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PART I

THE EMERGENCE OF PRINT CULTURE IN THE WEST

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CHAPTER ONE

An Unacknowledged Revolution

In the late fifteenth century, the reproduction of written materials began to move from the copyist's desk to the printer's workshop. This shift, which revolutionized all forms of learning, was particularly important for historical scholarship. Ever since then historians have been indebted to Gutenberg's invention; print enters their work from start to finish, from consulting card files to reading page proofs. Because historians are usually eager to investigate major changes and this change transformed the conditions of their own craft, one would expect the shift to attract some attention from the profession as a whole. Yet any historiographical survey will show the contrary to be true. It is symbolic that Clio has retained her handwritten scroll. So little has been made of the move into the new workshops that after five hundred years, the muse of history still remains outside. "History bears witness," writes a sociologist, "to the cataclysmic effect on society of inventions of new media for the transmission of information among persons. The development of writing, and later the development of printing, are examples."[1] Insofar as flesh-and-blood historians who turn out articles and books actually bear witness to what happened in the past, the effect on society of the development of printing, far from appearing cataclysmic, is remarkably inconspicuous. Many studies of developments during the last five centuries say nothing about it at all.

[1] N. St. John, Book review, *The American Journal of Sociology* 73 (1967): 255.

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There is, to be sure, a large, ever-growing literature on the history of printing and related topics. Several works that synthesize and summarize parts of this large literature have appeared. Thus Rudolf Hirsch surveys problems associated with "printing, selling, reading," during the first century after Gutenberg. A more extensive, well-organized volume by Febvre and Martin, which skillfully covers the first three centuries of printing and was first published in a French series devoted to "the evolution of humanity," has recently been translated into English.[2] An even broader coverage, embracing "five hundred years," is provided by Steinberg's remarkably succinct semi-popular survey. All three of these books summarize data drawn from many scattered studies. But although the broader historical implications of these data are occasionally hinted at, they are never really spelled out. Like the section on printing in the *New Cambridge Modern History*, the contents of these surveys rarely enter into treatments of other aspects of the evolution of humanity.

According to Steinberg: "The history of printing is an integral part of the general history of civilization."[3] Unfortunately, the statement is not applicable to written history as it stands, although it is probably true enough of the actual course of human affairs. Far from being integrated into other works, studies dealing with the history of printing are isolated and artificially sealed off from the rest of historical literature. In theory, these studies center on a topic that impinges on many other fields. In fact, they are seldom consulted by scholars who work in any other field, perhaps because their relevance to other fields is still not clear. "The exact nature of the impact which the invention and spread of printing had on Western civilization remains subject to interpretation even today."[4] This seems to understate the case. There are few interpretations even of an inexact or approximate nature upon which scholars may draw when pursuing other inquiries.

[2] Lucien Febvre and H.-J. Martin, *The Coming of the Book – L'Apparition du Livre*, tr. David Gerard (London, 1976).
[3] S. H. Steinberg, *Five Hundred Years of Printing*, rev. ed. (Bristol, 1961), 11.
[4] Rudolf Hirsch, *Printing, Selling and Reading 1450–1550*, rev. ed. (Wiesbaden, 1974), 2.

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The effects produced by printing have aroused little controversy, not because views on the topic coincide, but because almost none has been set forth in an explicit and systematic form. Indeed, those who seem to agree that momentous changes were entailed always seem to stop short of telling us just what they were.

"Neither political, constitutional, ecclesiastical, and economic events, nor sociological, philosophical, and literary movements can be fully understood," writes Steinberg, "without taking into account the influence the printing press has exerted upon them."[5] All these events and movements have been subjected to close scrutiny by generations of scholars with the aim of understanding them more fully. If the printing press exerted some influence upon them, why is this influence so often unnoted, so rarely even hinted at, let alone discussed? The question is worth posing if only to suggest that the effects produced by printing are by no means self-evident. Insofar as they may be encountered by scholars exploring different fields, they are apt to pass unrecognized at present. To track them down and set them forth – in an outline or some other form – is much easier said than done.

