

Looking Backward to the Future

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Article abstract

A key moment in the emergence of the history of the book as an independent discipline occurred in summer 1980, when the participants at the international conference "Books and Society in History" in Boston gathered to issue a manifesto defining the field and calling for institutional funding to support research. Thirty-five years on, my essay draws on my experience as an editor of and contributor to the *A History of the Book in America* series to explore how that *History* came to be shaped by discussions during a series of editorial board meetings during the 1990s. I conclude by suggesting a few ways that scholars and historians might now build on those foundations for future directions in their work in book history.

LOOKING BACKWARD TO THE FUTURE

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* Editor's note: The following text is taken from remarks contributed to the roundtable, "Inheriting the National Histories of the Book / L'héritage des grands projets nationaux d'histoire du livre," held on the occasion of the 23rd Annual Conference of the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing, "The Generation and Regeneration of Books / Générations et régénérations du livre." The traces of oral presentation have therefore been retained. Moreover, the audio file includes exchanges with the audience that followed the roundtable. The audio file is accessible here: http://www.usherbrooke.ca/grelq/fileadmin/sites/grelq/documents/Colloques/SHARP_2015/Table_ronde_projets_nationaux_2015-07-07_1.mp3.

ABSTRACT

A key moment in the emergence of the history of the book as an independent discipline occurred in summer 1980, when the participants at the international conference "Books and Society in History" in Boston gathered to issue a manifesto defining the field and calling for institutional funding to support research. Thirty-five years on, my essay draws on my experience as an editor of and contributor to the *A History of the Book in America* series to explore how that *History* came to be shaped by discussions during a series of editorial board meetings during the 1990s. I conclude by suggesting a few ways that scholars and historians might now build on those foundations for future directions in their work in book history.

RÉSUMÉ

L'été 1980 marque un tournant dans l'émergence de l'histoire du livre en tant que discipline distincte. Des participants au congrès international « Books and Society in History », tenu à Boston, signent alors un manifeste qui définit ce champ d'étude et réclame un financement institutionnel de la recherche. Quelque 35 ans plus tard, et à partir de mon expérience comme collaborateur et directeur de publication de *A History of the Book in America*, je veux explorer la manière dont cette histoire du livre aux États-Unis s'est façonnée au fil de discussions ayant animé les rencontres du comité de rédaction durant les années 1990. Je tenterai également de proposer des avenues que pourraient vouloir emprunter chercheurs et historiens du livre actuels dans la foulée du projet *A History of the Book in America*.

I begin by looking backward to a conference held in Boston, Massachusetts, in June 1980 that, I believe, was a signal event in the emergence of the history of the book as a discipline in the United States. Entitled “Books and Society in History,” the conference was organized by Kenneth E. Carpenter for the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section of the Association of College and Research Libraries. It was an interdisciplinary, multinational, and multilingual event, all three. Many of the leading scholars in the field were among the speakers: Elizabeth L. Eisenstein and Robert Darnton from the United States, Henri-Jean Martin and Frédéric Barbier from France, Paul Raabe and Bernhard Fabian from Germany, John Feather from Great Britain. The conference participants included not only librarians, but also bibliographers and academics, from both history and literature departments. There was an electricity in the air, the kind of excitement that Darnton evokes so vividly in the opening paragraphs of his now canonical essay “What Is the History of Books?”—an essay included in the published volume of the conference’s proceedings.¹

It must have been that headiness that inspired the speakers at the conference, on the final day, to come together and issue “A Statement on the History of the Book” to serve as a kind of manifesto for this new way of doing scholarship that, as Darnton wrote, seemed “likely to win a place . . . in the canon of scholarly disciplines.”² In their statement, the speakers explain that “since the book is by its nature a cultural force that transcends national boundaries, both the design and compilation of basic tools requires international cooperation” and then continue: “Likewise, analysis based on the fundamental tools must be on an international basis if one is to understand how national differences in book production and dissemination have affected the various cultural areas.” In conclusion, they call on library directors and funding agencies “to support basic projects as well as seminars, workshops, and conferences on an international level.”³

I rehearse all this not only because I believe that the Boston conference serves as a convenient originary moment, but also because it makes clear that even then the international, or at least transnational but perhaps not global, dimensions of book history were recognized and called for. Curious, then, that so much work in the field over the following decades would instead be defined by national boundaries. Given that focus, however, it seems overdetermined that the American Antiquarian Society (AAS) in

Worcester would become the major centre for the study of the history of the American book. Founded in 1812 by Isaiah Thomas, Revolutionary war patriot and printer, that Society has made collecting, preserving, and interpreting the output of the American press through 1876 its mission. Thomas himself wrote and published our first comprehensive history of American printing: his two-volume *History of Printing in America* (1810) remains useful and can be viewed as a direct ancestor of the modern five-volume *A History of the Book in America* (1999–2010).

