

Introduction

This is a history book about the history of history books, and about the experiences of some of their readers in the two and a half centuries following the arrival of printing in England. As readers, we now take it for granted that history is to be found principally in books. Yet that is a matter of practice, and has not always been the case.¹ There is, in fact, no law, natural or otherwise, that necessitates the placing of historical discourse into a hard or paperbound codex. Nor does it take place there exclusively, for all our stress on the book. Historical knowledge can be acquired in other forms also, ranging from the academic or popular journal (closest cousin of the book), to television, film, Internet discussion groups, and military board games. Other academic disciplines, especially in the natural and social sciences, have already deprived the book of its status as the dominant vessel for the communication of knowledge. Humanists, and especially professional historians and literary scholars, are especially wedded to its preservation. In large part this is because the cultural and economic structures of honour and reward (promotion, prizes and fellowships, merit increases) that we have erected within our academic micro-society still privilege the book above all other forms of presentation – most notoriously in the now commonplace requirement of a monograph, published with a reputable press, in order to secure tenure in most North American departments of history. While rumors of the “death of the book” appear to have been greatly exaggerated, there is no question that the turn of the millennium and the advent of the Information Age have rendered the status of books in general, and expensive academic books in particular, uncertain at best.

It is somewhat surprising, therefore, that there is very little available in print about the history of the history book *as* book. This is all the stranger if one considers that there are two well-developed, if entirely unconvergent,

¹ For the significance of the transition from roll to codex in the history of access to information, see Michael Hobart and Zachary Schiffman, *Information Ages* (Baltimore, 1998); Roger Chartier, *Forms and Meanings: Texts, Performances, and Audiences from Codex to Computer* (Philadelphia, 1995).

Cambridge University Press

0521780462 - Reading History in Early Modern England

D. R. Woolf

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2

Reading history in early modern England

grand streams of modern humanist scholarship that deal with areas related to each of the terms in the phrase “history book.” The more recent is the history of the book in general, and its related subfields, the history of reading and the history of libraries. The first has been pioneered in American and especially French scholarship, in particular the work of certain *Annales*-influenced historians, beginning with Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin’s famous *The Coming of the Book*.² The second has a more complicated parentage, deriving not just from intellectual history, but also from continental (especially German) and American literary theory (reader-response theory in particular), cognitive psychology, philosophy and hermeneutics.³ The third, library history, has a slightly older history and has now wedded an older, Anglo-American textual tradition and physical bibliography (focused mainly on issues of provenance, ownership, watermarks, bindings, and so on) with a social history approach that pays attention to the owners as well as their collections. With articles on book history appearing daily, and the advent of journals such as *Libraries and Culture*, *Book History*, and *Publishing His-*

² The literature on all these topics is enormous, and growing by the day, and I shall not attempt a complete bibliography here. The modern history of the book may be said to have begun with Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin, *L’Apparition du Livre* (Paris, 1958), trans. D. Gerard and ed. D. Nowell-Smith and D. Wootton as *The Coming of the Book* (1984). Since Febvre and Martin, the historiography of the book has taken off, especially in the past twenty years. Martin himself has been among the leaders of the *histoire du livre* in France: see, for instance, his *Le livre français sous l’Ancien Régime* (Paris, 1987) and *Print, Power, and People in Seventeenth-Century France*, trans. David Gerard (Metuchen, NJ, 1993). The most wide-ranging recent studies, and most influential because of their frequent translation into English are those of Roger Chartier, including *The Cultural Uses of Print in Early Modern France*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Princeton, 1987) and his briefer study of libraries and their users, *The Order of Books: Readers, Authors and Libraries in Europe Between the Fourteenth and Eighteenth Centuries*, trans. Lydia G. Cochrane (Oxford, 1994). A similarly important study of a particular type of cheap-print book is Robert Mandrou’s still untranslated *De la culture populaire aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles: La Bibliothèque Bleue de Troyes*. Chartier’s approach, unlike Martin’s and others, emphasizes the cultural uses of books (and print in general) rather than relying on quantification of such issues as book ownership and production rates. In North America, Robert Darnton has adopted both approaches in a series of important studies, beginning with *The Business of Enlightenment: a Publishing History of the Encyclopédie, 1775–1800* (Cambridge, MA, 1979); his subsequent studies include essays collected in *The Kiss of Lamourette: Reflections in Cultural History* (New York and London, 1990) and *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (New York, 1995). While she has not published a monograph on the subject, the essays of Natalie Zemon Davis have also been profoundly influential beyond French borders, in particular *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, 1975). Although much criticized and controverted, Elizabeth Eisenstein’s enormous *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (Cambridge, 1979) is an important and seminal work from or against which much of the scholarship of the 1980s and 1990s has emerged.

