

Knygos mokslas:
istorija, teorija, raiška

HAS BOOK HISTORY A FUTURE?

SIMON ELIOT

Institute of English Studies, University of London
Room 239, Senate House, Malet Street WC1E 7HU, UK
E-mail: simon.eliot@sas.ac.uk

Book history is already a large subject, but it will need to expand still further if it is to survive and flourish. In particular, we need to know more about how, in the past, information was transmitted from place to place and from period to period. We shall need to know about how roads functioned. We shall need to know much more about inland waterways and coastal trade, and about transoceanic routes. The development of postal, banking and credit systems must be studied, as must the development of national and later international telegraphic systems. New forms of information transmission introduced in the last two centuries, such as photography, the telephone, cinema, radio, television, video and the web, need to be better understood. All this requires that we view book history in a much broader context, i. e. as part of the history of communication. The integration of the history of the book and of communication will ensure that the subject will be large enough to be internally consistent, and that it will be too large and too important ever to suffer the fate of smaller and less relevant disciplines.

Key words: book history, communication, text, information, transport.

In one sense this is an absurd question, for it can be answered vigorously and positively simply by looking at the number of books and articles published each year on the subject. The discipline is clearly alive and well.

In many ways this is true, and it is heartening. Does this mean that we can relax and just let the subject take its course, whatever that proves to be? No, I think not, because such a laid-back view cannot be an adequate answer to my question. Any old

future for Book History is not good enough and doesn't get to the core of my question. Perhaps I should re-phrase the question: what sort of future is there for Book History?

It is a question all relatively new disciplines should ask. Thirty or forty years ago there were conferences on the 'history of ideas' and that seemed a promising and vigorous subject. Where is the History of ideas now? It's around, of course, and feeds use-

fully into other subjects, but it cannot be regarded as a major and recognised discipline. This may not in one sense be too worrying; as long as there are people practising it, it survives, and that should be enough.

But I don't think that it is enough. Now, at this point I am going to ask for your forgiveness, for I am going to be cynical but, I hope, also practical. Those at the beginning of their academic career need above all else to be practical and pragmatic. Let us talk, therefore, about Book History's public profile. In the modern world where those in higher education are more and more dependent, for their jobs and for promotion, on gaining grants from regional, national and international agencies, a public profile, a high public profile, is very important. To put it crudely, as a scholar who wants to make more than just a living, you have to be in a subject that has an international profile high enough to attract grants, or government support, or support from the EU. That is much more easily done if the grant-awarding bodies know what you do, and like what you do. This is not an argument for compromising intellectual integrity, and it is not an argument for doing what our masters want us to do, but it is a reason for being concerned about the current health of our subject and its future prospects. That's one practical argument that should encourage us to worry about, and therefore plan, the future of book history.

There is another argument which will be equally important in helping to determine the future of the subject. Any worthwhile

academic discipline will tend to grow in size and scope. Not forever, of course, but to a size at which it is internally consistent, has the ability fully to integrate its various parts, and has boundaries that touch but do not intrude into other disciplines.

Consider now Book History. If we take the Darnton circuit as a crude model for the current subject area, we might say that Book History covers the history of authorship, the history of publishing, the history of distribution, the history of consumption, and the history of preservation. This is quite an ambitious range, and is surely big enough for any subject.

No, it is not. Even with these aspects we don't have a subject that will explain very important phenomena that Book History claims to deal with. For the moment, just let me take some examples from the 19th century. Book History as currently practised will not explain how and why Charles Dickens made more money out of his public readings than out of his novels in the last ten years of his life. It will not explain why, in the UK, newspapers were much more important and profitable than books in the 19th century. It will not explain how copyright publishing was co-ordinated throughout the world in the late 19th century. Book History's future will not be clear and certain until we realise that, despite its already large size, it will have to expand its scope if it is to be a self-consistent, self-supporting subject. Like any large building, Book History needs large and deep foundations. If the foundations are not big enough, the superstructure will fail and fall.