Accordingly, in fall 1982 the American Antiquarian Society circulated to interested parties for comment a ten-page “Proposal” that outlined the active role that a formal program at the Society directed at fostering work in the emerging field of book history could play, and in the fall of 1983 the Program in the History of the Book in American Culture was formally established.⁴ On 9 November of that year, David D. Hall, a professor of history and American studies at Boston University who had been instrumental in conceiving and planning the Program, delivered the inaugural James Russell Wiggins Lecture in the History of the Book, the first of what has since been an annual series of lectures. His title, “On Native Ground: From the History of Printing to the History of the Book,” made direct allusion to Thomas’s earlier work, and his text sketched out a direction for future work on American book history that took these new approaches and insights into account.⁵

The following year, on 1–3 November 1984, the Society’s Program held an invitational “needs and opportunity” conference, funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), that was intended to “systematically review the present state of scholarship and formulate agendas for future research” in order to “stimulate and give direction to an emerging field of inquiry.” Papers on a wide range of topics on the history of the American book—not only on the printing, publishing, distribution, and readers of books, but also on newspapers, the religious press, popular and elite culture, and how social history and book history intersect—were prepared and circulated in advance. Discussion at the conference itself was lively, occasionally contentious, but participants came away energized and with a clear sense that the history of the book was becoming a vital and active scholarly enterprise.⁶

I do not recall that there was any discussion at that needs and opportunities conference about plans for the publication of a new comprehensive history of the American book, but in November 1998 the Program issued a four-page preliminary prospectus for *A History of the Book in the American Culture* as a supplement to its newsletter, *The Book*. This begins:

Since the very outset of the American Society's Program in the History of the Book in American Culture, we envisioned a collaborative history of "the book" in the United States. Incorporating the traditional subject matter of book history, this narrative would also encompass questions and topics arising out of literary cultural, and social history. Interdisciplinary and, we trust, looking afresh at a range of problems, this series of volumes would represent as fully as possible the rethinking of the history of the book that has occurred in our time.⁷

The plan for a national history of the book was hardly original: by that time, the four-volume French *Histoire de l'édition française* had been published, the British were already planning what was then imagined as a six-volume *History of the Book in Britain*, and a multi-volume series was under development in Germany.

The "Prospectus" was written by David Hall and still bears a careful rereading. It is an intriguing document: at the time, the series was envisioned as encompassing three volumes that would cover American book history only through 1876, the concluding year of the AAS's collecting interests. The first volume was to "encompass the period of settlement, expansion, and state-making" up to 1800 and would "mainly be narrative, incorporating readers, writers, the trades, and intermediaries into a single story," while the final two volumes together would cover the first three-quarters of the nineteenth century. The central theme of the volumes would be "the transformation from the old regime to new, and its consequences for how books were understood and used," and the final volumes would have chapters dedicated to trade practices and the rise of the publisher, authors and readers, newspapers and periodicals, intermediaries, children's literature, press freedom, and the book as artifact. A final chapter, while eschewing "Grand reflections on 'the book'," would "undertake to describe the 'cultural uses of print'" that would "permit more reflection on the

relationship between printed books and politics” and could address “how print affected the transmission of culture.”⁸

In the event, however, no immediate progress was made on this project, and it was only several years later that an editorial board, chaired by David Hall, was named. In March 1991 the board held its first working meeting, where it was decided to proceed somewhat along the lines proposed in the prospectus—three volumes covering the period up to only about 1880. Also at that meeting the editors for these first three volumes of *A History of the Book in America* were decided upon, with the exception of my co-editor on the third volume.⁹ In a fall meeting that year, we agreed that the *History* needed to expand its coverage beyond the limits of the AAS collecting policy, 1876, and it was “determined to bring the series into the twentieth century and up to our own times” in two additional volumes.¹⁰ The editors for volume 4 were named the following summer, 1992, and those for the fifth and final volume in 1995.

During the following years, thanks to further funding from the NEH, the editorial board met regularly twice a year to plan the shape and scope of the series. The members of the group came from a varied background: mostly academics, but also a few librarians. While historians tended to predominate among the former group, other disciplines—literature, education, and journalism—were also represented. Looking back, I think that I do not exaggerate when I say that our discussions at those editorial board meetings were some of the most intellectually stimulating of my career, and I would like here to focus briefly on four of the many questions that we addressed at our meetings: what do we mean by “the book” (media)? What do we mean by America (geography)? What kind of history is the history of the book (historiography)? How should we organize the volumes (periodization)? There were lively differences of opinion on how we should answer these questions, and I do not know that we ever achieved consensus but, in retrospect, I think that our discussions set the agenda for the series *A History of the Book in America*. I should stress that my remarks carry no authority beyond being formed from my own memories and perspectives based on my participation as a member of that editorial board.

