

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-17068-0 - Serial Publication in England Before 1750

R.M. Wiles

Excerpt

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## CHAPTER I

## 'NIMBLY THROUGH THE NATION'

For two hundred years the potential market in the English-speaking world has been large enough to absorb vast quantities of periodical literature and large editions of many books. The twentieth-century book-buying public is enormous, and it is likely to continue to be so unless rising costs of book production make retail prices too high or the charms of television permanently allure readers' eyes away from the printed page. These threats to the trade, however, are slight in comparison with the problems confronting the publisher at the beginning of the eighteenth century, when relatively few people could either read books or afford to buy them. There were then, as there have always been since the invention of printing, persons of means and discrimination who would willingly pay as much for a choice book as for a suit of clothes. There was then, as now, a limited group of learned and professional men to whom good books were as necessary as food and air—the men who bought most of the works listed in Robert Clavell's quarterly *Catalogue of Books Printed and Published at London* (1670–1709), in the *History of the Works of the Learned; or, An Impartial Account of Books Lately Printed in All Parts of Europe* (monthly, 1699–1712), and in the catalogues published by Lintot (1714–1715) and Wilford (1723–1730). These lists included many publications at moderate cost—playbooks, sermons, pamphlets, little volumes of fiction and poetry—which even the less 'polite' sections of the population would buy. Yet the bulk of the population at the end of the seventeenth century either had no money to spare for books or had no desire to buy them, for the good and sufficient reason that they could not read. Exact figures showing the extent of literacy are not available for that period, but it is probably reasonable to conjecture that in the early years of the eighteenth century the ratio of readers to non-readers in the whole population of the British Isles was lower than it has been in any decade since, and the figures for London by itself were probably not much better. In the present century books are bought by hundreds of thou-

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sands of readers, and there are literally millions of persons who do not hesitate to buy a well printed paper-covered book of three or four hundred pages for half a crown or half a dollar. In the year 1700 the equivalent of a twentieth-century half-crown or half-dollar would not have bought anything larger than a very thin pamphlet, for no publisher could hope to sell enough copies of a sizable quarto or octavo volume to justify his bringing out a large edition at a low retail price. The reading public was simply not big enough to absorb editions of more than a few hundred copies. The economic law correlating price, supply, and demand was inescapable; the problem was how to influence the demand so as to bring about an expansion of the trade—to induce more people to buy more books.

There is no doubt whatever that the book trade did expand. As the century advanced, more and more people were discovered to be interested in buying books. There are several reasons for this accelerated development of the market: new and improved schools substantially added to the number of persons who could read; prosperity brought notably increased purchasing power to the middle classes; and a strong impetus to reading was given by the *Tatler* and the *Spectator*, by the newspapers, which rapidly became numerous in town and country, and by the spirited writings of Defoe, Swift, and Henry Fielding. In addition to all these influences there was one remarkable innovation which must certainly have accelerated the book trade more than any other single force affecting the reading habits of our ancestors between 1700 and 1750. This was a new method of persuading people to buy books—big, expensive books—and the publishers themselves must take the credit for the discovery. The plan, admirably simple and amazingly successful, can be expressed in these terms: if the customer cannot or will not buy a book because he has not enough money, then sell it to him in portions, so many pages each month or each week, at a cash price so low that he cannot possibly resist. The plan worked. As was observed in the *Grub-Street Journal* number 148 on October 26, 1732, ‘This Method of Weekly Publication allures Multitudes to peruse Books, into which they would otherwise never have looked.’

It now seems surprising that no one had thought of the principle

earlier, for it offered advantages to everyone concerned. A book, no matter how big it is, has to be written page by page, and it is read page by page. Why not sell it page by page, or in batches of pages—exactly, indeed, as it is set up in type? For books are made up of sheets of paper which have been printed on both sides and then folded once, or twice, or thrice, or four times, according to the size of the page desired, the type having been set appropriately. Fold the sheet once and you have four folio pages; fold it twice and you have eight quarto pages, all accessible when the folded edges are cut open or trimmed off; fold it thrice and you have sixteen octavo pages; and so on. The sheets used for the printing of any one work will naturally have to be of uniform size, though in the eighteenth century other sizes were available<sup>1</sup> in addition to the standard, which was approximately sixteen by twenty inches. It takes 150 sheets to make a folio volume of 600 pages. Half that number will do for a quarto volume of 600 pages, since each sheet makes eight pages of moderate size instead of four large ones. What the eighteenth-century publisher discovered was that people who would not pay thirty shillings for a thick folio volume were quite willing to purchase the same book, three sheets at a time, by paying sixpence a week as they received the successive numbered parts (each a fascicule or 'number'). It was a principle which the author and the publishers of *The Pickwick Papers* and *Nicholas Nickleby* found useful in the 1830's; indeed it was the common practice of Dickens, Thackeray, Surtees, Trollope, and several other Victorian novelists to publish a new work in 'parts' before issuing it as a complete book, though the nineteenth-century 'parts' or 'numbers'—unlike those of the preceding century—were complete units, beginning and ending with unbroken sentences. The fact is that the piecemeal publishing of books was well established a hundred years before Dickens put pen to paper.