Let me try to explain this by using an analogy from ship building. If this sounds far-fetched, let me just remind you that the trade across the Atlantic between the UK and the USA, something that helped to determine the Anglophone hegemony visible in the twentieth century, would probably not have emerged in its recognisable form had not books, and magazines, and newspapers, and printed sheets and stereotype plates crossed and re-crossed the Atlantic in such volumes and at such speeds.

Planners and engineers first thought of the possibility of establishing a transatlantic route served by ships driven by steam in the early 19th century. Steam ships, given that they were not subject to the vagaries of the wind, could establish not only faster but also more regular, more efficient services. The problem was that a steam ship would have to carry enough fuel, in the form of coal, to power it for three thousands miles without re-fuelling. Those who thought purely in terms of taking an existing sailing ship and converting it into a steam-powered one, or building a new steam-driven ship but on the same scale as previous ships, immediately hit a problem. Such a vessel would not be able to carry enough coal to power it across the whole of the Atlantic unless it carried nothing but coal. There would be no room for any passengers or any goods. It was the great engineer, Isambard Kingdom Brunel, who saw that increasing the size of the ship, through increasing the size of the engine needed to drive it and thus the quantity of coal needed to power it, increased the ship's

capacity by much more.¹ That is, a steam ship twice the size of the average sailing ship would have plenty of room for all the coal needed, as well as enough extra room for goods and passengers. This discovery led to that magnificent triumvirate of Brunel-designed ships: the *Great Western*, the *Great Britain* and the *Great Eastern*. As has been said in many other contexts – and in subjects far less seemly than book history – size matters.

Size is going to matter to book history and its future. It may be argued that the discipline is already large enough, and to encourage it to encompass more would result in the subject over-reaching itself and consequently achieving less. But, unless the practitioners of book history can scale up their subject, there is a grave danger that it will lose momentum and miss its mark, or simply fall back into the status of a minor, almost invisible, branch of history. This subject of scaling-up is something that I shall return to.

To plan Book History's future, we shall need to consider both the threats to our subject and the opportunities for our subject. If we can deflect these threats and exploit these opportunities, then we shall ensure the growth and success of this most promising of disciplines.

Firstly, let me list three main threats to the subject. As with all the most dangerous

¹ For a ship of given dimensions, its resistance to motion through the water is the square of those dimensions; the capacity of a ship's hull, however, is the cube of those dimensions. See [5].

threats, these mostly come from within. They are parts of the subject, and important parts, but if they get too large or too active then they threaten the very system that they would otherwise enrich.

The first problem: much of Book History was originally based on bibliography and the traditions of textual criticism. These are vital and important. But they can also attract a particular sort of temperament: the compulsive, the obsessive; those who seek for perfection and completeness in an imperfect world. This neurotic accumulation of detail has been aided and abetted by Information Technology, by computers. You now can have an almost infinite amount of storage for other texts or objects that in some way affect your critical text. So a textual critic can have every proof stage and every edition, impression, and state available. You can have every letter and every critical reaction. You can almost have a one-to-one relationship with reality set up in a digital environment. You can avoid the editors' responsibility to decide, to judge one reading more likely than another, you can avoid committing yourself. In many ways this fits very well with the modern intellectual temperament. Most people seem fearful to make wholly positive or narrative statements; everything is dissolved into a fluid subjectivity and relativity in which no one is vulnerable or can be caught out because no one commits himself or herself to anything. Electronic editing can become a way of continually amassing material and never coming to judgement.

The second danger is a sort of regional antiquarianism. Many Book Historians devote themselves exclusively to the pursuit of one author or even one book. Like all other threats to Book History, there is nothing wrong in this *per se*: most subjects must rest on the basis of masses of individual studies. Bob Patten's marvellous study of Dickens's publishing history [3], or Jim Seccord's remarkable survey of the impact of *The Vestiges of Creation* [6] are good examples of such works. However, we all have some obligation, however obsessive we are about, say, *Anne of Green Gables*, to draw back and see the bigger picture. We have an obligation to relate our micro-studies to broader macro-studies so that the wider significance of our work can be properly understood.

