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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

book as a physical object. The crafts associated with the creation of the physical book, such as papermaking, book design, printing, illustration, and bookbinding, also received attention, as did the leading practitioners of these crafts. Courses reflecting this approach were commonly called "History of Printing" or, if they included significant coverage of the manuscript book, "History of Books and Printing." Books on the subject had similar titles, as the following representative sampling indicates: Blumenthal, *Art of the Printed Book* (1973); Chappell, *Short History of the Printed Word* (1970); Clair, *History of European Printing* (1976); McMurtrie, *History of Printing in the United States* (1936); Steinberg, *Five Hundred Years of Printing* (1955); and Wroth, *History of the Printed Book* (1938). The traditional focus on the book as a physical object will be referred to in this paper as "printing history."

Scholars drawn to the field in recent years tend to place their primary focus on the creation, publication, distribution, and reception of intellectual works, with particular emphasis on the intellectual influences of one stage of the "communications circuit" on another and the economic and social context in which books are written, published, and consumed. This approach will be referred to in this paper as "history of the book." Robert Darnton has provided a model of the "communications circuit" in his influential essay, "What Is the History of Books?" (112). Thomas R. Adams and Nicolas Barker have proposed an alternative model (14), and Michael Winship has formulated a model that reflects American conditions in the mid-nineteenth century (1995, 14). All of these models incorporate printing and other aspects of book manufacturing, but with a few exceptions the new breed of book historian has shown little interest in the book as a physical object. It is no accident that SHARP makes no reference to printing or the physical book in its name but only to the comparatively more dynamic processes of authorship, reading, and publishing.

PRINTING HISTORY

The tradition of scholarly work on the history of printing is a long one. We know a great deal about bookmaking technologies and how books have been physically put together at different periods. We have highly developed methodologies for studying the transmission of texts from one physical format to another, and for identifying and describing the salient features of those formats. We know a lot about book design, illustration, and the aesthetic qualities of books and printing. And we have accumulated a considerable body of knowledge about typographers, book designers, printers, illustrators, and binders — the people directly involved in the creation of the physical book. All of this work shares a primary focus on the book as a physical object. Within the broad area of printing history we can usefully distinguish several distinct scholarly traditions or approaches: (1) antiquarian, (2) aesthetic and technological, and (3) bibliographical.

Work that seeks to establish the factual historical record without attempting much in the way of analysis or historical explanation falls into the first category. Much antiquarian research is concerned with identifying the earliest printers in a given region, compiling lists of early imprints, and describing genres of books such as textbooks or children's books. Spadework of this kind when undertaken conscientiously and without bias can be extremely important for subsequent historical scholarship. The work of Douglas McMurtrie provides an excellent example of the antiquarian approach to printing history. A commercial printer by profession, he undertook in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s a prodigious amount of research on the history of printing. Much of his work was inspired by the edict of the bibliographer Wilberforce Eames: "Find the printing and record the imprints, and you will slowly but surely build up a dependable history of the press in any given locality" (qtd. in Bruntjen and Young vii). The bibliography of McMurtrie's writings runs to nearly 800 items, many of them privately printed pamphlets dealing with the first printers in a given city, state, or country. He planned to consolidate much of this information in a multi-volume *History of Printing in the United States*, but only one volume, dealing with the Middle and South-Atlantic states, was published. It remains a useful work, one that established the factual record as well as it could be done in the late 1930s, both in terms of providing new information and correcting earlier accounts. His best known work, *The Book: The Story of Printing & Bookmaking*, is an informative and engaging synthesis that has remained in print in one form or another since its original publication under the title *The Golden Book* in 1927. Other examples of the antiquarian approach range from pioneering works of original research such as Thomas's *History of Printing in America* (1810; 2nd ed., 1874) to secondary works such as Winterich's *Early American Books & Printing* (1935). Most of the early work on popular literature, undertaken decades before the subject was taken seriously by academics, was antiquarian in nature. Examples include Ashton's *Chap-Books of the Eighteenth Century* (1882) and Hindley's *Life and Times of James Catnach, Ballad Monger* (1878).

