SERIAL PUBLICATION IN ENGLAND BEFORE 1750

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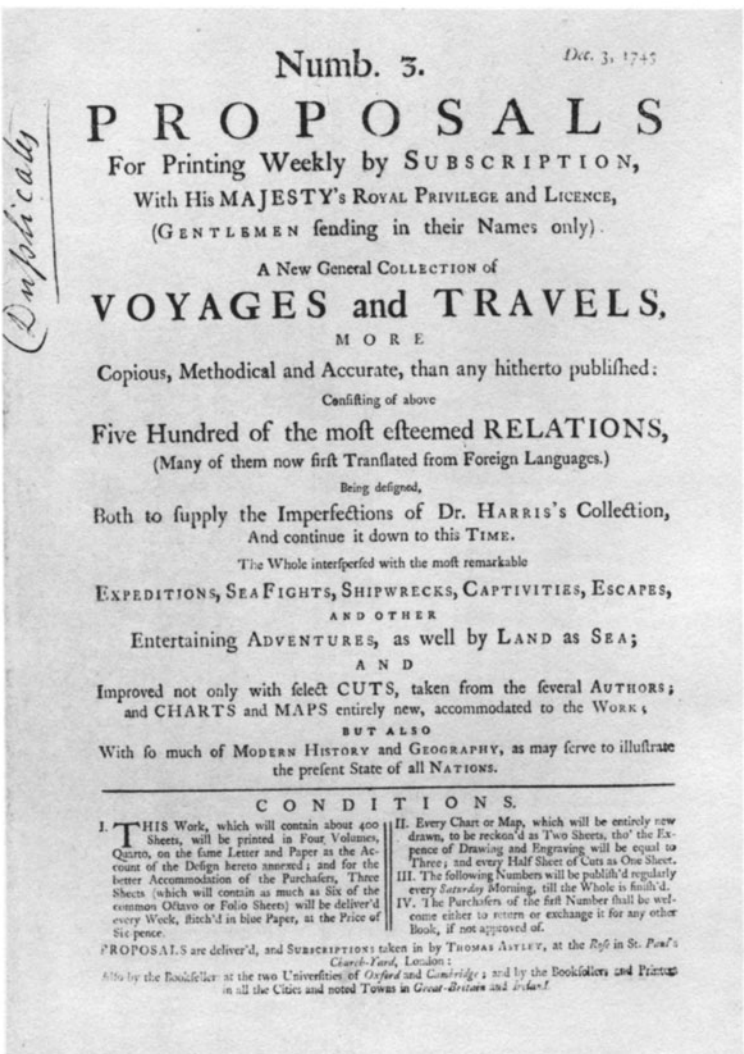

Numb. 3. Dec. 3, 1745

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1. Proposals of Astley's *Voyages*

SERIAL PUBLICATION IN ENGLAND BEFORE 1750

BY

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ILLUSTRATIONS

PREFACE

This book began as a brief introductory essay prefixed to a list of about 150 titles of works published in 'numbers' during the first half of the eighteenth century. As the list of titles grew, the introductory essay expanded into half a dozen chapters. What was at first intended only as a mildly interesting note for librarians has turned into a treatise on an important phase of England's literary history. Evidence of the growth of the reading public had earlier been seen in the phenomenal increase in the number of newspapers and other periodical publications. What is here discussed is a curious and extensive development of the book trade brought about by an entirely new mode of publishing and vending books. This was the device of issuing books in instalments. Publishers discovered that hundreds—even thousands—of people not previously interested in books would buy them if they could get them in inexpensive parts, piecemeal. It became quite the thing to buy books in monthly or weekly fascicules—that is, in small batches of printed sheets, folded, collated, and stitched in blue paper covers—at prices everyone could manage. Many of the books issued in fascicules (then called 'numbers') were reprints; but the publishers of several important new books deliberately chose to put them before the world in successive portions rather than in complete volumes. More than three hundred new and reprinted works were so issued before 1750, on almost every conceivable subject: history, theology, biography, fiction, travel, drama, music, mathematics, geography, architecture, astronomy, botany, anatomy, medicine, calligraphy—even carpentry. The extent of the trade is indicated by the sheer bulk of the short-title catalogue in Appendix B, and it is quite probable that within a year after this book is published a dozen or more works missing from the list will be reported.

This new branch of the book publishing business has not previously been studied with any thoroughness. Evidence brought forward here shows that during the first few decades after it was introduced, publishing in numbers became both highly competitive and highly remunerative for the booksellers, if not for the authors and compilers; it was

big business. But for most readers this study will have its chief value as an account of a hitherto unrecognized stimulus to increased literacy among the lower and middle classes of the English people two centuries ago.

The material examined has been principally the books themselves, now to be found in considerable numbers as bound volumes on the shelves of public and private libraries. Modern readers, and even some librarians, are unaware that these particular volumes were made up of sheets originally issued in weekly or monthly fascicules. Were it not for newspaper advertisements, indeed, relatively few eighteenth-century books would now be recognized as having been published in fascicules; certainly this present book could not have been written had the information which the newspapers provide not been available. Primary evidence as to the mode and frequency of publication, the selling price of each number, the dates on which runs began, sales, and profits, is to be found in these contemporary newspaper advertisements, in editorial comments, letters, trade-sales catalogues, printers' ledgers, and in other records, both printed and in manuscript.

