Modern Intellectual History, 5, 2 (2008), pp. 363–372 © 2008 Cambridge University Press
doi:10.1017/S1479244308001686 Printed in the United Kingdom

THREE APPROACHES TO BOOK HISTORY

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William St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004; paperback 2007)

Richard B. Sher, *The Enlightenment and the Book: Scottish Authors and Their Publishers in Eighteenth-Century Britain, Ireland, and America* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2006)

James Raven, *The Business of Books: Booksellers and the English Book Trade, 1450–1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007)

The history of the book is older than we often think (the French classicist Emile Egger published his survey as long ago as 1880).[1] All the same, its rise in the last generation has been remarkable, from the gradual recognition of the field in France in the 1960s to the current "age of synthesis", including recent histories of the book in Britain, in America and, still more recently, in Scotland.[2]

This review focuses on three massive volumes, major contributions to book history in which all three authors present the results of original research, as well as offering syntheses. There is a considerable overlap in the interests of the authors, but also some divergences of opinion. In any case, they adopt three distinctive approaches.

William St Clair is concerned above all with the history of readers, with what he calls the "reading nation" in Britain in the Romantic period, framed in a survey that takes him and us from 1774 to 1900 or thereabouts. The problem from which he begins is a large and difficult one, that of the consequences of reading,

[1] A. Emile Egger, *Histoire du livre depuis ses origines jusqu'à nos jours* (Paris: Hetzel, 1880). An earlier study, more limited in scope, is Edmond Werdet, *Histoire du livre en France: Depuis les Temps les plus reculés jusqu'en 1789*, 4 vols. (Paris: Dentu, 1861–4).

[2] Don McKenzie, David McKitterick and Ian Willison, eds., *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, 7 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999–, in progress); *The History of the Book in America*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); *The Edinburgh History of the Book in Scotland*, vols. 1 and 3 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244308001686 Published online by Cambridge University Press

its effect on the mentalities of the readers. Despite some praise for Richard Altick, the author is extremely critical of earlier studies in the field, which he describes as "at the stage of astronomy before telescopes, economics before statistics, heavily reliant on a few commonly repeated traditional narratives and favourite anecdotes but weak on the spade-work of basic empirical research" (9).[3] He is particularly critical of the use of reviews to establish the ways in which readers responded to books, considering the importance of reviews to have been "greatly exaggerated, both at the time and by subsequent writers" (189).

What is to be done? St Clair notes the difficulty of recovering individual "acts of reading", most of which leave virtually no traces on the book, despite the minority of active or scribbling readers. He is also well aware that the history of reading cannot be studied in isolation from other histories. As he argues, cultural production is "an integral part of economic production, subject to many of the same economic forces and governing structures as other forms of production, and explainable in similar terms" (440). Or again, still more incisively, "To trace readership, we need to trace access. To trace access, we need to trace price. To trace price, we need to trace intellectual property, and to trace intellectual property we need to trace the changing relationship between the book industry and the state" (42). For this reason he speaks of the need for a "systems approach" to reading (5) and engages with the classic articles on the communication circuit by Robert Darnton and by Thomas Adams and Nicolas Barker.[4]

To remedy the situation, St Clair includes in his case study of Britain not only a history of readers but also a chapter on the law of copyright and five chapters on the economics and organization of the book industry, as well as nearly three hundred pages of appendices presenting data in support of earlier arguments. In brief, he argues that the eighteenth century was a time of a "high monopoly regime" in the sense of agreements to fix prices at an artificially high level, thus restricting the circulation of texts. This regime was undermined when perpetual copyright was brought to an end in 1774, "the most decisive event in the history of reading in England", so the author suggests, "since the arrival of printing 300 years before" (109), even if other restrictive practices continued.

The result of the change was what St Clair calls the "takeoff in reading" or "the explosion of reading", discussing, among other things, the importance of circulating libraries and of rural readers "at the boundaries of the reading

3 Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public 1800–1900* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957).

4 Robert Darnton, "What is the history of books?", In K. E. Carpenter, ed., *Books and Society in History* (New York: Bowker, 1983); Thomas R. Adams and Nicolas Barker, "A New Model for the History of the Book", in Nicolas Barker, ed., *Potencie of Life: Books in Society* (London: British Library, 1993), 5–43.

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nation". He goes on to discuss what was read in chapters concerned with Shakespeare, poetry, novels and what he calls "the old canon" of English poets. He finally returns to the problem of mentalities in chapters on "horizons of expectations" and "the political economy of reading", describing what he calls "official mainstream ideology" on the basis of contemporary conduct books and offering his own "author-led", "reader-led" and "commercial and political" models of the relation between texts and readers.