What do we mean by “the book”? There is, of course, no single, good answer to this question, and yet it cannot easily be ignored. On the one

hand, we wanted to be expansive, to apply the term to any textual object, whether verbal or graphic, printed or manuscript, bound or not, monographic or serial. On the other hand, how could we cover all that meaningfully? We recognized that a history of, say, newspapers or sheet music in America would look quite different from the history of what has come to be called the “trade” book, those printed and bound codex volumes that you buy—or used to buy, before Amazon.com—in bookstores. To the extent that we were able to resolve this dilemma, we decided to be inclusive, but also to privilege the traditional bound volume, as I believe American culture and society also has, by placing other types of textual object, to the extent that we were able to cover them at all, in relation to it. We also quickly recognized that our history had to be one of the book in America not just the American book—that is, the “book” printed in America, the ones that define AAS collecting policy.

What do we mean by America? Clearly we did not mean the entire hemisphere—continents, north and south—but rather something like the part that would become the United States. But our tendency was to centre our history on the Atlantic northeast, especially Cambridge for the early years, and later Boston, New York, and Philadelphia—a perspective that seemed natural to the majority of our board members, who lived and taught in the region. We soon recognized that at least for the first volume, a colonial perspective that looked to an Atlantic world would be necessary. In later volumes, I suppose that we tried to achieve some geographic diversity and include an international perspective, but I fear we mostly failed. Similarly, our Americans had a tendency to be white, of European ancestry, protestant, and English-speaking. I trust that today we would see things very differently.

What kind of history is the history of the book? Another vexing question. When I look backward at those statements and prospectuses from the 1980s, what strikes me is how expansive they tend to be. The history of the book would call on many disciplines: it would need to draw on work of political, social, economic, legal, and literary historians—and that is only a start. Bibliography and book trade history would be central. Again, in the end, I do not know that we succeeded in our published volumes to achieve such interdisciplinarity, which may be a good thing. Overall, I would say that *A History of the Book in America* is chiefly a cultural history of the book, and I

personally regret that there is not more presence of the book trades and the lessons of bibliography. On the other hand, attention paid to readers and history of reading is exemplary, even if the readers covered could have been more diverse. The indefinite article at the beginning of the series title was intentional.

How should we organize the series? I do not remember that we ever much discussed any other possibility than a chronological history, so this question was for us chiefly a question of periodization. The expansion of the series from three to five volumes occurred somewhat haphazardly, and to some extent this is reflected in the way that the chronology is divided, particularly by the vestigial decision to end volume 3 at 1880. Attention to book trade history might well have suggested a different chronology for that volume: perhaps 1824 (the year of the first publishers' trade sale) to 1891 (the passage of the Chace Act enabling international copyright). But then again, I do not think that any of us who served as editors felt compelled to avoid extending the coverage of our volumes beyond the stated dates when it seemed appropriate. For example, my chapter on "Manufacturing and Book Production" in volume 3, which has volume title *The Industrial Book, 1840–1880*, covers technological developments over most of the nineteenth century. The choices we made respecting chronology certainly did shape the series, however: the book history of the Revolutionary War and World War II might have been told quite differently if each did not fall between two volumes. Sadly, the American Civil War is also not well represented in volume 3, even though it comes in the middle of the period covered—an omission that I have recently attempted to address in an essay that will be published elsewhere.¹¹

As the 1990s came to an end, the editorial board's regular meetings came to a halt, and each team of editors focused its efforts on its own volume. In July 1999, the AAS issued a second "Prospectus" for the *History* that reflected the expanded scope for the series, with a paragraph for each of the five volumes laying out for each the particular themes that would be emphasized within the general framework that our discussion had established. Informal communication among the editors continued, of course, and many of us contributed essays to more than one volume. As general editor, David Hall oversaw the whole, assisted by John B. Hench and Caroline Sloat from the AAS editorial office. But to a remarkable

degree, the editors of the individual volumes were free to develop their volume as they thought best. Whether the resulting series, published between October 1999 and June 2010, hangs together and succeeds as a whole is probably best left to others to decide.

I began this essay by looking backward to 1980, when the history of the book was first emerging as a discipline in the United States. *A History of the Book in America* is, of course, just one of the many book history projects that have been accomplished since then, but let me close with a few, brief thoughts pointing to avenues that I believe future historians of the book might take in their work. I suppose that we all agree that, as useful as it has been, the national paradigm has served its purpose. What other frameworks might prove useful? The international or transnational, certainly, but we might also look for local studies like that shown by James Raven's recently published Panizzi Lectures.¹² Language may prove a fruitful way to cross national boundaries, and I can imagine that a history of the Spanish-language book, for instance, might prove fascinating, and we certainly need to pay more attention the role of translation in moving texts across national and cultural boundaries.¹³ I have already suggested that our series might have benefited from greater engagement with questions of race and ethnicity,¹⁴ but also from closer attention to the economics of the book trades, especially as related to markets, distribution, and accessibility—as the work of William St Clair has suggested.¹⁵ Peter W. M. Blayney reminds us that there remains much to learn about how the book trades were organized and regulated.¹⁶ Finally, I am often struck by how much our early discussions about the discipline of history of the book are echoed by those now taking place about digital humanities. I suspect that book historians have much to gain by allying themselves with that emerging field, not only from using the wonderful new tools and methodologies that digital humanities has developed, but also from taking up the new perspectives on the history and meaning of human communication provided by media studies.¹⁷ But whatever direction book historical studies choose to take, I trust that our efforts on *A History of the Book in America* will provide a solid foundation on which future scholars can build.

