A Report on the 1984 Conference on Needs and Opportunities in the History of the Book in American Culture

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On November 1–3, 1984, the American Antiquarian Society convened a conference on 'Needs and Opportunities in the History of the Book in American Culture.' The purpose of this conference was to take advantage of a particular moment, the maturing of a field of study that bears the name 'the history of the book.' As envisioned in a proposal to the National Endowment for the Humanities requesting NEH support, this conference would 'stimulate and give direction to an emerging field of inquiry.' Via commissioned papers, the proposal went on to declare, the conference would 'systematically review the present state of scholarship and formulate agendas for future research.' Referring to the Society's newly founded Program in the History of the Book in American Culture, the proposal declared that the larger ambition was to 'suggest interpretative frameworks that link the history of the book to social and cultural history.'

I want to begin this report on the Worcester conference by thanking NEH, The Earhart Foundation (which made a matching grant), and other donors[1] for the support that made it

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possible. Conferences come and go in great abundance, and their consequences may seem modest or elusive. Because the Worcester conference is resulting in a series of published papers (several of them in issues of the *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*),[2] its effects will grow as scholars absorb the points of view and information so richly spread before those in attendance. What follows is a brief summary of accomplishments, a review of the papers and discussion that may serve to introduce the present state and future prospects of the history of the book in America.

Starting from the goals enumerated in the NEH proposal, the conference organizers invited eleven scholars to present papers on topics in the history of the book. Four of these topics concerned the 'communications circuit' (to borrow a phrase from Robert Darnton) that books follow as they move from author to printer, and from bookseller to reader: printing, publishing, distribution, readers.[3] Two others concerned the artifact itself, the physical book as bibliographers describe and interpret it. The scope of the conference was, however, all of print (or printing), and not merely 'the book' in any narrow sense; thus, there was a paper on the nineteenth-century newspaper, and another on the religious press, which had an extraordinary importance in the nineteenth century. In the search for wider contexts and connections, other papers were solicited on the kindred topics of popular and elite culture. To conclude, a paper was commissioned on the general subject of social history and the history of the book. It may be useful to mention

[2] All of these papers, in the form in which they were prepared for the conference, are on deposit at the American Antiquarian Society. This journal is publishing some of these papers over three issues. That of David Grimsted, 'Books and Culture: Canned, Canonized, and Neglected,' with a commentary by Roger Chartier, appeared in volume 94, part 2 (Oct., 1984): 297–335. In this issue is G. Thomas Tanselle's essay on 'The Bibliographical and Textual Study of American Books,' with a commentary by Norman Fiering. Scheduled to appear in the next issue will be the essays by Michael Winship, James Gilreath, and William Pretzer. It is likely that other papers will appear in other journals.

[3] Robert Darnton, 'What is the History of Books?,' in *Books and Society in History*, ed. Kenneth E. Carpenter (New York, 1983), pp. 3–28.

some of the topics that were deliberately omitted, though only because any conference has to work within limits of time and energy: authors and the author-marketplace relationship; libraries and schools; the printed image, or illustration; censorship; governments and printing; literacy. In keeping with the scope of the American Antiquarian Society and its collections, the papers surveyed American book history from the beginnings of settlement to the year 1876.

The NEH proposal contained one other statement that deserves repeating. Referring again to the Program in the History of the Book in American Culture, the proposal spoke of its 'international outreach' and promised that the conference would 'bring to America a number of European scholars who have made the history of the book into a central field of study.' Accordingly, the conference would function to 'transmit themes and methods from one side of the Atlantic to the other,' and in so doing enrich several of the disciplines that converge on the history of the book. Indeed, the conference benefited from the presence of historians of the book in Europe; Roger Chartier (École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales), Michael Turner (Bodleian Library), Erdmann Weyrauch (Herzog August Bibliothek, Wolfenbüttel), themselves Europeans, and others such as Robert Darnton and Elizabeth Eisenstein, whose proper field is printing and book history in early modern Europe.

The conference opened with a paper on 'The Printing Trade and Allied Crafts: Technologies and Labor Practices.' William Pretzer (then at Winterthur Museum, now at the Henry Ford Museum), proposed that the 'history of the book trades should be seen as a part of the general history of American labor and technology.' Drawing on concepts arising within labor history, Pretzer focused his discussion on the history of work. Accordingly, he engaged in a careful reconstruction of the actual work processes in a series of crafts: printing, papermaking, typefounding, inkmaking, and bookbinding. In the course of this

description he raised and helped to answer such major questions as the transatlantic transfer of technology, the process of technological diffusion, the role of capital investment, and the ideological consciousness of those who worked as journeymen and master craftsmen. The commentator was Rollo Silver, a distinguished historian of printing.

