murray, which — along with many other publishers' archives — are available on microfilm from the Center for Research Libraries in Chicago. If all that can be done using the fairly limited resources of the Drew University Library, it can be done at any graduate school.

What pleased me most about the course is that the students quickly cottoned on to the importance and the potential of book history. There was hardly any need to prepare lectures: I simply tossed out questions about the origins of literary property or working-class reading habits, and discussions took off like a rocket. I think we all felt the delicious intellectual thrill of entering a fresh field of study, where everyone can still be a pioneer. Many of my colleagues in literature departments tell me that they miss that kind of excitement. Literary studies, they complain, have serious morale problems, brought on by protracted trench warfare between theorists and traditionalists, the fracturing of the discipline along ideological and racial and gender lines, and, of course, the hundreds of applicants for every teaching job. Certainly, many younger literary scholars feel that they have been shut out of the profession. Scraping a living as adjunct instructors, tired of slogging through one solipsistic theorist after another, they have every right to ask if there is any longer a place in academia for people who simply love literature. I hope the situation is not as bad as all that, but if you do love books, and the literature departments will not have you — the history department is across the quad.

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APPENDIX

Course Syllabus

The History of the Book in Modern Britain

Note: Books in paperback are indicated with an asterisk. For students who felt the need of a general overview of the subject, **A History of British Publishing* by John Feather (Routledge, 1991) was available as a recommended reading.

I. Introduction

*Robert Darnton, "What is the History of Books?" in *The Kiss of Lamourette* (Norton, 1990), 107-35.

II. The Gutenberg Revolution

*Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge UP, 1993).

III. The Invention of Literary Property

Mark Rose, *Authors and Owners: The Invention of Copyright* (Harvard UP, 1993); Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?"; Trevor Ross, "Copyright and the Invention of Tradition," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 26 (1992): 1-27; Linda Zionkowski, "Aesthetics, Copyright, and 'The Goods of the Mind,'" *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 15 (1992): 163-74.

IV. Print Culture and the Professionalization of Literature

*Alvin Kernan, *Samuel Johnson and the Impact of Print* (Princeton UP, 1989); Thomas F. Bonnell, "Bookselling and Canon-Making: The Trade Rivalry over the English Poets, 1776-1783," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 19 (1989): 53-69.

V. The Uses of Literacy

*David Vincent, *Literacy and Popular Culture: England 1750-1914* (Cambridge UP, 1993).

VI. Common Readers

*Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader* (Chicago UP, 1957), Chapter 11; *David Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom* (Methuen, 1982), 109-95; Jonathan Rose, "Rereading the English Common Reader: A Preface to a History of Audiences," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 53 (1992): 47-70; Jonathan Rose, "Marx, Jane Eyre, Tarzan: Miners' Libraries in South Wales 1923-52," *Leipziger Jahrbuch zur Buchgeschichte* 4 (1994): 187-207; Joseph McAleer, *Popular Reading and Publishing in Britain 1914-1950* (Oxford UP, 1992), Chapter 3.

VII. The Sociology of Authorship I: Men of Letters

*T.W. Heyck, *The Transformation of Intellectual Life in Victorian England* (Lyceum, 1982); Richard D. Altick, "The Sociology of Authorship: The Social Origins, Education and Occupations of 1,100 British Writers, 1800-1935," *Bulletin of the New York Public Library* 66 (1962): 389-404; Patrick Leary, *Fraser's Magazine and the Literary Life, 1830-1847*, *Victorian Periodicals Review* 27 (1994): 105-26.

VIII. The Sociology of Authorship II: Women of Letters

Gillian Thomas, *A Position to Command Respect: Women and the Eleventh Britannica* (Scarecrow, 1992); *Nigel Cross, *The Common Writer* (Cambridge UP, 1985), 164-203.

IX. The Origins of English Studies

Franklin Court, *Institutionalizing English Literature: The Culture and Politics of Literary Study, 1750-1900* (Stanford UP, 1992); *John Dixon, *A Schooling in "English"* (Open UP, 1991), 1-76.

X. Publishing the Victorians

*John Sutherland, *Victorian Novelists and Publishers* (Chicago UP, 1978); Linda Marie Fritschner, "Publishers' Readers, Publishers and Their Authors," *Publishing History* 7 (1980): 45-100.

XI. Publishing the Modernists

*James Nelson, *Elkin Mathews: Publisher to Yeats, Joyce, Pound* (Wisconsin UP, 1989).

XII. Reception History and Literary Politics

*John Rodden, *The Politics of Literary Reputation: The Making and Claiming of "St. George" Orwell* (Oxford UP, 1989).

XIII. Censorship

*Paul Hyland and Neil Sammells, eds., *Writing and Censorship in Britain* (Routledge, 1992).

GORDON B. NEAVILL

From Printing History to History of the Book

In the late 1970s and early 1980s mainstream scholars from a variety of disciplines in the English-speaking world suddenly began to pay attention to the history of the book. Interest in the area seemed to emerge overnight, as if a new field of scholarship offering important new insights and unlimited possibilities of research had unexpectedly been revealed. The field has grown steadily during the past fifteen years. The 1990s have witnessed an outpouring of books based on research undertaken in the previous decade, the creation of formal graduate programs in book history, and the establishment of a major scholarly society, the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing (SHARP), which serves as the institutional nucleus of a field that transcends disciplinary and national boundaries.

Despite the recent surge of interest in the field, research on the history of books and printing is far from new. Before the 1980s the subject occupied a position in the English-speaking world on the scholarly periphery, where it was cultivated by bibliographers, other highly specialized academics, and a number of nonprofessional scholars, including historically minded members of the book trades. Publications by the latter group ranged from works of original scholarship to popular accounts and reached a disparate audience that included book-trade professionals, bibliophiles, and collectors as well as scholars. Most of the academic work in the area was narrowly focused and addressed to fellow specialists. Bibliographical scholarship was recognized as a field of academic specialization and generally respected, but neither its practitioners nor the scholarly community at large imagined that it could illuminate questions regarded as fundamental to the humanities and social sciences.

The transformation that took place around 1980 did not represent a shift of traditional bibliographical scholarship from the periphery to center stage but the emergence of a new intellectual approach to the history of the book. How that approach differs from traditional scholarship on the history of books and printing, where it came from, and the relation between history of the book as practiced today and older traditions of book history are questions this paper will attempt to address.

The fundamental difference between the old and new approaches to book history can be simply stated. Traditional scholarship focused primarily on the