Michael Winship, the Iris Howard Regents Professor of English II at the University of Texas at Austin, was an editor for *A History of the Book in America* and has published extensively on American literary publishing of the industrial era.

Notes

¹ Kenneth E. Carpenter, ed., *Books and Society in History* (New York: Bowker, 1983).

² Kenneth E. Carpenter, ed., *Books and Society in History* (New York: Bowker, 1983), 3.

³ Kenneth E. Carpenter, ed., *Books and Society in History* (New York: Bowker, 1983), xi–xii.

⁴ “A Proposal to Establish the Program in the History of the Book in American Culture at the American Antiquarian Society,” duplicated typescript (n.d., 1982). The record of the activities of the Program in the History of the Book in American Culture is best recovered from the Program’s newsletter, *The Book*, published from 1983 to 2008, but see also Philip F. Gura’s 22nd Wiggins lecture, “*Magnalia Historiae Libri Americana*; or, How AAS Brought History of the Book into the New Millennium,” *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 114 (Oct. 2004): 255–57.

⁵ Hall’s text is printed in *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 93 (Oct. 1983): 313–36; for a list of the Wiggins lectures, see <http://www.americanantiquarian.org/wiggins-lectures>.

⁶ Quotations are taken from the original proposal to the NEH for funding as reprinted in David D. Hall, “A Report on the 1984 Conference on Needs and Opportunities in the History of the Book in American Culture,” in *Needs and Opportunities in the History of the Book: America, 1639–1876*, eds. David D. Hall and John B. Hench (Worcester: AAS, 1987), 1–12. This volume also prints edited versions of five of the papers prepared for that conference.

⁷ David D. Hall, “Prospectus: A History of the Book in American Culture,” supplement to *The Book: Newsletter of the Program in the History of the Book in American Culture*, No. 16 (Nov. 1988).

⁸ David D. Hall, “Prospectus: A History of the Book in American Culture,” supplement to *The Book: Newsletter of the Program in the History of the Book in American Culture*, No. 16 (Nov. 1988).

⁹ Stephen W. Nissenbaum was named as coeditor of volume 3 later in 1991; Scott E. Casper and Jeffrey D. Groves were added to the editorial team for that volume in 2001.

¹⁰ *The Book: Newsletter of the Program in the History of the Book in American Culture* 25 (Nov. 1991).

¹¹ Michael Winship, “The American Book Trade and the Civil War” in *A History of American Civil War Literature*, ed. Coleman Hutchison (New York: Cambridge UP, 2016), 17–32.

¹² James Raven, *Bookscape: Geographies of Printing and Publishing in London before 1800* (London: British Library, 2014).

¹³ See Isabel Hofmeyr, *The Portable Bunyan: A Transnational History of “The Pilgrim’s Progress”* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004) and the preliminary presentation (publication with fuller bibliographical entries forthcoming) of Kenneth E. Carpenter’s bibliographical investigation of the translation and publication of Benjamin Franklin’s “The Way to Wealth” at *The Way to Wealth Editions Project*, Knowledge and Library Services, Harvard Business School, <http://waytowealth.org/editions.html>.

¹⁴ See Phillip H. Round, *Removable Type: Histories of the Book in Indian Country* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2010); Lara Langer Cohen and Jordan Alexander Stein, eds. *Early African American Print Culture* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2012); and George Hutchinson and John K. Young, eds. *Publishing Blackness: Textual Constructions of Race since 1850* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2013).

¹⁵ William St Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), and St Clair, “The Political Economy of Reading,” The John Coffin Memorial Lecture in the History of the Book 2005, rev. ed. Oct. 2012, available at: http://www.ies.sas.ac.uk/sites/default/files/files/Publications/Coffin%20lectures/StClair_PolEcReading_2012.pdf

¹⁶ Peter W. M. Blayney, *The Stationers’ Company and the Printers’ of London, 1501–1557* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013).

¹⁷ A recent survey is Matthew Kirschenbaum and Sarah Werner, “Digital Scholarship and Digital Studies: The State of the Discipline,” *Book History* 17 (2014): 406–58.

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