The second approach to printing history is concerned with the aesthetic qualities of books and technologies of bookmaking. Technology and aesthetics are not always closely linked, but where books are concerned they are inseparable. It is difficult to talk about the aesthetics of book illustration without talking about illustration techniques. Students of type design tend also to be interested in typesetting. An aesthetic consideration of nineteenth-century printing cannot be divorced from the mechanization of bookmaking. There is an extensive literature on papermaking, typography, book design, printing, illustration, and bookbinding. Some of the most significant contributions within this approach to printing history have come from nonprofessional scholars connected with the book trades, including Joseph Blumenthal, Harry Carter, Warren Chappell, Theodore Low De Vinne, E.P. Goldschmidt, Dard Hunter, Ruari

McLean, Bernard Middleton, Stanley Morison, Percy Muir, Daniel Berkeley Updike, Beatrice Warde, and Adrian Wilson.

The problem with the aesthetic and technological approach to printing history is that, like the history of art, it tends to focus on the exceptional rather than the typical. It is difficult to get a sense of what ordinary books of past centuries looked like from the illustrations in most histories of printing. All too often books that were profoundly influential but aesthetically undistinguished are ignored in favor of outstanding examples of the printer's art that reached comparatively small audiences. It can be difficult even to get a sense of what typical facing pages of the monuments of fine printing looked like, since it is the title pages and pages with the most impressive illustrations that are reproduced over and over again. Many of our histories of books and printing reflect this approach. So did most of the survey courses on the history of books and printing taught in American library schools before the 1970s and 1980s, when many schools dropped the subject from their curricula altogether. The course this author inherited at the library school where he taught in the mid-1980s was an extreme example of this approach. It devoted the first couple of weeks to looking at slides of miniature paintings from medieval manuscripts; turned to the invention of printing in the fifteenth century and a consideration of the golden age of fine printing in the early sixteenth century; skipped the typographically undistinguished seventeenth century except to note the introduction of printing into the North American colonies; paused briefly in the eighteenth century to discuss Caslon and Baskerville types but without referring to the introduction of statutory copyright, the professionalization of authorship, eighteenth-century publishing, or the circulation of popular literature; noted the nineteenth-century mechanization of bookmaking with an appropriate shudder; and then settled in for the final third of the semester to a detailed consideration of the private press movement. The aesthetic and technological approach to the history of printing is significant in itself, it is enormously appealing, and much outstanding scholarly work has been done in this area. But it is not the whole story.

The third approach to printing history is that of analytical bibliography. Here the goal is to understand as much as we can about the transmission of texts and to establish texts that are as accurate and free of errors as possible. This involves the close analysis of printed books as physical objects as well as the author's drafts, final manuscript, and corrected proofs when they exist, and it involves understanding as much as we can about how the printed editions came into existence. In this respect the aesthetic and technological approach and that of analytical bibliography can be closely related, as they are in two of the greatest examples of bibliographical scholarship, Hinman's *The Printing and Proof-reading of the First Folio of Shakespeare* (1963) and Stevenson's *The Problem of the Missale Speciale* (1967). The connections between the two approaches are also evident in Greetham's recent survey, *Textual Scholarship: An Introduction*

(1994), especially in the chapters on paleography, typography, and the bibliography of manuscript and printed books. Analytical bibliography is the area of printing history with the highest concentration of academic scholars and the strongest institutional matrix of societies and journals. It also has the liveliest and best-developed theoretical base. It has been part of literary and historical scholarship for more than a century and has contributed enormously to our understanding of the book as a physical object.

HISTORY OF THE BOOK

The field of scholarship known today as history of the book originated in France in the 1950s and was actively cultivated by French scholars for more than twenty years before it began to attract attention in Britain and North America. The existence of the field dates from 1958, when *L'Apparition du livre* by Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin was published in the series, *L'évolution de l'humanité*. Febvre, a founder of the *Annales* school of history and one of the most important French historians of his generation, conceived the book in 1953. In the preface he stated the object of the work as follows:

About the year 1450 some rather unusual "manuscripts" made their appearance in the northern regions of Western Europe. Although not very different in appearance from traditional manuscripts, they were "impressed" on paper, sometimes on vellum, with the mechanical aid of a printing press which used moveable type.... These new books were to cause profound changes not only in the habits of thought but also in the working conditions of secular and religious scholars, the great readers of the time.... The changes ... soon broke the bounds of this original audience and made considerable impact on the outside world. The object of the present work is to study those changes, their causes and effects, and show just how the printed book became something the manuscript neither could nor did become, for reasons we will have to analyse in detail. (Febvre and Martin 1976, 9)

Febvre prepared an outline and plan of work and turned it over to Henri-Jean Martin, a young historian then in his late twenties. His intention was to rework and expand Martin's draft. He saw most of the chapters and revised several of them before his death in 1956, but Martin in the end was "more or less solely responsible for the work" as it was published (7). The only part of the book Febvre wrote himself was the preface. The appearance of *L'Apparition du livre* established *histoire du livre* as a scholarly field in France. Martin went on to write a succession of major studies, including *Livre, pouvoirs et société à Paris au XVIIIe siècle* (1969; translated as *Print, Power and People in 17th Century France*, 1993) and *L'Histoire et pouvoirs de l'écrit* (1988; translated as *The History and Power of Writing*, 1994). By the 1970s a third generation of French historians of the book was coming to the fore. The leading figure of this generation is Roger Chartier. Among his books that have appeared in outstanding

English translations beginning in the late 1980s are *The Cultural Uses of Print in Early Modern France* (1987), *The Culture of Print* (1989), *The Cultural Origins of the French Revolution* (1991), and *The Order of Books* (1994).

Febvre and Martin's book had little immediate impact in the English-speaking world. The original French edition does not appear to have been reviewed by a single major American scholarly journal in the fields of history or literature. It was not even reviewed by the *Times Literary Supplement*. The only review of which this author is aware was written by James Wells of the Newberry Library and published in *Library Quarterly*. It was a long and perceptive review of over three pages and conveyed fully the significance of the work. Wells concluded, "*L'Apparition du livre* is a first-rate work in an area all too often dominated by the second rate. One hopes that some enterprising publisher will commission an English translation so that it may become more widely known" (204). It took eighteen years for this hope to be realized. An English translation, titled *The Coming of the Book: The Impact of Printing, 1450-1800*, finally appeared in 1976. The accessibility in English of the core text of *histoire du livre* was an important prerequisite for the emergence of history of the book as a scholarly field in Britain and the United States.

But mainstream scholars in the English-speaking world, if they thought about book history at all, continued to regard it as a marginal subject of interest mainly to specialists until the publication of two major works by American scholars in 1979 attracted widespread attention to the field. These works, published six months apart and widely reviewed, were Elizabeth L. Eisenstein's *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early-Modern Europe* and Robert Darnton's *The Business of Enlightenment: A Publishing History of the Encyclopédie*. As specialists in French history both authors were in touch with trends in postwar French historiography. Darnton explicitly acknowledged the influence of "the French masters of *histoire du livre*" (*Business* vii). In contrast, Eisenstein appears to have been influenced more by Marshall McLuhan and expressed reservations about the work of Febvre and Martin (*Printing* 1: x-xi, 35-36).

Eisenstein's book was based on over a decade's reflection and wide reading in the secondary literature. It was preceded by several articles, the first of which, "Some Conjectures about the Impact of Printing on Western Society and Thought: A Preliminary Report," appeared in 1968. Eisenstein argued that the advent of printing in the fifteenth century contributed to or largely made possible many of the major transformations of the early modern era, from the full flowering of the Renaissance to the scientific revolution. Her arguments were provocative and dramatic, if not always convincing under close scrutiny, and her work was widely discussed and endlessly cited. More than any other historian, Eisenstein focused attention on the kinds of profoundly important issues that the history of the book could illuminate.