When authors such as Steinberg refer to the impact of printing on every field of human enterprise – political, economic, philosophical, and so forth – it is by no means clear just what they have in mind. In part at least they seem to be pointing to indirect consequences which have to be inferred and which are associated with the consumption of printed products or with changed mental habits. Such consequences are, of course, of major historical significance and impinge on most forms of human enterprise. Nevertheless, it is difficult to describe them precisely or even to determine exactly what they are. It is one thing to describe how methods of book production changed after the mid-fifteenth century or to estimate rates of increased output. It is another thing to decide how access to a greater abundance or variety of written records affected ways of learning, thinking, and perceiving among literate elites. Similarly, it is one thing to show that

[5] Steinberg, *Five Hundred Years*, 11.

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standardization was a consequence of printing. It is another to decide how laws, languages, or mental constructs were affected by more uniform texts. Even at present, despite all the data being obtained from living responsive subjects; despite all the efforts being made by public opinion analysts, pollsters, or behavioral scientists; we still know very little about how access to printed materials affects human behavior. (A glance at recent controversies on the desirability of censoring pornography shows how ignorant we are.) Historians who have to reach out beyond the grave to reconstruct past forms of consciousness are especially disadvantaged in dealing with such issues. Theories about unevenly phased changes affecting learning processes, attitudes, and expectations do not lend themselves, in any event, to simple, clear-cut formulations that can be easily tested or integrated into conventional historical narratives.

Problems posed by some of the more indirect effects produced by the shift from script to print probably can never be overcome entirely. But such problems could be confronted more squarely if other impediments did not lie in the way. Among the far-reaching effects that need to be noted are many that still affect present observations and that operate with particularly great force upon every professional scholar. Thus constant access to printed materials is a prerequisite for the practice of the historian's own craft. It is difficult to observe processes that enter so intimately into our own observations. In order to assess changes ushered in by printing, for example, we need to survey the conditions that prevailed before its advent. Yet the conditions of scribal culture can only be observed through a veil of print.

Even a cursory acquaintance with the findings of anthropologists or casual observations of preschool-age children may help to remind us of the gulf that exists between oral and literate cultures. Several studies, accordingly, have illuminated the difference between mentalities shaped by reliance on the spoken as opposed to the written word. The gulf that separates our experience from that of literate elites who relied exclusively on hand-copied texts is much more difficult to fathom. There is nothing analogous in our experience or in that of any living creature within the Western world at present. The conditions of scribal culture thus have to be artificially reconstructed

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by recourse to history books and reference guides. Yet for the most part, these works are more likely to conceal than to reveal the object of such a search. Scribal themes are carried forward, postprint trends are traced backward, in a manner that makes it difficult to envisage the existence of a distinctive literary culture based on hand copying. There is not even an agreed-upon term in common use which designates the system of written communications that prevailed before print.

Schoolchildren who are asked to trace early overseas voyages on identical outline maps are likely to become absentminded about the fact that there were no uniform world maps in the era when the voyages were made. A similar absentmindedness on a more sophisticated level is encouraged by increasingly refined techniques for collating manuscripts and producing authoritative editions of them. Each successive edition tells us more than was previously known about how a given manuscript was composed and copied. By the same token, each makes it more difficult to envisage how a given manuscript appeared to a scribal scholar who had only one hand-copied version to consult and no certain guidance as to its place or date of composition, its title or author. Historians are trained to discriminate between manuscript sources and printed texts; but they are not trained to think with equal care about how manuscripts appeared when this sort of discrimination was inconceivable. Similarly, the more thoroughly we are trained to master the events and dates contained in modern history books, the less likely we are to appreciate the difficulties confronting scribal scholars who had access to assorted written records but lacked uniform chronologies, maps, and all the other reference guides which are now in common use.

Efforts to reconstruct the circumstances that preceded printing thus lead to a scholarly predicament. Reconstruction requires recourse to printed materials, thereby blurring clear perception of the conditions that prevailed before these materials were available. Even when the predicament is partly resolved by sensitive scholars who manage to develop a genuine "feel" for the times after handling countless documents, efforts at reconstruction are still bound to be frustratingly incomplete.