Little attention has hitherto been paid to the earlier phases of serial publication. Since the age of Fielding and Johnson stands significantly in the records largely because of Fielding and Johnson themselves, together with a few of their most distinguished contemporaries, literary

<sup>1</sup> See Graham Pollard, 'Notes on the Size of the Sheet', *Library*, 4th ser., XXII (Sept.-Dec. 1941), 105-37.

historians and bibliographers have quite properly focussed attention upon these important writers, the great 'producers' of literature. In reviewing the cultural trends of England in the eighteenth century, however, one should not ignore the 'consumers', especially when their number increased so remarkably in that period. Increase in the number of readers can be looked upon both as a symptom and as a cause of cultural advance. There is something to be said, then, for observing how the practice developed of retailing literature in small parcels, both as instalments in newspapers and magazines and as numbered consecutive parts issued independently at regular intervals at low prices.

It is easy to assume that when the proprietors of eighteenth-century newspapers reprinted consecutive portions of books in their columns they did so because they were hard pressed for material and took to instalment printing as the least expensive method of filling space. It will be shown presently that such an assumption is not always justifiable. As for number books, it is equally easy—and much more erroneous—to suppose that only the most disreputable of printers would stoop so low as to wheedle pennies from soft-headed illiterates by specious promises of culture at bargain prices when (it is assumed) all they could offer was twopenny or sixpenny fragments of hack-written history, fourth-rate fiction, and dull theology, badly printed on poor paper. To a few of the number books issued before 1750 these harsh terms apply. Investigation shows, however, that although this issuing of books in numbered parts was sometimes only a paltry money-grubbing enterprise undertaken by a handful of book pirates on the outer fringes of the publishing business, it was a much more respectable and impressive thing than that, even in the course of the first few decades after the idea caught on.

Books had been published in parts as early as the last quarter of the seventeenth century, but it was not until a few works advertised in the *Tailer* (1709–1711) had proved successful that the possibilities of developing the piecemeal publishing of books into a thriving business began to be recognized. Prior to 1725 only a score of works were issued in consecutive parts; but during the second quarter of the eighteenth century the new experiment in book publishing expanded

with phenomenal success. The first real boom came in 1732, and (as the chronological register in Appendix B shows) the next eighteen years saw the number-book trade well established. Aggressive rivalry soon sprang up among booksellers, who hoped for large gains from the publishing of books in fascicules. It was reported in the *Grub-Street Journal* number 247 (September 19, 1734) that the Knaptons were expected to clear between eight and ten thousand pounds by their publication—first in monthly and then in weekly numbers—of Rapin's *History of England* in the English translation by Nicholas Tindal, in spite of the fact that a rival translation by John Kelly was at the same time being published in numbers by J. Mechell. Profits on other number books must have been considerable, too, for many works issued in fascicules were owned jointly by one or other of the 'congers' or by large groups of individual firms in temporary partnerships, the shares sometimes being in very small fractions indeed, such as one tenth of one third, one fifty-seventh, or three sixty-fourths. There is evidence showing that in the 1730's and 1740's the editions in numbers were in some cases as large as two or three thousand copies, and that in numerous instances particular numbers had to be reprinted because the demand for the work far exceeded the proprietors' expectations.

By the third quarter of the eighteenth century a majority of the books published piecemeal were mere pot-boilers; but they *did* sell. Lest it be supposed that the number-book business dwindled after 1750, attention should be drawn to the very extensive sale enjoyed by Smollett's *History of England* when published in weekly numbers by James Rivington and James Fletcher. There is in the British Museum a manuscript record<sup>1</sup> of the financial affairs of these two business partners at the time when Rivington's share was being taken over by William Johnston. This interesting document shows that Smollett was paid three guineas per sheet for writing the 332 sheets (making four volumes) of the *History*, plus five hundred pounds for revisions and additions; it shows that the sum of three hundred pounds was spent on advertising, two hundred pounds for printing 'very large Quantities of Proposals', and other sums for engraving maps, 'heads', etc.; it shows

<sup>1</sup> British Museum, Add. MS. 38730.