I have not managed to see a copy of every book published in numbers before 1750, and I confess that I have not read very far into those I have examined. My bookworm zeal ordinarily took me through scores of massive volumes from cover to cover with no more than a swift and purely physical nibbling; it did not often happen that a work which I knew to have been published in fascicules proved so engaging that I suspended my search in order to feast on mental sustenance. Perhaps I was warned by the fable of the man who laboured long to separate wheat from chaff and at the end of the task was given the chaff as reward. Among the number books there is no lack of dusty chaff. It will perhaps distress some readers to find that my object has been to display the variety of number books rather than to appraise their intrinsic worth one by one or to describe them with bibliographical exactitude.

For courteous assistance in finding these books, records, advertisements, and other materials I am happy to record my thanks to the librarians of the British Museum, the Bodleian, the Cambridge University Library, the National Library of Scotland, the Library of

Lambeth Palace, the Sion College Library, the Public Record Office, the Worshipful Company of Stationers and Paper Makers, the Folger Shakespeare Library, the Library of Congress, the Harvard College Library, the Harvard Law School, the Yale University Library, the New York Public Library, the American Archaeological Society, the Parliamentary Library at Ottawa, the Ontario Legislative Library, the University of Toronto Library, the Toronto Reference Library, Osgoode Hall, the Nova Scotia Barristers' Society, the Hamilton Law Association, and the McMaster University Library. To these librarians and their courteous assistants I am grateful, for they have enabled me to spend many pleasant hours in a harmless and often diverting piece of research. I feel, and here record, a special kind of gratitude toward McMaster University, whose liberal grants enabled me to visit great libraries in Britain and America.

For particular kindnesses I should also like to express cordial thanks to Messrs Longmans, Green and Company, to Mr. Cyprian Blagden, to Mr. Graham Pollard, to Dr. Laurence Hanson, to Mr. Sidney Hodgson, to Mr. R. A. Austen-Leigh, to Dr. Giles E. Dawson, and to Professor James Sutherland. I have good cause also to thank the staff of the Cambridge University Press for unfailing courtesy and efficiency at every stage in the publishing of this book. To no one am I more indebted or more grateful than to my wife, upon whom (in Dogberry's phrase) I have bestowed all my tediousness, chapter by chapter. It will give her much relief to see this book in print.

R. M.W.

Hamilton, Ontario, Canada
December 1955

NOTE ON DATES

For two quite different but often confused reasons, literary historians dealing with the eighteenth century have to be especially careful in citing dates. One of these is the matter of Old Style and New Style. Until the Gregorian reform of the calendar was adopted in England in 1752, English dates were normally given in Old Style, which during the first half of the century differed by eleven days from the New Style already in use in Scotland and on the Continent. England's January 25, for example, came on the day which France and Scotland dated February 5. When the change was effected by Act of Parliament in 1752, the eleven days were dropped, Wednesday, September 2 being followed by Thursday, September 14. This particular anomaly does not have to be considered in the present work, for no document, book, fascicule, or newspaper referred to here as having been written or published in England before September 14, 1752 either was or is dated in New Style, and all dates given herein from September 14, 1752 onwards were and are in New Style. The universal use of Old Style in England prior to the official change to New Style is mentioned in this note only in order to emphasize the fact that this practice did not affect the dating of a publication except from the point of view of a person living outside of England.

The other and more noteworthy reason why special care is needed in giving eighteenth-century dates is that, until New Style replaced Old Style in England, the date that officially and, for many people, unofficially marked the beginning of a new year was March 25, not January 1. Some Englishmen preferred to consider—as all Englishmen do now—that one year ended and a new one began when the clocks ticked their way past midnight on December 31; for them, December 31, 1735 was followed by January 1, 1736. But the majority of people called that day January 1, 1735, on the well established principle that the change of year would not come until Lady Day, nearly three months later. More often than not, newspapers, letters, and documents both in manuscript and in print bearing dates between January 1 and March 24 were assigned—as entries in the Stationers' Register and

in the Journals of the House of Lords and the House of Commons invariably were—to the year we now consider to have ended the preceding December 31. For example, the *Tatler* number 93 was dated November 12, 1709; *Tatler* number 147, issued four months later, bore the date March 18, 1709, but clearly was published in the year we now call 1710. The eighteenth-century Englishman recognized the possibility of uncertainty or mistake, for double dates were sometimes used, in the forms

January 9, $173\frac{6}{7}$, February 12, $17\frac{25}{26}$, and March 21, 1741/2.

In the present work all newspapers and fascicules published between January 1 and March 24 inclusive have been regarded as falling within the same year as those published during the nine months which followed March, and where necessary the year dates have been silently adjusted accordingly. This has also been done with the dates of entries in the Stationers' Register. Dates in imprints of volumes have not been altered, however, even when it is known that the imprint date is one year early because of publication between January 1 and March 24.

In addition to the slightly confusing before-or-after-Lady-Day principle of dating, the works published piecemeal present a special problem of chronology, for the date that was printed on the title page of a book published in numbers depended on whether that title page was issued with the first fascicule of a volume or with the last. It is easy to see that if the general title page was issued with the last fascicule, as was usually done, the date in the imprint might be a year, or even two years, later than the date on which No. 1 was issued, the gap depending on the time of year at which the series began and on the length of the run. On the other hand it sometimes happened that the title page was issued as part of the first fascicule, in which case the date in the imprint might be as much as a year or two in advance of that on which the work was completed. So far as consistency is both desirable and possible, each number book mentioned in the text or chronological Catalogue of the present work is assigned to the January-December

year in which the first fascicule reached the subscribers, no matter what date appears in the imprint of the completed volume. Particular examples are discussed in the introductory paragraphs of Appendix B.

Dates of the month are given in the form which most eighteenth-century writers preferred: August 15, 1736, not 15 August 1736.