The third danger comes from the academic origins of many of us, and that includes me. I was fortunate that in my first degree I read as much history as literature, but nevertheless my first degree was in literature. Many came to Book History from literature, others have fled from literature as the relentless, grinding glacier of modern literary theory flattened and smoothed and finally hid the landscape. But that having been said, some of us carry a taste for theory with us. Now there is nothing wrong in this, as long as it is real theory. By that, I mean a proposed model that can be tested by data. Our subject is book *history*, and history and historical procedures must be at the heart of what we do. By all means theorise, but do so in ways that produce models of how things work so that

they are testable, or more accurately, to use Karl Popper's words, 'falsifiable'. Those of you who are signed up to SHARP-L will know what I mean: the questions that provoke the most vigorous debates are about the definition of words, or to take the most recent popular debate, finding new words for reading electronic texts. We should perhaps be slightly less keen on counting the number of angels congregating on the head of a pin, and more concerned with how that pin was manufactured, how much it was sold for, and how it was used.

Now let's stop being negative, and think about the opportunities and advantages that Book History offers.

The first advantage is that Book History is not just a historical discipline, but a material-based discipline. Our main subject, text, was devised, produced, copied, distributed, consumed and stored in the real material world and has left abundant physical evidence of its presence. In that sense, Book History is in many ways much closer to archaeology than to cultural history. We must always emphasise the materiality of our subject – and not just the materiality of the printed book. The material emphasis allows us to look at clay tablets, fragments of papyrus, parchment-based codexes, as well as printed books and ephemera.

The second advantage is that Book History is naturally international and trans-continental. We started with the History of the Book in France in the 1970s and 1980s. We have spent the last thirty and more years writing national book histories: of Britain,

of the USA, of Canada, of Australia, of Ireland, of Scotland, and so on and so forth. The trouble with this, and we all know it, is that books are, to use Don McKenzie apt adjective, 'promiscuous'. They cross national boundaries, they cross ideological boundaries, they cross class boundaries. In the late 19th century, perhaps 30% of Britain's books were exported abroad, and the proportion became even greater in the early 20th century. To understand British books, to understand any book market, one has to look at texts going out of the country and coming into the country. Books are, by definition, mobile and permeating. Book History in Europe is about dissolving borders and diffusing books.

This very conference, which brings speakers from, of course, Lithuania, but also Belarus, Estonia, Finland, France, Latvia, Poland, Russia, Slovenia, Sweden, and the UK, is a case in point. HIBOLIRE is a vivid expression of this internationalism, as is the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing (SHARP) with over a thousand members from a multitude of countries. SHARP was not something that came after the national histories. We set it up in 1991, before any national histories in English-speaking countries had been published, though France got there before us, of course. Internationalism in Book History is not an after-thought, it is a necessary early step towards realising a do-able and long-term form of Book History.

I myself am currently working on the trade in textbooks 1800–1920 between

the UK, India and South Africa. I am also heavily involved in International Book History as general editor of the four-volume *The History of Oxford University Press* which we cannot write but as a history of OUP's global outreach, at least in the 20th and 21st centuries.

The third advantage of Book History is that texts and images that are reproduced and copied in any way are not the preserve of an elite, or of a particular section of society. In some way or other, texts affect all parts of a society: even those who cannot read will see cheap woodcuts and will hear the literate read, whether it is the Bible or the latest sensational account of a murder in a newspaper. Nor is book history, though many of its current practitioners might think so, just about literature. It is about textbooks, cookery books, books and magazines about celebrities; it is also about the hugely valuable market for scientific, technical and medical – STM – publications. Text, from the popular newspaper to the technical journal, finds its way into every aspect of society.