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that 13,000 copies were printed of each of the first fourteen weekly numbers, and that for the next eighty-three numbers 2,739,000 sheets of paper were required; it shows that 2281 reams of blue paper were used 'for the Wrappers of the said History'; it shows that Richard Baldwin of Paternoster Row was paid £ 7589. 5s. 'for printing and publishing four hundred and twenty one thousand six hundred and twenty five Numbers of Dr. Tobias Smollett's History of England', which numbers Baldwin had delivered to Rivington and Fletcher between February 25, 1758, and January 1, 1760. As literature and as history this work of Smollett's is undistinguished; but the figures in this financial statement make it hard to maintain that reading in England two centuries ago was restricted to a small inner-circle group of statesmen, aristocrats, and professional men who bought only *whole* books.

As will presently be shown, many of the substantial works which English readers were prevailed on to buy in weekly or monthly parts not only put money into the pockets of publishers but did much to stimulate both book buying and book reading. In 1839 C. H. Timperley, testifying to the enormous sums of money made by Alexander Hogg, John Cooke, and James Harrison by the publication of number books in the second half of the eighteenth century, declared that these Paternoster-Row numbers were 'calculated to catch the attention of mechanics'; but he did not hesitate to add that although it might be customary to kick the ladder down when it was of no further use, publications of this sort 'must be confessed to have greatly contributed to lay the foundation of that literary taste and thirst for knowledge which now pervades all classes'.<sup>1</sup> A little later Charles Knight asserted that the number-book trade was 'a necessary offshoot of that periodical literature which sprang up into importance at the beginning of the eighteenth century'. Periodical literature, he added, 'in all its ramifications, has had a more powerful influence than that of all other literature upon the intelligence of the great body of the people'.<sup>2</sup> If it be

<sup>1</sup> C. H. Timperley, *A Dictionary of Printers and Printing* (London: Johnson, 1839), p.838n.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Knight, *The Old Printer and the Modern Press* (London: John Murray, 1854), p. 217.

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objected that only the least intelligent readers would ever bother to buy a number book, and that men of letters like Fielding and Johnson would scorn such lowly sheets, let it be remembered that the inherent goodness or badness of a book does not depend on the number of its sheets released at a time; Johnson's own *Dictionary* was none the worse for being reprinted in weekly numbers shortly after the two folio volumes of the original edition had appeared in 1755. People who could not or would not spend money for a whole book were willing to buy it in inexpensive parts, paying the same total price in the end but being less conscious of the outlay. Such arrangements are common enough to-day, though seldom for the purchase of books.

Sometimes, of course, a book foisted on a too-gullible public was worthless. Fielding clearly implied in the introductory chapter to Book XIII of *Tom Jones* that booksellers of his time often turned the dead loss of an unsaleable remainder into clear gain, or made capital of an antiquated tome, by issuing it in instalments, for thus 'the heavy, unread, folio lump which long had dozed on the dusty shelf, piecemealed into numbers, runs nimbly through the nation'. Fielding was here denouncing an unscrupulous practice and at the same time testifying to its success, for by 1748, when these words were written, scores and scores of books—not all of them heavy folio lumps by any means—had run nimbly through the nation precisely because they had been piecemealed into numbers. Six years earlier Fielding, in the chatty introductory chapter in Book II of *Joseph Andrews*, had poked fun at the parcelling out of books. There the satirical novelist facetiously declared that even Homer not only divided his great work into twenty-four parts but 'according to the opinion of some very sagacious criticks, hawked them all separately, delivering only one book at a time (probably by subscription)'. It was Homer, indeed, that 'was the first inventor of the art which hath so long lain dormant, of publishing by numbers'. Even dictionaries were divided and exhibited piecemeal to the public, said Fielding derisively. But he was hardly fair when he added that one bookseller, to encourage learning and ease the public, had 'contrived to give them a dictionary in this divided manner for only fifteen shillings more than it would have cost them entire'.

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In the half century before Fielding wrote the words quoted from *Tom Jones* at least three hundred separate works in English were sold in numbered parts to subscribers and casual purchasers in London, in the provinces, and (a few of them) in the American colonies. Many other works were printed as serials in the columns of London and provincial newspapers or attached as supplements thereto. All these publications have significance in the history of our ancestors' reading, but particularly the number books, since the combined parts made up real folio, quarto, octavo, or duodecimo volumes. Booksellers of the present century often list them among other valuable second-hand survivals of earlier times without knowing that they once reached the original buyers in the form of slender packets of sheets, delivered at intervals of a month, a week, or a fortnight. Many a fat volume now given space on the shelves of a national or a university library is made up of sheets originally issued in groups of two or more, stitched together in blue paper covers, the first sheet in each fascicule having its special signature—'Numb. VII', or 'No. LXXVI'—to mark its place in the series. Except for this consecutive numbering of parts, these sheets differed in no respects from those used in making up any other book. Librarians may even be unaware that some of the most impressive looking volumes on their shelves are number books, for a fair proportion of the books published in weekly or monthly parts had no special signatures, the serial numbers being printed on the blue paper covers of the separate fascicules, which were removed when the work was bound.