The chapters on reception are to my mind the least effective part of the book. The author seems to be unaware of earlier research on the history of mentalities. Specific conclusions such as the explanation of the popularity of Scott's novels by his conservative attitudes (288) are less new than he appears to think. St Clair notes the need for a "micro approach", for studies of individual readers to supplement the macro approaches pursued elsewhere in the volume, but his discussion of this question is oddly brief, given its centrality to his argument as well as the overall length of the book. It is of course unfair to juxtapose the concrete details presented in a general survey with those offered in a monograph—but it is difficult not to see these chapters as rather jejune compared to the recent work of James Secord on the reception of a single text, *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*, pursuing Victorian readers through a variety of locales.[5]

All the same, informed as it is by both economic and literary theory, based on years of research in the primary sources, and written with clarity and vigour, *The Reading Nation* is making and deserves to make a major impact on its field. Even if one is not always satisfied with the author's answers, he has raised or emphasized questions that refuse to go away, especially the question of the impact of books on their readers. After all, if book historians do not concern themselves with the difference that reading makes to people's lives and attitudes, they risk lapsing into antiquarianism.

In recent years, the history of reading has become the most visible and indeed the most glamorous approach to the history of the book.[6] As Richard Sher remarks, "recent scholarship has so thoroughly privileged reading and reception over production that some correction is necessary" (31), and one of the aims of his study is to provide such a correction.

Like St Clair, Sher is interested in the links between books as material objects sold in the market and the ideas expressed in them, focusing on that cluster of ideas that we call "the Enlightenment", especially in Scotland. Once again, Sher

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5 James A. Secord, *Victorian Sensation: The Extraordinary Publication, Reception, and Secret Authorship of* Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000).

6 Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier, eds., *A History of Reading in the West* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999; English trans.).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244308001686 Published online by Cambridge University Press

cites the work of both Darnton and Adams and Barker and makes good use of the idea of a literary system (including authors, printers, booksellers, reviewers and purchasers). However, he displaces attention from the readers of books to their producers.

The Enlightenment and the Book makes some illuminating points about authors, especially about what is described as the "prime generation" of Scottish Enlightenment authors, born between 1710 and 1739, sixty-two individuals who include David Hume, William Robertson, Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson. Engaging with and developing Michel Foucault's concept of the "author function", Sher notes the importance of what he calls "author recognition . . . author construction, author categorization, author accountability, and author criticism" (155). Adopting and adapting Robert Darnton's concept of the "low life of literature", he describes a group of Scottish Grub Street writers in London such as Gilbert Stuart, although in this case, he insists, "their marginality should not be exaggerated" (128).[7]

Readers are not left out of the loop. Criticizing Habermas but also making use of his ideas, Sher discusses what he variously calls the "market", the "public" and the "readers", noting, among other things, the appearance of new mediators such as the publisher's reader and the reviewer (even though favourable reviews were sometimes "fixed").

However, *The Enlightenment and the Book* is mainly concerned with bookseller–publishers and their strategies for both acquiring authors and selling their works. Sher argues that what he calls the "take-off" of the Scottish Enlightenment occurred in the middle of the eighteenth century when the group he describes as the "five founding booksellers" began to promote the work of Scottish authors. His famous five, who dominated the Edinburgh–London axis, are Andrew Millar, who moved from Scotland to London in 1728; William Strachan, who did the same thing (and changed his name to "Strahan" so that the English could pronounce it); Gavin Hamilton; John Balfour; and Alexander Kincaid.

Sher offers us vivid portraits of these five men and of some of their colleagues such as Thomas Cadell (who was Millar's apprentice and Strahan's partner), and William Creech, a master of the art of networking, cultivating his authors with parties, or, as they were known at the time, "levees". He emphasizes the fact that the bookseller–publishers were educated men, that they were moved by patriotism as well as by profit, and that they not only socialized but also worked closely with their authors: "the book culture of the Scottish Enlightenment was remarkably collaborative" (607). He also has interesting things to say about urban

7 Robert Darnton, *The Literary Underground of the Old Regime* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244308001686 Published online by Cambridge University Press

microgeography, from the concentration of booksellers around the Cross in the High Street in the Old Town of Edinburgh to the concentration of Scots around the British Coffee House near London's Charing Cross.