Now that we have our three threats and our three advantages, how are we to make the best of what we have got? How are we to encourage Book History to grow and to flourish in the future?

Whenever interviewed by a newspaper or television journalist, the first question I'm asked is a variation of: 'is the book dying?' or 'when and how will the electronic book take over?' Now that the Kindle has arrived on the international scene, I suspect

that this question will be posed even more frequently. We don't need to concern ourselves here about the naiveté of the question, or the nature of the answer. What is important is that, as far as popular interest in book history goes, we are being forced to view the book in a larger and more dynamic context: in the context of technology, of economics, and of social interaction. That context is, for want of a better phrase, the history of communication.

This ungainly phrase identifies, I would argue, the best way in which book history can avoid the threats to its future and can exploit its advantages to the full. It is a commonplace to say that the book and the periodical – indeed, almost any form of text you wish to name – are converging with the technologies of film, radio, television, DVD and the Web. This convergence is being driven by economic and social factors, and is being shaped by the material world in which that convergence is being realized. So far, so obvious, and if we are not to think of book history as having its terminal dates set by the partial decline of the printed codex, we are going to have to follow it. But this is only the largest and most recent example of what has always been the case in book history.

For instance, in order to understand the success of 'publishers', such as Atrectus or Tryphon [2], in Rome in the first century AD, it is not enough to detail what we know about the titles he produced. We need to understand the supply of papyrus, the economics of slave production, the na-

ture of retailing in Rome and the transport systems between cities that allowed bookshops in the provinces to sell new and second-hand books in considerable numbers [1]. To take another example: in order to understand the success of the first W. H. Smith in distributing newspapers, we need also to comprehend the transformation of the British road system by the early 19th century, the technology of the new coaches [4] that ran upon the new turnpike roads, and the timetables that governed the mail coach system. Indeed, we also need to understand the evolution of the postal system in the late 18th century and costs of newspaper distribution linked to them [7]. A final example: if we are to understand the significance of the huge expansion in the export of printed matter and, more significantly, the export of literary property in the 1880s and 1890s, then we need to contextualise it. This context would include an understanding of national laws and international conventions governing copyrights and patents, but also a sense of the way in which the steamship had transformed the speed and reliability of international commerce. It would also require us to understand the ways in which national and international telegraphic cabling systems had made possible the complex coordination of simultaneous or sequenced publication dates – linked to copyright release – over two or more continents. In other words, the inescapable truth is that books, serials, maps, music, graphic prints and ephemeral texts have always used, indeed, have always been

part of, the broader system of information generation and transmission in society.

I am not arguing that this sort of integrated study never happens now. On the contrary, late medievalists, for instance, have long been aware that printing shops were more likely to flourish where there were easy communications by river or existing trade patterns provided by a port. What we need to do now is turn this sort of ‘thinking in systems’ into second nature for book historians. When we think about nineteenth-century newspapers, we should be thinking about the all-weather goods and people transport system provided by the new railways, we should be thinking about the standardization of time through the telegraph wires that paralleled the railway tracks – and we should be thinking of the printing and distribution of railway timetables that followed this standardization. We should be thinking of railways offering long (and short) distance transport to international exhibitions in Europe and the USA, and of the flood of cheap guidebooks that were issued in response to the needs of day trippers and tourists. We should be thinking about the new reading environment created by the railway carriage (and the lighting technology that supported it), and the commuters served by local and national newspapers sold from station bookstalls whose limited display space forced booksellers to think very precisely of how selling space was to be allocated between books, newspapers, and travelling rugs. When we write about publishing in Brit-

ain in the Second World War, we shall need to take into account – not peripherally but centrally – the Ministry of Information, paper supply, the BBC and the process of dropping millions of leaflets and newsletters from bombers over Europe.

