

SYMPOSIUM: WHAT WAS THE HISTORY OF THE BOOK? INTRODUCTION

BILL BELL

Centre for the History of the Book, University of Edinburgh

“*Histoire du livre*”, remarked Robert Darnton in a much celebrated essay from 1982, “*Geschichte des Buchwesens*” . . . ‘history of books’ or ‘of the book’ in English-speaking countries—its name varies from place to place, but everywhere it is being recognized as an important new discipline”. In the twenty-five years since Darnton’s original observation book history has if anything continued to flourish. With a number of multi-volume national histories of the book now at various stages of completion, an international infrastructure of research centres, teaching programmes and publishers’ lists, quite clearly something has been happening.

In July 2005 a symposium took place under the auspices of the Centre for the History of the Book at the University of Edinburgh, the aim of which was to bring together three of today’s most influential practitioners of “book history” in order to take stock of how the field had developed over this prolific period. While we had initially intended to ask our speakers to speculate on that disciplinary history, as well as its potential future, the great danger of such exercises is that they can drift off into abstract speculation. In the end, we asked them to reflect on specific texts that they had written, to speculate on the kinds of influence that had informed them and to tell us how they would do things differently today. Thereby not only did we hope to get a more intimate sense of the moment of these influential texts, texts that have become absolutely central to the subject as it has developed in recent years, but more generally it was hoped that we would achieve a clearer sense of what it is that we do as historians of the book, why we do it and what its scholarly implications can or should be today. Under these circumstances, the title of this introduction may appear surprising. The use of the past tense to describe a subject still in ferment was meant in part to be

provocative, but it was also intended to acknowledge that book history had now come of age as a field which has its own history, and that perhaps it was high time to take stock of where it has come from, what its intellectual and institutional contributions are in the present and where it might be going in the future.

It seemed only appropriate that we should begin the exercise with Robert Darnton's "What is the History of Books?"; the essay from which the opening quotation was taken. Appearing first as an article in *Daedalus* in 1982, it was subsequently reprinted first in a collection called *Books in Society and History* in 1983, and later, and more familiarly, in the author's collected essays, *The Kiss of Lamourette* (1989). Regarded as a *locus classicus* by some, the essay is often credited with having mapped the field for the first time. In the intervening years, Darnton's diagram has raised criticism as well as approbation, so we knew that a re-examination of this essay, and in particular the now-familiar concept of the communication circuit, would make an interesting exercise in itself.

While Darnton's method is grounded in an archivally oriented historiography, the work of Roger Chartier belongs as much to the tradition of French critical theory as to the protocols of evidential history. Although Chartier's influential work, *L'Ordre des livres* (1992), later translated as *The Order of Books* (1994), came out of the movement epitomized by the work of Henri-Jean Martin and the *Annalistes*, an important dimension of Chartier's approach, as he explains here, came out of the intellectual ferment of the late 1980s, heavily inflected by the projects of his Paris colleagues Michel de Certeau and Michel Foucault. A work that has been appropriated and—as Chartier argues—misappropriated since its first appearance, *The Order of Books* stands a decade and a half on as one of the most original and provocative interventions in the field.

Peter Burke's *A Social History of Knowledge* appeared in 2000. Subtitled "From Gutenberg to Diderot", its engagement with book history is evident throughout a number of its chapters, covering the role of libraries, censorship, the literary market and the position of readers. Despite such abiding concerns, Burke's approach to cultural history is not exclusively, nor even primarily, materialist in focus. Indeed it is characteristic of his expansive view that Burke argues here for a total approach to cultural history, locating the rise of "knowledge" within a number of European cultural institutions, of which the printed word, important as it is, is only one among many.

Despite a number of obvious similarities between the symposium participants, what came through was a sense of three strikingly different intellectual personalities, each having its own specific relationship with a field still in ferment. This is more than evident in the highly personal routes by which each contributor first came to the field. For Darnton it was an accidental encounter with the archives of the Société typographique de Neuchâtel while he was hunting down information on eighteenth-century revolutionaries; for Chartier it was the

discovery of a long-neglected but teeming underworld of seventeenth-century print, commonly referred to as the *Bibliothèque bleue*; for Burke it was time spent in his father's London antiquarian bookshop and rummaging through booksellers' barrows on the Farringdon Road.