³ See, e.g., Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: a Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore, 1978); Philip Davis, *The Experience of Reading* (London and New York, 1992); Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans. Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis, 1982). The high tide of reader response in the United States came in the 1980s in the wake of such works as Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, MA, 1980) and Susan Suleiman and Inge Crosman (eds.), *The Reader in the Text: Essays on Audience and Interpretation* (Princeton, 1980).

Cambridge University Press

0521780462 - Reading History in Early Modern England

D. R. Woolf

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

3

tory, not to mention collaborative projects such as the British Reading Experience Database (RED), the history of what has collectively, if uneasily, been called “print culture” is clearly booming. It has also been given considerable attention by scholars of early modern England, both historical and literary, the fruits of whose efforts are obvious in important studies by Margaret Spufford and Tessa Watt.⁴

The other grand stream is the history of history, a major part of the overall activity that is usually called “historiography.” Historians are proud of their discipline and its achievements. As a resolutely backward-looking lot we have never been shy about examining the origins of our discipline, though we have generally done so in a highly whiggish way that celebrates the pioneers of modern critical methods and historicist appreciation of change and individuality. These are assumed, rather than demonstrated, to have been the illuminated chamber of truth toward which our more courageous and visionary predecessors were feeling their way, stumbling grittily through a maze of half-lit passages blocked by myth, error, anachronism, and partisan or religious bigotry. We have evaluated past historians and historical scholars (including some, such as antiquaries, philologists, and epigraphers, who are not always deemed historians-proper) almost entirely according to the standards practiced by our discipline in its post-Rankean, modern shape. In Anglo-American historiography, this tendency has been especially noticeable, from early twentieth-century surveys by the likes of James T. Shotwell, James Westfall Thompson, and Harry Elmer Barnes, up to the more recent textbook by Ernst Breisach, which is at least more guarded in picking winners and losers among the historians of past eras.⁵

⁴ Margaret Spufford, *Small Books and Pleasant Histories: Popular Fiction and its Readership in Seventeenth-Century England* (1981); Tessa Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety, 1550–1640* (Cambridge, 1991); for an influential study of the press and German popular literature, see Robert Scribner, *For the Sake of Simple Folk: Popular Propaganda for the German Reformation* (Cambridge, 1981). An early and still valuable study is H. S. Bennett, *English Books and Readers*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, 1952–70). Most recently the entire subject of what precisely is meant by “print culture” has been unpacked by Adrian Johns in his *The Nature of the Book* (Chicago, 1998).

⁵ James T. Shotwell, *The History of History* (New York, 1939); James Westfall Thompson, *A History of Historical Writing*, 2 vols. (New York, 1942); Harry Elmer Barnes, *A History of Historical Writing* (Norman, OK, 1937); Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: ancient, medieval, and modern*, 2nd edn (Chicago, 1993). A briefer, English account exhibiting many of the same whiggish features can be found in a book by Herbert Butterfield (the very author who coined the phrase “Whig interpretation of history”), *Man on His Past: the Study of the History of Historical Scholarship* (Cambridge, 1955). Most recently, a focus on not simply method but on the even narrower question of the creation of a modern “profession” can be found in John Kenyon’s *The History Men: the historical profession in England Since the Renaissance* (1983). For alternative approaches, highlighting the social context of history-writing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and especially the hitherto neglected issue of gender, see Maxine Berg, *A Woman in History: Eileen Power, 1889–1940* (Cambridge, 1996) and Bonnie G. Smith, *The Gender of History* (Cambridge, MA, 1998). Cf. Billie Melman’s essay, “Gender, History and Memory: The Invention of a Women’s Past in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries,” *History and Memory*, 5 (1993), 5–41.