Since it was common in the eighteenth century for books to be sold in sheets instead of in volumes ready bound, the only difference between buying, say, the 512½ sheets of Chambers's *Cyclopædia* (fourth edition, 1741) at one transaction and buying the same work three sheets at a time was that the latter arrangement enabled the customer to acquire the two folio volumes by paying sixpence a week instead of four guineas in a lump sum. What came back from the binder was the same in either case, though the buyer of the numbers could begin reading the early sheets of his book many months sooner than the man who preferred to wait until the whole had been printed, since more



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often than not the regular subscribers got the book in parts some time before the complete volume was on sale in the shops. That was naturally true of works written or translated especially for the number-book trade, for not all number books were reprints.

Whether reprints or originals, however, the books issued in numbers represent a surprisingly wide range of interests among the polite as well as among the less affluent sections of the population. Number books were commonplace when George Crabbe wrote *The Library* (1781), for many people were then finding their palates 'Cloy'd with a folio-Number once a week'.

Bibles, with cuts and comments, thus go down:  
 E'en light Voltaire is number'd through the town:  
 Thus physic flies abroad, and thus the law,  
 From men of study, and from men of straw . . . .

If fewer palates were cloyed half a century earlier it was not for lack of numbers. Between 1725 and 1750 all the important publishers of London were delivering every month or week great quantities of number-book parts to the houses of subscribers, or sending them 'smoking forth, a hundred hawkers' load',<sup>1</sup> to be sold in the streets.

The variety of subjects is remarkable. You could buy the Bible in numbers, with or without annotations; you could buy *Paradise Lost*, or *Don Quixote*, or Foxe's *Book of Martyrs*; you could buy collected sermons, songs, maps, plays, Latin classics, and reports of scientific research; you could buy the biography of Christ, of Cromwell, of Sir Walter Raleigh, of Queen Anne, of Quarll the hermit, of Peter the Great, of the kings of England, of the most notorious female robbers and 'pyratesses'; you could buy histories of England, of Ireland, of Scotland, of America, of China, of Rome, of the Ottoman Empire, of the British navy, of the Jews, of the Christian Church, of the Inquisition; you could buy dictionaries, encyclopedias, books of travel, records of famous trials, collections of rare documents; you could buy treatises on architecture, astronomy, conveyancing, painting, penmanship, physics, mathematics, topography, officinal herbs—everything, in fact, from anatomy to logarithms.

<sup>1</sup> Pope, *Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot*, l. 217.

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The mere enumeration of these subjects is enough to show that, whether frail or substantial, the number books were designed to appeal to a wide range of interests. At prices that sometimes were as low as a single farthing, sometimes went as high as half a crown, but usually were based on a rate of three halfpence or twopence per sheet, the weekly and monthly numbers would doubtless attract readers of moderate income. Again and again the advertisements make the claim that 'the Design of publishing Books in this manner Weekly is to lighten the Expence of them'. But the lists of subscribers make it perfectly clear that some, at least, of the more significant works published in numbers were taken by the most distinguished aristocrats in the kingdom as well as by ordinary citizens, university men, lawyers, schoolmasters, clergymen, surgeons, and tradesmen. Warren Hastings owned and used Claude Du Bosc's number-book edition' of *The Ceremonies and Religious Customs of the Various Nations of the Known World*—published in weekly numbers from 1733 to 1739—not the rival edition published by Nicholas Prevost in whole volumes. According to Thomas Tyers,<sup>2</sup> Samuel Johnson, in his desire to develop an elegant style of writing, 'set for his emulation the preface of Chambers to his *Cyclopaedia*', and it was the edition published in numbers in 1741 that Johnson had in his own library.<sup>3</sup> It can hardly be supposed that only lightermen, porters, and chimney sweeps bought the consecutive numbers of Rapin's *Acta Regia*, Elizabeth Blackwell's *Curious Herbal*, and the *Harleian Miscellany*. No one can be sure how many persons were really interested in reading works printed serially in newspapers, for the man who bought a newspaper got the instalment or the literary supplement willy-nilly, and if he glanced at anything besides news and advertisements it may often have been because he had

<sup>1</sup> Each of the seven volumes in the British Museum has the autograph of Warren Hastings on the title page.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Tyers, *A Biographical Sketch of Samuel Johnson* (1785), reprinted as the Augustan Reprint Society's Publication No. 34 (Los Angeles: William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, 1952), which see, p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> Item No. 487 in *A Catalogue of the Valuable Library of Books, of the Late Learned Samuel Johnson, Esq; LL.D. Deceased; Which Will Be Sold by Auction, (By Order of the Executors) By Mr. Christie, At His Great Room in Pall Mall, On Wednesday, February 16, 1785, and three following Days.*