Despite all of their differences, however, clear similarities between the three projects are more than apparent. All three acknowledge, though to different extents, the important influence of *Annales* on their early development. The seminal figure of Henri-Jean Martin, who in 1958 produced with Lucien Febvre *L'Apparition du livre*, is an abiding presence. Martin it was who went on, with Chartier, to fashion *L'Histoire de l'édition française*, the four-volume series that would become a model for a number of later national history-of-the-book projects.

In setting up this exercise in disciplinary retrospection we were aware that another key voice, this time from the anglophone tradition, was missing. It is fitting that each of our contributors acknowledges the important influence of the late D. F. McKenzie, who has often been credited with having brought the history of the book in its present form to the English-speaking world. While all three contributors express their debt to what McKenzie called the "sociology of the text", a phrase he coined in 1985, McKenzie himself owed more to an earlier wave of historical bibliography, more indebted to the work of W. W. Greg than to that of Febvre and Martin. In the work of McKenzie we are reminded that, while book history might be regarded in some quarters these days as highly fashionable, it is a field whose roots reach far deeper than even some of its practitioners realize. (The use of the phrase in French goes back at least to Edmundo Werdet's 1861 work *Histoire du livre en France depuis les temps les plus reculés jusqu'en 1789*).

Today's book-history scholars, working in different periods and disciplines, can each trace their own lines of intellectual affiliation. My own first encounter with the field was through two classic studies in nineteenth-century print culture, namely Richard Altick's *The English Common Reader* (1958) and Raymond Williams's *The Long Revolution* (1961). But it was only really in Williams's *Marxism and Literature* (1977)—published within a year of the first English translation of *L'Apparition du livre*—with its call for a "sociology of culture" that put printing, publishing and reading audiences at the centre of a coherent social programme, that it became apparent to me at least that something like a "field" might exist. For his own part, Williams identified with an older tradition on the European left whose focus by the 1930s was on what Leo Lowenthal, Lucien Goldmann, Robert Escarpit and others would come to call the "sociology of literature", a tendency that would later re-emerge most productively in the work of Pierre Bourdieu. There are still others who regard book history as something entirely different, not least those who see it as a variant of textual criticism with a provenance going back at least to the first editors of Shakespeare.

Given such complexities, it would be wrong to rethink the history of the book as a series of discrete but interrelated phases of development. Like that of other intellectual fields the history of book history is one of complex continuities and discontinuities and the stories that book historians tell about themselves are many and varied, stories about forgetting as well as remembering. In the end it may well be that only an awareness of the sheer number of intersecting and sometimes contradictory traditions to which today's book historian lays claim can begin to explain what David Hall, in a companion article, characterizes as the field's mercurial nature. In view of the fact that our three principal contributors belong, generally speaking, to the field of continental cultural history, in preparing these articles for publication we felt that it would be helpful to have the additional views of a scholar working in an entirely different intellectual tradition. Although not an original participant in the symposium, as an American ecclesiastical historian and as general editor of the *Cambridge History of the Book in America*, Hall brings yet another perspective to the mix—in this instance the views of a modern anglophone cultural historian with his own views on the possibility of future kinds of synthesis.

For all of the intellectual difficulties involved in such an enterprise, and in spite of being so “widely diffused”, argues Hall, book history is now more publicly visible than ever. As it moves beyond its present revivifying phase it is to be hoped that, with the development of its own conferences, research groupings and teaching programmes, book history does not, like so many other disciplines, become subject to overspecialization. If nothing else, the following essays demonstrate the importance of the book historian's ability to speak across special interest groups, as well as a variety of national and linguistic traditions. From Darnton's regard for the control of print in the *ancien régime*, to Chartier's analysis of the ways in which material meaning is made, to Burke's analysis of the political and ideological effects of the institutions of print, these contributions taken together serve continually to question ingrained disciplinary assumptions about the role of texts in society. What is more, they demonstrate that, while their own versions of the history of the book have benefited from a wide range of disciplinary influences, they in turn belong to an interdisciplinary field that is capable of making important contributions to an understanding of an enormous variety of fundamental issues, from literary meaning (whether in the rise of genres and the constitution of reading audiences) to political events (the French Revolution to the rise of nationalism) to cultural phenomena—from the demographics of literacy and even the definition of knowledge itself.