Cambridge University Press

0521780462 - Reading History in Early Modern England

D. R. Woolf

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Within the narrower compass of histories of early modern English history-writing, one sees laid out the steps in this passage to modern scholarship from the end of the Middle Ages to the early Hanoverian period (the unit of time taken by the present book). From David Douglas' *English Scholars, 1660–1730*, first published just before World War II, through F. Smith Fussner's *The Historical Revolution* (1962) and F. J. Levy's *Tudor Historical Thought* (1967), right up to recent works by scholars such as Joseph M. Levine, Michael Hunter, and Arthur Ferguson, scholars of early modern English historiography have, to varying degrees, bought into a progressive account of the development of English history writing, antiquarian research, and archaeological methods, and by extension, of the main currents in the history of what we now call the “discipline” in other countries.⁶ Most of these works also deal with briefer spans of time. The year 1640, which marks the end of Pollard and Redgrave's *Short-Title Catalogue* and the beginning of the Long Parliament, has often provided the dividing line between the Tudor and early Stuart period of Renaissance historiography (Levy, Fussner, Ferguson), and its Restoration and Augustan successor (Douglas, Levine). Levine's *Humanism and History* covers the whole period, but its essays are discrete snapshots rather than a continuous account, and the greater weight of its material is drawn from the later, Augustan age.⁷

Works concerned with the development of ancillary studies have also concentrated on advances in the development of historical conceptualization or historical method, though not in quite the same way. J. G. A. Pocock's classic *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law*,⁸ an incisive study of the formation of the modern notion of feudalism within the context of seventeenth-century political debates and arguments about the development of law, has the virtue of placing the texts it dissects within a richly defined contemporary context. Pocock's work covers the legal side of antiquarianism, and though its analysis of this is both incisive and balanced, it is still

⁶ David C. Douglas, *English Scholars 1660–1730* (revised edn, 1951); T. D. Kendrick, *British Antiquity* (1950); F. J. Levy, *Tudor Historical Thought* (San Marino, CA, 1967); Arthur B. Ferguson, *Clio Unbound: Perception of the Social and Cultural Past in Renaissance England*, (Durham, NC, 1979); Joseph M. Levine, *Humanism and History: Origins of Modern English Historiography* (Ithaca, NY, 1987) and *The Battle of the Books: History and Literature in the Augustan Age* (Ithaca, NY, 1991); D. R. Woolf, *The Idea of History in Early Stuart England* (Toronto, 1990); J. A. I. Champion, *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken: the Church of England and its Enemies, 1660–1730* (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 25–98.

⁷ The period between 1640 and 1660 has been rather less well-served, but see Royce MacGillivray, *Restoration Historians and the English Civil War* (The Hague, 1974); R. C. Richardson, *The Debate on the English Revolution*, 3rd edn. (Manchester, 1998); and Nicholas von Maltzahn, *Milton's History of Britain: Republican Historiography in the English Revolution* (Oxford, 1991). A detailed study of the historical writing of the civil war and interregnum is badly needed.

⁸ J. G. A. Pocock, *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law: a Study of English Historical Thought in the Seventeenth Century. A Reissue with a Retrospect* (Cambridge, 1987).