Michael Winship, who serves as editor of the *Bibliography of American Literature,* followed with an essay on 'Publishing in America.' The very term 'publishing,' as Roger Chartier remarked in the discussion afterwards, is confusing since its meaning changed sharply as functions in the book trade became differentiated. Taking note of these complications, Winship focused on the nineteenth century, 'when American publishing first became an independent and fully developed activity,' on the publishing of books in particular, and on the publisher as 'playing the central entrepreneurial role—that is, the person or office that organized and coordinated its main components.' Throughout his essay, Winship indicated that strategies and decisions in the practice of publishing grew out of certain basic relationships. He called attention in particular to capital, credit, and markets. Publishing was a business, though nineteenth-century entrepreneurs sometimes invoked an ideology of publishing as an art. The audience and his commentator, Michael Turner, seconded his plea that we seek more information about the economic costs and benefits of publishing.

The conference turned next to distribution. James Gilreath (Library of Congress) reviewed with care and precision the historiography. He called attention to certain interpretations, or alternatives, and assessed the merit of these different positions in the light of more recent research. A theme of Gilreath's paper was the persistent focus on American imprints and the ignoring of imported books, a tendency he deplored. Reflecting on the several channels by which books became available to readers, Gilreath emphasized the role of private collectors in the eighteenth century, and of tract societies and state and fed-

eral governments in the nineteenth. He reminded us that significant communication often happened via other means than books, a case in point being Benjamin Franklin's initial knowledge of electricity. A corollary observation was that a great many Americans never entered a bookstore, and may have owned or used but very few books. Distribution in the colonial period and the early republic was hampered by social, economic, and technological conditions; yet as Gilreath, Winship, and others pointed out, some books and pamphlets broke free of these restrictions—Paine's *Common Sense*, Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*—in ways that suggest it may have been demand that lagged, not supply.

Robert Darnton (Princeton University), the commentator, proposed a four-part structure—marketing, trade routes, intermediary service functions, and sales—as a way of grasping the importance of distribution, a neglected but, in his words, 'great' subject in the history of the book. The thrust of his commentary was to emphasize the role of the distributor as 'middleman,' a role that, as historians learn to describe it, helps us understand how books actually got into the hands of readers. Turning to comparisons between Europe and America, Darnton noted many parallels between German and American book history.

One parallel development was a 'reading revolution' that occurred as the eighteenth century gave way to the nineteenth. So William Gilmore (Stockton State College) argued in his essay 'The "Mystic Chords of Memory": Needs and Opportunities for a History of Reading.' Gilmore adopted the concept of a reading revolution from the German historian Rolf Engelsing, enriching it with the fruits of his own research on the print culture of the Upper Connecticut River Valley. By the early nineteenth century, he argued, reading had become a 'necessity of life,' an essential vehicle of information. Within this same span of time, literacy increased from lower levels to become nearly universal. Elsewhere in his essay, Gilmore re-

flected on the ambiguity of much of the evidence about what people read. In effect, the evidence is often indirect, as in the case of books that were owned but quite possibly not opened. Drawing again on his own research, he insisted, however, that books appearing in probate inventories should be understood as books that the owner read.

Discussion benefited from comments by Roger Chartier and Robert Darnton, both of whom have helped bring about a history of reading that construes it as an active process whereby readers impose themselves upon the text, interpreting it according to their basic social and intellectual situation. As the commentator on Gilmore's wide-ranging paper, I suggested that we temper the concept of a reading revolution, a point made more forcefully by Darnton. There were pleas on the part of historians that bibliographers—those who study the 'materiality' of the book—inform us about the relationship between differences in material form and mode of reading.

Turning from the 'communications circuit' to questions drawn from social and cultural history, the conference took up the related subjects of popular and elite culture. David Grimsted offered a masterful critique of popular culture studies in America. Roger Chartier, speaking from the perspective of the social historian of early modern Europe, followed with a thoughtful commentary. Chartier and Grimsted both argued that the historian of popular culture must avoid two facile extremes: the one of denouncing the 'popular' as inferior, degraded, or escapist; the other of embracing the popular as though it were genuinely democratic or 'of the people.' Enthusiasm and snobbery are equally useless. Grimsted devoted much of his essay to demonstrating that popular texts embody complexities of various kinds. He called attention to certain theories of culture, or theories of the relationship between society and culture, that had brought new energy to the field, and at the same time, new difficulties, as in the effort to separate the culture of the working class from that of owners or employers.