The economic side of publishing is not neglected. Criticizing St Clair for what he calls a "rigid theory of monopoly" (4), and playing down the importance of subscription, which involved, he notes, only a small minority of books, Sher emphasizes "the wide variation in the kinds of arrangements that Scottish authors made with their publishers" (255), as well as in the size and price of books in successive editions. Major works of the Scottish Enlightenment tended to appear for the first time in quarto form: large, handsome and expensive books "intended for the wealthy and learned" (46). If the book did well in quarto, as in the case of Ferguson's *Essay on the History of Civil Society*, for instance, strategies varied: Cadell wanted a second quarto edition, while Kincaid and his partner John Bell preferred the cheaper octavo format.

In any case, when books were "pirated"—reprinted without permission in Dublin and elsewhere—the smaller, cheaper format was generally preferred. Sher devotes one of his most original chapters to the Dublin booksellers, viewing them in a positive light, describing Dublin as "a thriving center of print culture, operating on a scale that dwarfed all English-speaking cities except London" (469) and also—returning to intellectual history—"the hinge on which the Atlantic dissemination of Enlightenment books turned" (502), although he also discusses reprinting in Philadelphia. In short, he argues a case for the inclusion of booksellers in the history of the Enlightenment that is all the more convincing for being couched in moderate terms.

James Raven's *The Business of Books* is less of a monograph and more of a synthesis than its two companions in this review: a much-needed synthesis that draws on the author's own researches. As his *Judging New Wealth* (1992) already showed, Raven has the skills of an economic historian and what he has given us is primarily an economic history, concerned with capital, investment, production, wholesaling and retailing, informed by economic theory and employing quantitative methods wherever this is appropriate. The products he examines include broadsides, newspapers and other printed matter as well as books, and second-hand books as well as new ones.

The story Raven tells is one of a "revolution in book and print production between the mid-fifteenth and the mid-nineteenth century", a long revolution indeed. However, the author does his best to avoid a grand narrative of modernization, especially one that views the eighteenth century as central—the "rise of consumer society" and all that. One way in which the grand narrative is qualified or sidelined in this book is by the author's recurrent emphasis on continuity. Another is his habit of drawing attention to different turning points. In the late seventeenth century, for instance, there was "an apparently enormous

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growth" in book production, "notably in religious and instructional small books" (91). Again, the rise of the pocketbook in the 1770s is noted, while the years between 1740 and 1820 are described as "a critical transformative period" (375). More precisely, attention is directed to the twenty years between 1780 and 1800, when the average annual growth rate in new titles increased to nearly 3.5 per cent. Like Sher, Raven employs the metaphor of "take-off" (131). In the early nineteenth century the steam press "revolutionized newspaper manufacture" (339). The only problem with these carefully qualified statements is that the reader may put down the book without a sufficiently clear idea of the hierarchy of decisive moments or the different reasons for viewing each one as decisive.

Among the general conclusions of this economic history, Raven stresses the importance for successful careers of "financial assets" rather than a knowledge of literature or printing. He presents publishing as an entrepreneurial role or "investment opportunity" rather than a specialized occupation and stresses the need for "versatility". A whole chapter is devoted to advertising, noting that books were promoted more as "luxury commodities" than for their intellectual content. However, the author's interest in broad patterns coexists with a concern with individuals, from William Caxton to John Nichols, some of them creative and eccentric; from John Newbery, who offered a ball for boys or pincushion for girls at twopence extra if one bought one of his children's books, to James Lackington, who claimed to have half a million volumes in his "Temple of the Muses" in Finsbury Square in London and to be "the cheapest bookseller in the world".

This economic history of the book trade takes care to locate it in a wider context or contexts. One of these contexts is geographical. Drawing on a previously unexploited source, the London land tax evaluations, Raven maps the distribution of booksellers in the city. His emphasis on continuity in the history of the book trade is illustrated and supported by the evidence for the constant use of certain sites, notably Fleet Street and St Paul's Churchyard, over the long term—in the case of Fleet Street (if we include newspapers), from the fifteenth century to the twentieth. Another context is social, since a history of the book trade must obviously take account of demand. Raven notes the way in which London booksellers responded to increasing demand from the American colonies from the late seventeenth century onwards, just as he points to the "greater stratification of the market" in the nineteenth century and the increasing concern with selling books to women and children. The London establishment known as Tabart's Juvenile Library, for instance, goes back to the early nineteenth century.

The Business of Books is learned, lucid, balanced and cautious. Perhaps it is a shade too cautious (it even includes an index entry, "quantification, cautions about"), but this study is certainly a path-breaking as well as an accessible introduction to the subject. The late Don McKenzie once lamented the lack

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of what he called "a satisfactory model" of the economics of the London book trade.[8] Raven has given us one—and a good deal more into the bargain.