Darnton's book was very different. *The Business of Enlightenment* is a study of the publication, distribution, and marketing of a single book, Diderot's *Encyclopédie*, and was based on years of research in the archival records of the Société typographique de Neuchâtel (STN) in Switzerland. The Société, Darnton notes, was "one of the most important publishers of French books in the eighteenth century" and its records "contain information about every aspect of book history. They show how authors were treated, paper manufactured, copy processed, type set, sheets printed, crates shipped, authorities courted, police circumvented, booksellers provisioned, and readers satisfied everywhere in Europe between 1769 and 1789" (3). Using these records Darnton was able to show in vivid detail exactly how the ideas of the Enlightenment were disseminated to a broad European audience. *The Business of Enlightenment* amply demonstrated his claim that history of the book "opens onto the broadest questions of historical research" (1), and it established Darnton as the preeminent book historian in the United States. He was awarded a MacArthur Prize and has published a succession of books derived from his work in the archives of the STN, including *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (1982), *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (1984), *The Kiss of Lamourette: Reflections in Cultural History* (1990), and, most recently, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (1995).

The development of the history of the book opened up many fruitful areas of research. But one of the most significant achievements of the field has been to make us aware of the web of relationships that link seemingly disparate research in a variety of disciplines into coherent scholarly discourse. Historians and literary scholars did not completely ignore book history before 1979 or even before the publication of Febvre and Martin's *L'Apparition du livre*, but much of this earlier work remained isolated and little known outside the subdisciplines where it originated. It is worth noting some of these pioneers. The historian Robert M. Kingdon at the University of Wisconsin has maintained throughout his career a productive interest in sixteenth-century printing and publishing, beginning with the chapter, "The Flood Tide: Books from Geneva," in his book, *Geneva and the Coming of the Wars of Religion in France* (1956). Another historian of early modern Europe who has written frequently about books and printing is Natalie Zemon Davis. Her first paper in this area, "The Protestant Printing Workers of Lyons," appeared in 1957. The business historian Florence Edler de Roover published a series of studies on the financing and marketing of early printed books in *Accounting Review* and other journals between 1937 and 1953. Enduring works by American literary historians from this period include Richard D. Altick's *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900* (1957), a book that filled a recognized gap and succeeded in attracting a wide audience, and William Charvat's *Literary Publishing in America 1790-1850*, delivered as the Rosenbach Lectures in

Bibliography in 1957-58 and published the following year. Michael Winship has noted in his afterword to the reprint edition published in 1992 that the emergence of history of the book has given Charvat's work an audience it mostly lacked when it originally appeared in the era of "new criticism" (92-93). The contrast between the reception of pioneering examples of book history and later work in the field is striking. By the early 1980s Darnton could write that adherents to the emerging field of history of the book could "recognize one another by the glint in their eyes. They belong to a common cause, one of the few sectors in the human sciences where there is a mood of expansion and a flurry of fresh ideas" ("What Is the History of Books" 108).

TENSIONS AND CONVERGENCES

Modern historians of the book and adherents to traditional approaches to printing history have been slow to embrace each other as natural allies. Many bibliographers and printing historians have welcomed the surge of interest in book history, but others have responded with skepticism or resentment. Some historians of the book have dismissed bibliographers and printing historians as narrow and pedantic. Darnton expressed a common view of book historians when he wrote in *The Business of Enlightenment*: "In the United States, book history has been relegated to library schools and rare book collections. Step into any rare book room and you will find aficionados savoring bindings, epigones contemplating watermarks, *érudits* preparing editions of Jane Austen; but you will not run across any ordinary, meat-and-potatoes historian attempting to understand the book as a force in history" (2). This was something of a caricature; its purpose was presumably to distinguish his approach from the kind of work traditionally associated with printing history and to establish the relevance of book history to mainstream historical scholarship. He went on to acknowledge the value of analytical bibliography as a historical methodology but his endorsement was not calculated to attract the support of many bibliographers:

It is a pity, for the generalist could learn a great deal from the specialists in the treasure houses of books. They could teach him to sift through their riches and to tap the vein of information that runs through their periodicals.... Admittedly, these publications seem to be written by bibliographers for bibliographers, and it can be difficult to see issues of substance beneath the esoteric language and the antiquarianism. But bibliography need not be confined to problems such as how consistently compositor B misspelled the text of *The Merchant of Venice* or whether the patterns of skeleton formes reveal regularity in compositorial practices. Bibliography leads directly into the hurly-burly of working-class history: it provides one of the few means of analyzing the work habits of skilled artisans before the Industrial Revolution. (2)