Indeed, Grimsted and Chartier were unhappy with the assumption that texts can be equated with any one social level. As Chartier has made clear in his essays on the *bibliotheque bleue,* a cheap form of book that began to appear in seventeenth-century France, certain items deemed 'popular' circulated widely, finding readers among the bourgeoisie and the peasants, the urban and the rural classes.

In the wake of popular culture came an essay on 'high' or 'elite' culture. But Stephen Botein (Michigan State University) and David Jaffee (Smithsonian Institution and Georgetown University) preferred the term 'expertise' to these older categories. In their essay, 'Printed Expertise in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century America,' they presented four case histories of the 'process by which print media transmitted . . . craft and professional knowledge.' One of these case histories concerned the role of Blackstone's *Commentaries* in the acquisition of legal expertise. Botein and Jaffee demonstrated that American publishers made the *Commentaries* widely available in the early national period, and by doing so 'helped to keep the legal profession quite accessible to large numbers of middle-class Americans who were located at a considerable distance from the great urban centers of practice.' Botein and Jaffee concluded that print culture played a more ambiguous and complex role in relation to the professions than historians had suspected. The commentator was Edwin Wolf, 2nd (Library Company of Philadelphia).

The conference moved from these broad questions to the more specific subject of the nineteenth-century newspaper. John C. Nerone (University of Illinois) offered a critique of journalism history as it has been written in America, in which he argued that most of this work ignores the relationships—political, social, intellectual, and economic—that impinge upon the newspaper. Nerone traced the limitations of journalism history to its 'occupational' purpose of enhancing the status of journalists. Hence, he concluded, there arose the concentration

on 'professional journalists' and the attitude that journalists are heroes. Yet Nerone also described recent scholarship that broke free of these limitations. By way of a conclusion, he sketched a number of themes and interpretative possibilities. The commentator, Ronald P. Formisano (Clark University), felt that Nerone had been too critical of the older historiography.

'The Religious Press in America' was the subject of an essay prepared by Harry C. Stout (University of Connecticut) and Nathan Hatch (Notre Dame University). They argued that the religious press was crucially involved in the emergence of a 'democratic' print culture that made available a veritable flood of inexpensive publications. One reason for the great activity of the religious press was an ideology, originating with the Reformation, that 'reading was a spiritual necessity, a sacred rite at the heart of personal religion, and that the printed page was itself efficacious.' At the outset of their essay, Stout and Hatch emphasized the importance to colonial Americans of a means of communication, the sermon, that reached the colonists via speech as well as through the printed word. Responding to their essay, Catherine Albanese (Wright State University) argued for an even broader view of the religious press than that which Stout and Hatch had taken. Evangelicalism—the movement on which they concentrated—may indeed have been numerically the most significant tendency in nineteenth-century America; yet Albanese reminded us of the many alternatives, such as spiritualism, that flourished in the same period. She criticized the emphasis Stout and Hatch placed on the occasional sermon, pointed out that statistics on press runs and book ownership from seventeenth- and eighteenth-century New England indicated the dominance of devotional literature. She pointed out, finally, that we know more about authors than about readers, and suggested that historians of the book concern themselves with the readership of the religious press.

Two essays, Roger Stoddard's on 'The Morphology of the

Book' and G. Thomas Tanselle's on 'The Bibliographical and Textual Study of American Books,' returned the conference to the artifact itself and its 'materiality,' to use a term familiar to historians of the book in France. Stoddard (Houghton Library), offered a series of reflections on the physical form of the printed book; the commentator was Marcus A. McCorison (American Antiquarian Society). Tanselle developed two lines of criticism, one of bibliographers of American imprints for failing to perform signature counts, the other of historians for failing to use bibliographical evidence in studying the texts on which they rely. Tanselle's starting point was the axiom that no two copies of any text can be presumed identical without careful bibliographical scrutiny of surviving copies. Responding, Norman Fiering (John Carter Brown Library) argued that an ideal standard of bibliographical control, while suited to some circumstances, was unsuited to others. Historians, he suggested, should adopt a standard of control adequate to the task at hand. Otherwise, Fiering prophesied that the burden of textual criticism would impede, if not overwhelm, every other stage of historical study.