Cambridge University Press

0521780462 - Reading History in Early Modern England

D. R. Woolf

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

5

framed in terms of identifying how the “correct” interpretation of English feudalism and of the origins of the common law emerged from political and legal debates of the seventeenth century.⁹ Michael Hunter’s exemplary works on the connections between archaeology, history, and natural history avoid judging contemporaries by modern standards, but remain focused on issues of methodology, albeit well situated within their social context.¹⁰

There can be little doubt that there were, in fact, important methodological and conceptual developments during the Tudor and Stuart centuries. These are rather more obvious on the antiquarian and philological side than in mainstream narrative historiography, where the degree of change has been considerably overstated, as classical and Renaissance models of history writing and ideas about the proper functions of a good history remained influential. Recent studies of late seventeenth-century histories by Martine Watson Brownley and Philip Hicks have quite properly emphasized the rhetorical and stylistic boundaries of historical form during this period, and have thereby dropped some much-needed, sobering rain on the celebratory parade leading from the early Tudor chroniclers to Enlightenment masters such as Edward Gibbon.¹¹

There is little need to revisit most of these topics here. The present work is less concerned with the sense of the past than with “history proper,” but *not* with historical texts as such: my goal, quite simply, is to combine historiography with the history of books, readers, and libraries. The focus is on early modern England, though the same approach could just as easily be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to eighteenth-century France, nineteenth-century Germany, or twentieth-century Japan and the United States.¹² This is not, in

⁹ The archaeological side, focusing on the study of old objects (coins, fossils, and great monuments like Stonehenge) has been dealt with in a parallel literature by Levine (in *Humanism and History*) and by authors such as Stuart Piggott (a practicing archaeologist with a highly positivist view of the development of his discipline), Graham Parry (a literary scholar), and Michael Hunter, a historian of knowledge and latterly science who offers a somewhat cooler evaluation of early modern archaeology, especially in the published and unpublished writings of John Aubrey. These works do not suffer from the same fixation on the text of the authors they study, but nor do they address questions of readership, ownership and contemporary reception of such works. See in particular Stuart Piggott, *Ruins in a Landscape: Essays in Antiquarianism* (Edinburgh, 1976) and *Ancient Britons and the Antiquarian Imagination: Ideas from the Renaissance to the Regency* (London, 1989); Graham Parry, *The Trophies of Time: English antiquarians of the seventeenth century* (Oxford and New York, 1995); Stan A. E. Mendyk, “*Speculum Britanniae*”: *Regional Study, Antiquarianism and Science in Britain to 1700* (Toronto, 1989); Michael Hunter, in particular in his *John Aubrey and the Realm of Learning* (1975).

¹⁰ Hunter, *John Aubrey and Science and the Shape of Orthodoxy: Intellectual Change in Late Seventeenth-Century Britain* (1995).

¹¹ Martine W. Brownley, *Clarendon and the Rhetoric of Historical Form* (Philadelphia, 1985); Philip Hicks, *Neoclassical History and English Culture: from Clarendon to Hume* (New York, 1996).

¹² An enormously important, but underused, work of this sort is Bernard Guenée’s *Histoire et culture historique dans l’Occident médiéval* (Paris, 1980).

Cambridge University Press

0521780462 - Reading History in Early Modern England

D. R. Woolf

Excerpt

[More information](#)

other words, a book about historians. Although the familiar names of early modern historiography from Polydore Vergil through Raphael Holinshed, from William Camden to William Stukeley, feature prominently herein, I am not in the least concerned with their interpretations of the past, their methods, their literary style, or even the social environment within which they wrote their texts. Nor, unlike Pocock, Quentin Skinner, John Dunn and the “Cambridge School” of political thought am I much interested (here) in the linguistic context of those texts. Rather, the present work is devoted to the after-life of historical texts, as words written on paper or parchment made their way from author through printer and publisher and into book form; how those books then were distributed and marketed; who was collecting them and for what reasons; where and how they were stored, retrieved and shared; and how readers made sense of them.