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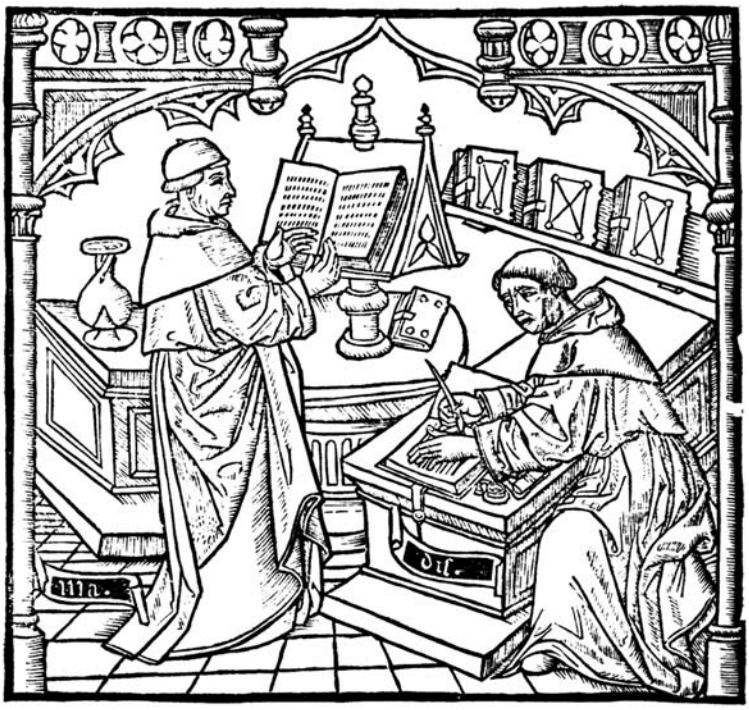
For the very texture of scribal culture was so fluctuating, uneven, and multiform that few long-range trends can be traced. Conditions that prevailed near the bookshops of ancient Rome, in the Alexandrian Library, or in certain medieval monasteries and university towns, made it possible for literate elites to develop a relatively sophisticated "bookish" culture. Yet all library collections were subject to contraction, and all texts in manuscript were liable to get corrupted after being copied over the course of time. Outside certain transitory special centers, moreover, the texture of scribal culture was so thin that heavy reliance was placed on oral transmission even by literate elites. Insofar as dictation governed copying in scriptoria and literary compositions were "published" by being read aloud, even "book" learning was governed by reliance on the spoken word – producing a hybrid half-oral, half-literate culture that has no precise counterpart today. Just what publication meant before printing or just how messages got transmitted in the age of scribes are questions that cannot be answered in general. Findings are bound to vary enormously depending on date and place. Contradictory verdicts are especially likely to proliferate with regard to the last century before printing – an interval when paper had become available and the literate man was more likely to become his own scribe.

Specialists in the field of incunabula, who are confronted by ragged evidence, are likely to insist that a similar lack of uniformity characterizes procedures used by early printers. To generalize about early printing is undoubtedly hazardous, and one should be on guard against projecting the output of modern standard editions too far back into the past. Yet one must also be on guard against blurring a major difference between the last century of scribal culture and the first century after Gutenberg. Early print culture is sufficiently uniform to permit us to measure its diversity. We can estimate output, arrive at averages, trace trends. For example, we have rough estimates of the total output of all printed materials during the so-called age of incunabula (that is, the interval between the 1450s and 1500). Similarly, we can say that the "average" early edition ranged between two hundred and one thousand copies. There are no

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Iodoci Ba. Aſcenſii. ut boni iuuenes ad litterarū ſtudia feruētius incūbāt cohortatio: cū
q̄dā huius opis & clariſſimi uiri Iohānis de trittenhem abbatis ſpanhē cōmēdatiūcula.

Fig. 1. Medieval scribe taking dictation, portrayed in a woodblock advertisement for J. Badius's firm in William of Ockham, *Dialogus* (Lyons: J. Trechsel, ca. 1494). Reproduced by kind permission of John Ehrman from Graham Pollard and Albert Ehrman, *The Distribution of Books by Catalogue to A.D. 1800* (Cambridge: The Roxburghe Club, 1965).

comparable figures for the last fifty years of scribal culture. Indeed, we have no figures at all. What is the "average edition" turned out between 1400 and 1450? The question verges on nonsense. The term "edition" comes close to being an anachronism when applied to copies of a manuscript book.