Robert Gross (Amherst College) brought the Worcester conference to a close with an essay on 'The Authority of the Word: Print and Social Change in America, 1607–1880.' Exploring the connections between book history and structures of authority in society and culture, Gross began by observing that historians of colonial America have proposed competing 'democratic' and 'elitist' interpretations. In *The Americans: The Colonial Experience* (New York, 1958), Daniel Boorstin argued that printers and printing in America broke with European patterns; on this side of the Atlantic, said Boorstin, 'print lost its exalted status as the companion of privilege, adapted to necessity, and took on a more pragmatic, democratic purpose as a community-oriented vehicle of useful information.' The theme of Americanization, or the emergence of a pluralistic, democratic culture, had its counterpoint, Gross argued, in two

other interpretations: one suggesting that the print culture of early New England 'sustained a deeply conservative social order, where consensus on fundamental values held sway,' the other arguing that in eighteenth-century Virginia books belonged to the privileged few, and were emblems of hierarchy. As for historians of nineteenth-century print culture, Gross pointed out that some argue that culture became democratized as literacy increased and more books were published, while others insist that the ethos of competitive capitalism became dominant. Gross moved to reconcile the historiography via an interpretation of his own, in which he stressed the emergence of a gentry in eighteenth-century America that sought wide control over books and culture. Responding, Bernard Bailyn (Harvard University) questioned how effective or established such a gentry was.

Formal papers and commentary are like the skeleton of the human body, a basic structure that achieves amplitude in the give-and-take of debate and discussion among the entire group of participants. Some of the points raised during the course of the conference deserve reiterating, as do one or two observations that arose in discussion or in the papers.

Thus, it seems worthwhile to recall James Gilreath's observation that in studies of eighteenth-century Virginia and of literary culture in early New England we encounter 'a seamless web of readers in which books appeared magically and circulated without regard to class, region, profession, or any other variable.' This criticism has wide application beyond the two examples that Gilreath specified. Generalizations about readers, distribution, publishing, and printing no longer satisfy unless they pay close attention to context. One context, as described from the floor by Alfred Young (Northern Illinois University), was economic and social inequality; referring to artisan and urban worker cultures in cities such as Boston in the Revolutionary period, Young suggested that certain forms of print culture should be understood as means of protest and self-assertion.

Indeed, many of the papers for the conference touched in one way or another on power. If we consider printing (or print culture) as synonymous with information, then it seems axiomatic that information is a form of power to which some have greater access than others. Similarly, the ability to read and the ability to write (especially the latter) are forms of empowerment that were unevenly available. Yet the thrust of discussion, and perhaps even more so of the formal papers and commentaries, was to reemphasize the connections between printing and pluralism or democracy. An explicit theme of Stout and Hatch's survey of the religious press, the democratic structure —or, if one wishes to speak of *process*, the democratization—of print culture in America, emerged implicitly in Grimsted's essay on popular culture and Botein and Jaffee's on expertise. With the exception of Gilmore, no one found it useful or necessary to speak of 'underground' printing (as Darnton has done so ably for eighteenth-century France) or of the role of the state in limiting freedom of the press.

Debate on these issues did not always conclude in agreement. The most explicit disagreement concerned texts and their transmittal: to what extent should historians undertake bibliographical research before they can proceed in confidence? Meanwhile, it was suggested that bibliographers put their skills to work answering questions of importance to historians, for example, the relationship between 'mis-en-page' and the ways in which a given text was read or appropriated. This exchange of expectations may not have satisfied either party, but it was exactly in keeping with the purpose of the Worcester conference. Similarly, it was in keeping with the purpose of the conference that it entertained pleas for progress on an improved national bibliography of American imprints and on preserving the records of American publishers. The southerners in our midst complained of an imbalance of references to other sections of the country, a complaint any westerner could have voiced as well. A conference may avoid situations of risk and

fall back to the safety of familiar ground. This was not the case at Worcester. The legacy of this conference includes a number of provocative arguments and interpretations—Pretzer's fusion of labor history and the history of technology, Gilmore's argument for a 'reading revolution,' the theme of authority as unifying social history and the history of the book, the broad rethinking of elite and popular culture, the possibilities and limitations of bibliographical methods, to name several.

In between the lines, as it were, two other assertions emerge from the papers and commentaries. The first is that texts elude restrictions. Print culture is singularly open-ended. For that matter, so are the boundaries that we try to draw around printers, publishers, or communities of readers. I conclude with this paradox: books, though products of specific material and social formations, can never be equated with any one interpretation, social group, or form of power. Like the Cheshire cat in *Alice in Wonderland,* the printed book teases us with its tangibility, while remaining just beyond our grasp or comprehension.

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