Those questions are, for reasons made clear in chapter 2, answered in reverse order, beginning with readers, after an opening study of the emergence of various historical genres from the medieval and Tudor chronicle. My reason for doing this is to avoid falling into another trap, that of regarding the transmission of historical knowledge as a vector in one direction, from author to reader, with every step along the way being simply that of a retransmitter. On the contrary, readers very clearly used what they read, revised it in various ways, lent their books to others, and ultimately shaped the commercial boundaries of what could be published. Readers represent not the end of a line, but a component in an on-going system of knowledge production that Robert Darnton once called a communications circuit, but which is far more dynamic and complex than even that useful metaphor suggests. This is not to say that the historians themselves will pass unmentioned, but where they and their antiquarian and biographical colleagues figure in this account (other than simply being identified as the authors of a particular book owned, read, annotated, printed, or sold) it is as then-living humans, actively engaged themselves in reading other works, and interacting with their booksellers, printers, and colleagues.

In his magisterial recent study *The Nature of the Book*, the emphasis of which is on scientific books (and, to a lesser extent, on early histories of printing), Adrian Johns has argued forcefully that the text conceived of and written by authors, even very famous and influential authors, is not necessarily identical to the text that is finally presented in book form. Moreover, Johns contends, authors and readers alike were aware of this and thus deeply skeptical of what they read in print, tending to place greater trust, as the seventeenth-century wore on, in works attributed to authors of high social standing or at least of unimpeachable moral character.¹³ All manner of

¹³ In this argument, Johns has been influenced by recent studies of the social construction of early modern science, especially Steven Shapin's *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago, 1994).

Cambridge University Press

0521780462 - Reading History in Early Modern England

D. R. Woolf

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

7

influences could intrude to shape, revise, and alter an author's words. These could be relatively minor, as in the revisions enforced by copyeditors and proofreaders, or much more serious, as in cases of outright piracy, where a book was printed allegedly without its author's permission, or with the wrong author's name attached. Johns' account of the mechanics of book production and dissemination apply largely to the history of science, but it is not at all difficult to extend them to another major branch of *scientia*, broadly defined, namely history, which by the eighteenth century had become for most lay readers the single most important branch of literature other than fiction or religion. By the time of Addison and Defoe, and *a fortiori* a few decades later at the time of Hume and Robertson, historical knowledge had become an essential mark of respectability, ease in its discussion an essential part of the training of young men and, for slightly different reasons, young ladies.¹⁴

How it got that way has, of course, a great deal to do with the work of the chroniclers, historians, biographers, and antiquaries who wrote the texts that became books, but they were certainly not the only authors of this development. F. Smith Fussner was probably right to suggest in 1962 that there was a "historical revolution" in England. Unfortunately, he identified the wrong things as revolutionary (history-writing) and he located his revolution in far too brief, and early, a span of time between 1580 and 1640. The true historical revolution in England was not the late Elizabethan and early Stuart working-out of proper historical method, or, as Arthur Ferguson would have it, that era's discovery of the idea of long-term social change. Rather, the revolution, which was a slow one, lay in the much longer-lasting change in sensibility, taste, and manners that turned history first from the minor pastime of a small number of monastic chroniclers and civic officials into a major area of study and leisurely pursuit of university students, lawyers, aspiring courtiers, and ordinary readers, and thence into a much more broadly appealing genre that straddled the worlds of scholarship and literary culture. One has simply to compare the smallish number of historical texts listed in Pollard and Redgrave's *Short-Title Catalogue* up to 1640 with the immense growth in historical titles registered by Donald Wing's successor catalogue, and the explosion of titles in the *Eighteenth-Century Short-Title Catalogue*. Alternatively, one can compare the limited, classically and biblically focused historical discussions of a very small segment of highly educated people, mainly men, in the sixteenth century with the almost daily conversations, familial readings, public performances, and correspondence discussions of historical issues in the eighteenth century, among both men and women, involving nearly everything about the past, British, European, and Asian, as well as the older classical and biblical material.

¹⁴ D. R. Woolf, "A Feminine Past? Gender, Genre, and Historical Knowledge in England, 1500–1800," *American Historical Review*, 102.3 (June 1997), 645–79.