As the difficulties of trying to estimate scribal output suggest, quantification is not suited to the conditions of scribal culture. The production figures which are most often cited, on the basis of the memoirs of a Florentine manuscript bookdealer, turn out to

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be entirely untrustworthy. Quattrocento Florence, in any case, is scarcely typical of other Italian centers (such as Bologna), let alone of regions beyond the Alps. But then *no* region is typical. There is no "typical" bookdealer, scribe, or even manuscript. Even if we set aside problems presented by secular book producers and markets as hopelessly complex and consider only the needs of churchmen on the eve of printing, we are still faced by a remarkable diversity of procedures. Book provisions for diverse monastic orders varied; mendicant friars had different arrangements from monks. Popes and cardinals often turned to the "multifarious activities" of the Italian *cartolai*; preachers made their own anthologies of sermons; semi-lay orders attempted to provide primers and catechisms for everyman.

The absence of an average output or a typical procedure poses a stumbling block when we try to set the stage for the advent of print. Let us take, for example, a deceptively simple summary statement which I made when first trying to describe the printing revolution. Fifteenth-century book production, I asserted, moved from scriptoria to printing shops. The assertion was criticized for leaving out of account a previous move from scriptoria to stationers' shops. In the course of the twelfth century, lay stationers began to replace monastic scribes. Books needed by university faculties and the mendicant orders were supplied by a "putting-out" system. Copyists were no longer assembled in a single room, but worked on different portions of a given text, receiving payment from the stationer for each piece (the so-called pecia system). Book production, according to my critic, had thus moved out of scriptoria three centuries *before* the advent of print.

The objection seems worth further thought. Certainly one ought to pay attention to the rise of the lay stationer in university towns and other urban centers during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The contrast between the free labor of monks working for remission of sins and the wage labor of lay copyists is an important one. Recent research has stressed the use of a putting-out system and has also called into question long-lived assumptions about the existence of lay scriptoria attached to stationers' shops. Thus one must be especially cautious about using the term scriptoria to apply to conditions

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in the later Middle Ages – more cautious than I was in my preliminary version.

Yet, on the other hand, one must also be wary about placing too much emphasis on trends launched in twelfth-century Paris, Oxford, Bologna, and other university towns where copies were multiplied rapidly to serve special institutional needs. Caution is needed when extending university regulations designed to control copyists to the actual practices of university stationers – let alone to bookdealers serving nonuniversity clientele. That relatively clear thirteenth-century patterns get smudged by the late fourteenth century must also be kept in mind. During the interval between 1350 and 1450 – the crucial century when setting our stage – conditions were unusually anarchic, and some presumably obsolete habits were revived. Monastic scriptoria, for example, were beginning to experience their "last golden age."

The existence of monastic scriptoria right down to and even beyond the days of early printing is most intriguingly demonstrated by a treatise which is often cited as a curiosity in books on early printing: Johannes Trithemius's *De laude scriptorum*. In this treatise, the Abbot of Sponheim not only exhorted his monks to copy books, but also explained why "monks should not stop copying because of the invention of printing." Among other arguments (the usefulness of keeping idle hands busy, encouraging diligence, devotion, knowledge of Scripture, and so on), Trithemius somewhat illogically compared the written word on parchment which would last one thousand years with the printed word on paper which would have a shorter life span. The possible use of paper (and scraped parchment) by copyists, or of skin for a special printed version, went unmentioned. As a Christian scholar, the abbot was clearly familiar with earlier writings which had set durable parchment against perishable papyrus. His arguments show his concern about preserving a form of manual labor which seemed especially suitable for monks. Whether he was genuinely worried about an increased use of paper – as an ardent bibliophile and in the light of ancient warnings – is an open question. But his activities show clearly that as an author he did not favor handwork over press-work. He had his *Praise of Scribes* promptly printed,

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