As the history of communication inevitably has to think about transporting physical goods and the cost of doing that, it will also have to take the materiality of the book seriously. Books have, since their emergence from the mud of Sumeria, been made objects whose raw materials and manufacturing processes represented a real cost to the community or to the individuals who produced them. This cost may have been just a cost (as in the production of a lectionary by a monastery for that monastery's sole use) and thus never converted into a price. Nevertheless, cost is important, for it indicates in a forceful, undeniably human, way the value a book had for that community or those individuals who produced and used it. However, most forms of book production would go one stage further and express the cost-plus-profit in the form of a price. Whether one was selling a made-to-measure Book of the Dead in Egypt to an upwardly mobile but probably still illiterate family, or a copy of a play by Aristophanes to the theatre-going public in Athens in the fourth century BC, or a copy of Martial's poems in a shop just off the forum in first-century Rome, or hiring out a pecia to an indigent student in thirteenth-century Paris, or selling printed accounts of the last words of the executed man to the crowds surround-

ing the gallows in early nineteenth-century England, what one was actually doing was measuring the material worth of a text to its potential reader. A book historian who ignores prices will never understand the value of a book. An intimate understanding of incomes, costs and prices in the material world is something that book history is going to have to cultivate as soon as it can. Without it, we shall never be able to account for, or calibrate, the importance and value given to texts by communities and individuals at any time in the past.

I hope that all I have said will suggest that if Book History grows into a History of Communication, all its advantages will be seen to the full: its materiality, its natural internationalism, and its ability to affect all types and parts of society.

We do not have to call it by this ugly phrase, 'the history of communication'. After all, already 'Book History' means much more than the history of books as we deal with clay tablets, papyrus rolls, the electronic book and newspapers, as well as the codex. We can keep the name as long as we expand the subject.

But how are we then to extend ourselves into these larger dimensions? What is happening now, and what is likely to happen in the near future, that will help us to build and run this much larger ship successfully?

In part it will happen naturally: as we ask these bigger questions the subject will have to extend its reach to answer them. But we mustn't be too relaxed. We must also give the subject a push in the right direction. Now I

hear you say: ‘it’s all very well Eliot saying this, but what is he doing about it?’

Well, I am doing a little, and it is with this that I shall finish. In May 2009, I arranged a symposium of about twenty-five people – those studying ancient Sumeria and Babylonia, those studying ancient Egypt, Classical Greece and Rome, Medievalists, and modernists, those interested in railways and postal systems – to discuss the idea of a ‘History of Communication’. We spent a profitable and enjoyable day and found that, for instance, a paper on the use of ‘Royal Roads’ in ancient Assyria had various links with a discussion of the trade in medieval manuscripts and with a discussion about the telegraph systems in Europe in the 19th century. We decided that this was such a profitable idea that we should set up a series of symposia beginning next year.

Here is the provisional programme.

First symposium

1. Roads and their cultures.
2. Postal systems.

Second symposium

3. Libraries as relay stations.
4. Anthologies and anthologizing.

Third symposium

5. Maps and diagrams.
6. Tabulating information.

Fourth symposium

7. Banking and money transfer.
8. Shipping and freight.

Fifth symposium

9. ‘I’m OK, you’re OK’: communication as a process of standardisation, normalisation and reassurance.
10. Censorship and control

Sixth symposium

11. Conveying bad news.
12. Misreading and misinformation.

Each symposium will comprise a couple of two-hour seminars. Each seminar will consist of three or four twenty-minute papers followed by a discussion. From these papers we hope to compile a book which will provide the first accessible survey of the subject. Beyond this, we hope to involve participating individuals and their institutions in the creation of a modest ‘Virtual museum of communication’ on the Web.

It’s just a beginning, but an encouraging one. If it works out as we hope it will, then I think we can be confident that Book History will grow into the subject that it always promised to be.

REFERENCES

1. DIRINGER, David. *The Book Before Printing*. New York: Dover Publications, 1982, p. 237.
2. HOWELL, Peter. *A Commentary on Book One of the Epigrams of Martial*. London: Athlone Press, 1980, p. 107.
3. PATTEN, Robert L. *Charles Dickens & His Publishers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978.
4. ROBINSON, Howard. *Britain’s Post Office*. London: Oxford University Press, 1953, p. 102–114.