Cambridge University Press

0521780462 - Reading History in Early Modern England

D. R. Woolf

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The chronological boundaries of the present book are, with occasional glances earlier and later, from the beginnings of printing in England in 1475 to the year 1730, the latter a somewhat arbitrary date but one, as it turns out, that fits well with some of the materials used, for example the bookseller's stockbook analyzed in appendix A. The story told within those dates, which is really several interlocking stories, begins with the Indian summer of the earliest form of history book in England, the chronicle. The definitive and indeed virtually only form of history book available to most history readers throughout the Middle Ages, the chronicle at first appeared to have adapted itself quite happily to the age of print. A significant number of new chronicles were produced for the press in the first three-quarters of the sixteenth century, and the chroniclers at first had little competition other than a handful of ancient historians. Unlike the case in Europe, where classically inspired humanist historiography was already half a century old at the advent of print (especially in Italy and to a lesser extent in France and Germany), there was at first no rival to the English chroniclers. Humanist history did not take hold, the work of early Tudor Italian emigrés such as Polydore Vergil notwithstanding, until the very end of the sixteenth century, and the chronicle thus seemed to have the field to itself. Yet by the 1570s the chronicle had begun a final and precipitate fall from grace. It virtually vanished as a printed genre (editions of older medieval chronicles excepted) in the seventeenth century, even while its annalistic format remained popular as a means for private readers to organize what they had themselves read elsewhere. Yet one must be very cautious in assigning too clear a link between the demise of the chronicle and the influence of humanism. The chronicle's eclipse owed a good deal to its humanist competition, to be sure, but also to a much-changed marketplace for history, and to the fact that many of the functions it had previously served could now be better served by other historical genres whose authors freely borrowed the contents of the chroniclers while eschewing their literary form. My account pays due attention to the conventional humanist critiques of the faults of chroniclers, but attempts to set these against broader social and economic trends that made the chronicle not simply a literary and methodological but also a commercial dinosaur. To put it another way, humanist historiography was indeed the mortal enemy of the chronicle, but not in the rather simplistic way that this has usually been understood.¹⁵

From the carcass of the chronicle there emerged many other, complementary forms of historical work: poems, plays, antiquarian tracts, humanist "politic histories," and, via a slightly different route connected more directly with religious concerns, biographies of humbler sorts of folk. Chapter 2

¹⁵ For an attempt to redress this balance, from a different perspective than that offered here, see Annabel Patterson, *Reading Holinshed's Chronicles* (Chicago, 1994).

Cambridge University Press

0521780462 - Reading History in Early Modern England

D. R. Woolf

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

9

looks at the sorts of books that readers were reading and, in particular, at *how* they read them, paying close attention to note-keeping techniques, and linkages made between the reader's own knowledge of other work and the words he or she was reading. A recent and influential school of thought, associated primarily with Anthony Grafton, Lisa Jardine, and William H. Sherman, has stressed the careful, deliberate and focused reading, rereading and rereading performed by certain classically trained scholars such as Gabriel Harvey and John Dee, who made of the texts in front of them not what the author said, but what they required the author to have said at that particular moment.¹⁶ Individual sentences or paragraphs would be glossed and reglossed, contextualized within several different webs of meaning generated by other texts. I believe this to be a correct interpretation of the methods and motives of a good many well-documented late Renaissance readers, and offer one or two similar seventeenth-century examples. But it was not the only style of reading at play in England during this period, and it diminished in relative importance as the Renaissance petered out. Accordingly, I argue here for a rather more pluralistic model of history-reading in early modern England, a model which allows for Grafton, Jardine, and Sherman's version of what is sometimes called (though not by them) "intensive" reading, but also for a much more leisurely form of "extensive" reading that follows little pattern beyond the individual reader's tastes, personal concerns, and daily whims.¹⁷ I suggest that by the end of the period covered here, in the early eighteenth century, the more informal style of history-reading was considerably more widely practiced than the "humanist" style so much in evidence a century before, though one could still find both practiced at different times by the same reader.