All three studies are well produced, well illustrated and—considering today's prices—remarkably cheap as well. It seems that books about books still get preferential treatment from their publishers! Reading them in rapid succession encourages comparisons, while comparisons reveal agreements, contradictions and omissions. All three books emphasize the "explosion" or "take-off" in English publishing in the late eighteenth century. All three note the importance of figures such as Strahan and Cadell. London dominates the three stories, but Raven as well as Sher notes the importance of Dublin. Although they focus on Britain, all three authors are aware of a wider world. Sher and St Clair each include a chapter on North America, while Raven is critical of anglocentrism and makes frequent references to France, the Netherlands and other parts of the Continent, noting, for instance, the importance of the late eighteenth century as "a critical turnaround in the trade in foreign books in Britain and the trade in British books abroad" (143).

Turning to contradictions, the idea of the "public sphere" associated with Jürgen Habermas is discussed by both Sher and Raven, but Sher is more sympathetic to the idea, while Raven emphasizes Habermas's uncritical use of older histories of literature. Perhaps the most important divergence is that between St Clair on one side, offering an essentially optimistic picture of a prosperous eighteenth-century book trade, and Sher and Raven on the other, noting the risks of the trade and the consequent need for coalitions between booksellers. Raven's long index entry under "bankruptcies" emphasizes this divergence with particular force.

One of the values of comparison is to reveal absences. Here, for example, the discussion of printer's workshops in Raven (22 ff.) and in even more detail in St Clair (177–85) highlights Sher's virtual omission of this part of the literary system. Again, the chapter devoted by Raven to advertisements for books makes the reader aware that the other two scholars have remarkably little to say on the subject.

From comparisons between three studies it is only a step to some final reflections on comparative approaches to the history of the book, considering some of the problems raised and solutions offered in the case of the British book in a wider European context.

Take the case of piracy, for instance. St Clair's discussion of piracy is concerned with Paris, the home of Galignani's reprints, while the other two authors deal with Dublin. The juxtaposition between the two cities suggests the need for a comparative study of the geography, economics and politics of book piracy (a

[8] Don McKenzie in *Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, 4: 553.

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topic that might be appropriate for an international conference). As in the case of the trade in forbidden books, cities near international frontiers were especially suited for this role, with Amsterdam, Geneva and Neuchâtel supplying the French market.[9]

If proximity to frontiers was an advantage, then cities in small states were well placed. Alessandro Manzoni's great novel *I promessi sposi*, for instance, made him little money despite its numerous editions because most of them were unauthorized reprints. As the late Marino Berengo noted, "Nessun libro italiano è stato cosí pirateggiato come *I Promessi Sposi*".[10] In 1827 alone eight pirate editions appeared, two in Florence, two in Turin, and one each in Livorno, Lugano, Naples and Paris. Since Italy was still a mosaic of small states, piracy was difficult to suppress.

The last point suggests still wider comparisons between what we might call regimes of print in different parts of Europe, some of them more centralized and others less. The British regime was unusually centripetal, though less so in the eighteenth century than before, reminding us of the relevance of politics to the history of the book trade, and more specifically of the Act of Union as a precondition for the rise of Sher's Edinburgh–London axis. France was less centralized, given the importance of Lyon in the sixteenth century, but Paris became dominant in the seventeenth century for political reasons.[11] Italy was still less centralized, even if Venice overshadowed other printing cities, especially in the sixteenth century. Spain and Germany were even more centrifugal, since both regions lacked a dominant printing city in the early modern period.

Grub Streets too, in the sense of urban quarters in which people who wrote for their living clustered, might usefully be considered in the plural. The "original" Grub Street in eighteenth-century London was not the first, since similar quarters existed in Elizabethan London and also in sixteenth-century Venice, home of a group of writers known at the time as *poligrafi* because they wrote so much and on such a variety of topics, whether they composed, edited, translated or plagiarized.[12] Eighteenth-century Paris also had its Grub Street and so did

9 Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *Grub Street Abroad: Aspects of the French Cosmopolitan Press from the Age of Louis XIV to the French Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Robert Darnton, *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-revolutionary France* (London: HarperCollins, 1996).

10 "No Italian book has been as much pirated as *The Betrothed*". Marino Berengo, *Intellettuali e librai nella Milano della Restaurazione* (Turin: Einaudi, 1980), 289.

11 Henri-Jean Martin, *Livre, pouvoirs et société à Paris au 17e siècle (1598–1701)* (Geneva: Droz, 1969).

12 Pat Rogers, *Grub Street: Studies in a Subculture* (London: Methuen, 1972); Claudia di Filippo Bareggi, *Il mestiere di scrivere: lavoro intellettuale e mercato librario a Venezia nel '500* (Rome: Bulzoni, 1988).