A counterattack from the camp of printing history came in Paul Needham's review of *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*. Needham was the ideal

champion of the printing historians: young and fearless, the preeminent American authority on fifteenth-century books, and, at the time he wrote the review, Curator of Printed Books and Bindings at the Pierpont Morgan Library. He chose to engage Eisenstein in the pages of *Fine Print*, then the leading journal reflecting the aesthetic and technological approach to printing history, and he joined battle with savage zest. He attacked her writing style: "Excess words there are, foggy thinking there is, on every page, and I found myself continually losing the thread of Eisenstein's argument in the general murk.... Sentences compounded of unsupported generalizations and artificially posed dichotomies are spread thick throughout the work" (24-25). He pointed out one factual error after another, offered examples of false reasoning, challenged her grasp of historical chronology, and assailed her for her reliance on secondary writings and lack of hands-on knowledge of early printed books. In a final thrust, he stated that Eisenstein's book "might ... almost have been written to answer the question: can the historical effects of printing be assessed accurately by someone ignorant of the history of printing? And it proves the answer to be: no" (35). Eisenstein was vulnerable to such charges, but her work was meant to be exploratory rather than definitive and the significance of the questions she posed overshadowed the shortcomings of her answers.

Despite the tensions between the approaches of history of the book and printing history that the words of Darnton and Needham reflected, bridges between the two camps appeared quickly. Scholar-librarians who had a long-standing interest in printing history were among the first to recognize the importance of history of the book. It has already been noted that what appears to have been the only American review of *L'Apparition du livre* appeared in a journal of librarianship. The first American conference in history of the book, which took place as early as 1980 and brought together leading scholars of book history from France, Germany, Britain, and the United States, was sponsored by the Rare Book and Manuscripts Section of the American Library Association. The papers of the conference, edited by Kenneth E. Carpenter of Harvard University Library, were published as *Books and Society in History*. The following year, G. Thomas Tanselle, a commanding figure in American bibliographical circles and an eloquent proponent of the importance of books as physical evidence, argued in his Hanes Lecture, *The History of Books as a Field of Study*, that the history of the book approach and that of analytical bibliography were "logically one" (5).

There were also signs that analytical bibliography was beginning to incorporate approaches borrowed from the history of the book. It became more common for descriptive bibliographies to go beyond the identification and description of editions and impressions and to provide detailed information about publishing history derived from archival sources. Examples include Collie's bibliography of George Meredith and Gertzman's *Descriptive Bibliography of*

Lady Chatterley's Lover. D.F. McKenzie in his Panizzi Lectures, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* attempted to redirect bibliographical inquiry in response to the concerns of critical theory and questions relating to dissemination and readership and the interaction of texts and society (ix-x). And scholars with strong bibliographical credentials like Peter L. Shillingsburg, James L.W. West III, and Michael Winship have moved easily and naturally into book history: Shillingsburg with his *Pegasus in Harness: Victorian Publishing and W. M. Thackeray*, West with his work on *American Authors and the Literary Marketplace* and his Center for the History of the Book at Pennsylvania State University, and Winship with his study of the business practices of Ticknor and Fields.

But historians of the book continue to show little interest in books as physical objects for their own sake. Neil Harris, an acute and imaginative cultural historian, has written about illustration and book design, but he has never been regarded as a historian of the book. Work that has focused on the physical book has done so primarily to illuminate aspects of authorship or the reception of texts. Dooley's *Author and Printer in Victorian England* examines changing printing technologies of the nineteenth century in order to discover the extent to which authors were able to control their texts as they moved through successive stages of book production. And McKenzie's study of the typography of early and late editions of Congreve's works aims to relate changing typographical conventions to changes in the author's reputation.

The two approaches to book history, one focusing on authorship, publishing, and reading and the other on books as physical objects, are likely to persist for some time to come. There is much common ground, however, and we are beginning to discover opportunities for crossfertilization are many. Historians of the book discover the wealth of historical evidence to be gleaned from books as physical objects, and bibliographers and other printing historians are beginning to look beyond the physical book. Both groups have much to contribute to questions about the intellectual and cultural implications of new bookmaking technologies - issues that will be increasingly important as the digital revolution carries us further into the next stage of the history of the book.

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