With chapter 3 the present study begins to become more quantitative, examining the issue of history-book ownership: how many people possessed what sort of books. The sources for this include published and unpublished wills and inventories, and private library lists. The methods used are extended in chapter 4, which deals with the related topic of the place of history

¹⁶ Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine, "'Studied for Action': How Gabriel Harvey Read his Livy," *Past and Present*, 129 (1990), 30–78; Anthony Grafton, *Commerce with the Classics: Ancient Books and Renaissance Readers* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1997); William H. Sherman, *John Dee: the Politics of Reading and Writing in the English Renaissance* (Amherst, MA, 1995).

¹⁷ The idea of a shift from intensive to extensive reading is not a new one and is in some danger of being oversimplified. Taken up by Darnton and by Chartier, it originates in the idea of a "reading revolution" promulgated by the German scholar Rolf Engelsing in his *Der Bürger als Leser: Lesergeschichte in Deutschland, 1500–1800* (Stuttgart, 1971). The two modes are not, of course, incompatible since the same reader might well study one work repeatedly while perusing many others in less detail. For an eighteenth-century illustration, see John Brewer, "Reconstructing the Reader: prescriptions, texts, and strategies in Anna Larpen's reading," in James Raven, Helen Small, and Naomi Tadmor (eds.), *The Practice and Representation of Reading in England* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 226–45.

Cambridge University Press

0521780462 - Reading History in Early Modern England

D. R. Woolf

Excerpt

[More information](#)

books in libraries, but with the focus now less on individual than on institutional owners, and on the challenges, physical and intellectual, of storing, retrieving, and accessing a swelling stream of historical works during the two centuries between the dissolution of the monastic libraries and the advent of the Hanoverian circulating libraries. In neither of these chapters is the goal to discover exactly what copy of which edition of what author belonged to a particular reader, and where it came from. Exhaustive reconstruction of the libraries of major bibliophiles from John Dee to Jonathan Swift and his lesser-known contemporary, Thomas Baker, has been the valuable work of a number of skilled bibliographers. Rather than reinvent these wheels, I have chosen instead to draw upon modern critical editions of library catalogs and, in one important case, a major edited collection of book-owners' probate inventories, supplementing these with analysis of other library catalogs, inventories, account books, and related documents that have come to light in central and local archives.¹⁸ Rather than continuously interrupt the text with details of every history book contained in such lists, I have generally confined such listing activities to footnotes and, on occasion, to a number of tables and appendices.

In chapter 5 I move further along in the process that separates reader from author, to the production and economics of history-book production, revisiting at length a theme first raised in the chapter on chronicles. In this chapter I illustrate the prices at which different histories are known to have been bought and sold, arguing that publishers increasingly catered to social and economic inequalities by producing books that could sell, or that could be watered down into cheaper formats such as epitomes and abstracts. Chapter 6 continues in this vein, exploring the means by which history books, once written, were drawn to the attention of prospective readers (sometimes, as in the case of subscription, before publication), and how, in the physical sense, they were distributed from the center to the periphery. Here again, my task has been considerably eased by the work of previous scholars who have studied such features of the book trade as auctions, subscription, and serialization.

The marketing techniques just mentioned were very much the creatures of a highly literate, book-oriented age in which historians had to compete with each other commercially as well as intellectually, and in which history itself was under threat by other types of writing, especially the novel. In order to understand how the historiographical marketplace of the eighteenth century came about, we must look first to an earlier time, at the dawn of the age of printing in England, when readers' choices were considerably more limited. We begin, therefore, with the rather tangled story of the decline and fall of the English chronicle.

¹⁸ Elisabeth Leedham-Green, *Books in Cambridge Inventories: Book-lists from Vice-Chancellor's Court Probate Inventories in the Tudor and Stuart Periods* (2 vols., Cambridge, 1986).