5. ROLT, L.T.C. *Victorian Engineering*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974, p. 85–86.

6. SECCORD, James A. *Victorian Sensation*. Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

7. WILSON, Charles. *First with the News*. London: Jonathan Cape, 1985, Chapter 3.

AR KNYGOS ISTORIJA TURI ATEITĮ?

SIMON ELIOT

Santrauka

Knygos istorijos ateitis vis dar miglota. Šiuo metu ji klesti, bet tai dar nereiškia, kad taip bus ir ateityje. Knygos istorija – platus dalykas, bet ji ir toliau turi plėstis, kad apimtų visas sritis, kurias reikia išstudijuoti aiškinant, kaip kuriami, dauginami, platinami, naudojami ir saugomi visokių rūšių tekstai (įskaitant periodinius leidinius, brošiūras, trumpalaikius spaudinius ir knygas). Mums ypač svarbu daugiau žinoti, kaip informacija buvo perduodama per laiką ir erdvę praecityje. Teks išsiaiškinti, kokie buvo keliai Asirijoje, Romos imperijoje, Kinijoje ir Japonijoje bei XVIII ir XIX šimtmečių Europoje. Reikia plačiau tirti, kaip tokie krašto vidaus vandenių keliai, kaip Tigras ir Eufratas, Nilas, Jangtzi ir Reinas, padėjo tenkinti skaitytojų bendrijų poreikius, ar dažnai buvo prekiaujama knygomis Graikijos ir Romos imperijų bei Viduramžių Europos pakrantėse. Reikės suprasti transokeaninių kelių svarbą knygos pramonei XVIII ir XIX amžiais. Įvairių kultūrų pašto sistemų atsiradimas atliko lemiamą vaidmenį knygų prekyboje, taip pat bankų ir kredito sistemų pajėgumas visiškai aptarnauti knygų muges ir plėtoti tarptautinę knygų prekybą. Nacionalinių, o paskui ir tarptautinių telegrafo sistemų diegimas XIX amžiaus pabaigoje leido įgyvendinti tarptautinę autorių teisių ir išnaudoti literatūrinės

nuosavybės sistemas. XVIII ir XIX amžiais atsirado nauji informacijos perdavimo būdai (įskaitant fotografiją, telefoną, kiną, radiją, televiziją, vaizdo ir tinklo techniką), kurie tiesiogiai veikia knygą ir jos aplinką. Todėl turime žvelgti į knygos istoriją platesniame kontekste – kaip į komunikacijos istorijos sudedamąją dalį. Komunikacijos istorija garantuoja, kad šis dalykas bus pakankamai platus save paaiškinti ir pakankamai svarbus, kad nepatirtų smulkesnių ir mažiau svarbių disciplinų likimo. Kai kurie knygos istorikai jau juda šia kryptimi, o nauji poslinkiai Londono universitete, kaip tikimės, padės pagreitinti šiuos procesus. 2010 m. rengiame seriją simpoziumų apie komunikacijos istoriją: kelius ir jų kultūras, pašto sistemas, bibliotekas kaip informacijos perdavimo stotis, antologijas ir jų rengimą, žemėlapius ir diagramas, informacijos tabuliaciją, bankus ir pinigų pervedimą, laivinkystę ir krovinių gabenimą, komunikaciją kaip standartizavimo, reguliavimo ir patikimumo procesą („Man gerai ir tau gerai“), cenzūrą ir kontrolę, blogų žinių perdavimą, klaidingą perskaitymą ir dezinformaciją. Tikimės šios serijos pagrindu išleisti knygą. Be to, per artimiausius metus ketiname įkurti kuklų virtualų komunikacijos muziejų žiniatinklyje.

Įteikta 2010 m. sausio mėn.