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seventeenth-century Amsterdam, home to the *broodschrivers* (in other words, people who wrote in order to gain their daily bread).[13]

Comparisons—including contrasts—of this kind need not be confined to Europe. In a famous article of the 1920s, Marc Bloch distinguished between comparisons and contrasts of "neighbours", such as France and England, and those of cultures that are more distant from each other, such as France and Japan. The second kind of comparison is more difficult and more risky, but as Bloch's own study of feudal society—which discussed Japan in a concluding section—showed, it can also be extremely illuminating. What is illuminated includes significant absences. In the case of book history, for instance, comparisons between early modern Europe and the Middle East in the same period throw light on the consequences for the latter book culture of the rejection of printing.[14]

More generally, a comparative approach allows us to see more clearly than before the manifold ways in which books express, embody or illustrate the culture in which they are produced and consumed. Hence it is fortunate that the recent wave of studies of Chinese and Japanese book history, most of them written in English, makes it possible for the first time to look at the European book from an Asian perspective and vice versa.[15] The major contrast is between printing technologies, since until quite recently East Asian books were the result of block printing, with a separate woodblock for each page, while European books used movable type. However, it is intriguing to note that the Chinese experimented with movable type and the Europeans with block printing, before the two cultures went their separate ways, suggesting the conclusion that movable type is not the best form of printing in itself, but the best for printing texts in alphabetic script, while block printing is more appropriate in the case of ideograms.

All the same, and despite the fact that the Chinese were printing texts about seven hundred years before Gutenberg, we find an expansion of the book trade in the sixteenth century in both Europe and China. One of the people best qualified to make comparisons at the time, the Italian Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci, who

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13 Darnton, *Literary Underground*; Eisenstein, *Grub Street Abroad*. I know of no modern study of Amsterdam from this point of view.

14 George N. Atiyeh, ed., *The Book in the Islamic World* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995); Nelly Hanna, *In Praise of Books: A Cultural History of Cairo's Middle Class, 16th to 18th century* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2003).

15 On China see Lucille Chia, *Printing for Profit: The Commercial Publishers of Jianyang, Fukien* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003); Kai-Wing Chow, *Publishing, Culture and Politics in Early Modern China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004); Cynthia Brokaw and Kai-Wing Chow, eds., *Print and Book Culture in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Joseph P. McDermott, *A Social History of the Chinese Book: Books and Literati Culture in Late Imperial China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2006).

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lived for many years in China, remarked that Chinese books were cheaper than European ones. The point seems plausible, since the size of the market would have allowed larger print runs in China and so cut the cost of production.

To focus the comparison more sharply, take the case of Japan, an island nation in which the book trade expanded rapidly from the late seventeenth century onwards, as it did in Britain.[16] The print technology was very different, given the use of separate wood blocks for each page of the book. However, this point should not be allowed to obscure certain parallels, including the "greater stratification of the market" at this time. In the so-called Genroku era (1688–1704 by Western reckoning), books came to be printed in increasing numbers in a syllabic script rather than in Chinese characters in order to reach a wider public, especially women. The authors and compilers were often professionals such as Iharu Saikaku, who despite his talents might reasonably be described as a Grub Street writer. The expansion of print coincided with rapid urbanization and especially the rise of three great cities, Edō, Kyōtō and Ōsaka, all three of them important centres of the book trade at this time, confirming the importance of urbanization that was noted in the case of London and Edinburgh. Turning to the cultural consequences of the print explosion, it is at the very least intriguing to note that the Genroku era has often been viewed as a kind of Japanese Enlightenment.

Pointing to similarities such as these highlights the importance of economic and social factors that encouraged the "rise of the book" at particular moments in history. In so doing, it is of course necessary not only to take account of the differences between the Japanese and the European book cultures, but also to reflect on them and to attempt to explain them. We need to compare and contrast not only writing systems and print technologies but also what was printed, for what kinds of reader, the prices, the distribution systems, the extent to which printed matter was regulated by different governments, the circulation of books in manuscript and so on.

Without jumping to premature conclusions, it is at least worth suggesting that a sustained comparison between the early modern British and East Asian (especially Japanese) book regimes and literary systems is likely to be illuminating. Who will make it?

[16] Peter F. Kornicki, *The Book in Japan: A Cultural History from the Beginnings to the Nineteenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 1998); Mary Elizabeth Berry, *Japan in Print: Information and Nation in the Early Modern Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006). Some comparisons are sketched in Henry D. Smith III, "The History of the Book in Edō and Paris", in James L. McClain, John M. Merriman and Ugawa Kaoru, eds., *Edō and Paris: Urban Life and the State in the Early Modern Era* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), 332–52.

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