

Introduction

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Mapping the book in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries

When the *Cambridge history of the book in Britain* project was first conceived in the early 1990s it was acknowledged by D. F. McKenzie that, compared to the first six projected volumes in the series, ‘the terms of reference’ for the final volume – originally planned to cover the period 1914–2000 – ‘remain disturbingly imprecise’. McKenzie offered three explanatory factors: ‘partly because the book must now share its functions with other media with which it is complexly interdependent, partly because the archival resources are so much richer than for earlier periods, [and] partly because new technologies and the emergence of multinational publishing weaken the very premises of a national history’.¹ A quarter of a century on we might add a fourth factor. Compared to earlier volumes in the series the period after 1914 remains largely unmapped – or at best inconsistently plotted. With a much smaller body of existing research on which to draw, this volume should be seen as laying the groundwork for future exploration of the book in Britain since 1914 as much as the summation of current work in the field.

There is, of course, an additional, ever more conspicuous factor of imprecision, the scale of which was unanticipated when McKenzie set out the terms of the project. In the 1992 essay quoted above, there is mention of ‘new technologies’, and indeed the impact of the computer had been a factor in the making of books since the 1960s. The speed of the development of digital technologies since the early 1990s, however, and the scale of their impact on the production, distribution and consumption of textual matter, could not have been foreseen. The changes have led many to refer to the ‘third

¹ McKenzie, ‘History of the book’, p. 300.

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revolution of the book', following the movement from orality to literacy, and from manuscript to print. It is a revolution through which we are living and its effects are changing before our eyes, making precise judgements about its impact on the *history* of the book a challenging if not impossible task. This volume makes no attempt to write the future but it does not refrain from addressing the changing present. The subtitle – 'the twentieth century and beyond' – has been deliberately chosen to allow contributors to address the latest developments, including the impact of digital technologies, to a greater or lesser extent. Some have chosen to adopt fixed end-dates to their coverage of individual topics as a way of exercising control over a picture that is forever shifting. In Part I of the volume we have included a dedicated chapter on 'The digital book' which explores specifically technological developments, an area where the changing historical map is more clearly delineated. The broader social, cultural and commercial impacts of digitisation, however, are themes that recur throughout.

To return to McKenzie's three factors which characterise the 'disturbingly imprecise' terms of reference. It is true that archival resources for the twentieth century are much richer than in earlier periods, but records are amorphous and far from complete. Substantial parts of the accumulated archive of printers, publishers and booksellers have been lost – destroyed through fire, enemy action or the transfer of company ownership, among other reasons. Records have been inconsistently preserved, are often difficult to navigate, and are frequently impossible to access for commercial reasons. The more recent the archive the harder it can be to unlock.² McKenzie's other two terms of reference, however, are persistent themes in this volume. The interdependence of the book and other media is visible not only in the changing structure of the trade and the rise of multimedia conglomerates, but also in the constant interpenetration between books and radio, television and digital media, whether viewed from the perspective of authors, publishers, booksellers and distributors, or of readers and consumers. The 'emergence of multinational publishing', which McKenzie warned 'weaken[ed] the very premises of a national history', is equally pervasive. Its roots lie in the transatlantic partnerships that emerged in the late nineteenth century, when US publishing houses established offices in London and British firms did likewise in New York. Emblematic of this growth of transatlantic cultural and commercial exchange in an expanding English language world was the purchase by Doubleday, Page & Company of

² For a fuller discussion of all these issues, see Nash, 'Publishers' archives'.

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William Heinemann – one of the enterprising new firms that had transformed British publishing in the late nineteenth century – following the death of the British publisher in 1920. But the international context of the book in Britain since 1914 also lays bare the distinctiveness of this national history. The system and culture of the British book emerge from these chapters as distinctive in many ways, not least because of the continued importance of imperial and post-imperial markets which, alongside the trade's absorption into global markets and business environments, make for a unique kind of internationalism.

The book is organised into four sections. Part I contains three chapters which address changing technologies of print and book production, and the design, look and material form of the book across the period. Among the topics covered in this section are the development of the illustrated book, changing taste and practice in typography, and the combined impact of photocomposition, computerised typesetting, and recent developments in digital technology in the twenty-first century. Chapter 1 also provides an account of the printing industry against the changing social and industrial background of the period.

Part II is devoted to the sociology of text production, circulation and consumption. Substantial chapters on 'Authorship', 'Publishing', 'Distribution and bookselling' and 'Reading and ownership' provide a comprehensive historical survey of the institutional structures of the book, and the social, cultural and economic factors underpinning its creation, transmission and use. Many of the points introduced in these chapters are explored in greater depth in other parts of the volume. Extensive cross-referencing allows the reader to trace the entire treatment of a topic from the different perspectives offered.

Part III considers different types of books covering a wide range of genres or subject areas. Substantial space is devoted to major sectors of the publishing trade, such as literature (fiction, drama and poetry), children's books, and schoolbooks and textbook publishing, as well as to smaller but equally distinct areas like academic publishing, learned journals, museum and art book publishing, and music publishing (a topic that encompasses both sheet music and performance material as well as books about music). The substantial chapter on religion addresses a subject that illustrates social and cultural change in the period. Other topics covered, such as popular science and popular history, deal with areas of the trade which became more distinct as the century progressed, and which owe part of that distinctiveness to the layout and organisation of bookshops. The chapters on 'Publishing for

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leisure', and 'Information, reference and government publishing' cover broader, less obviously discrete, areas of book production focussing on a representative sample of sub-topics. Though wide-ranging, this section of the book does not seek to be comprehensive and not all sectors or subject areas are represented. For topics not addressed here, such as law books and legal publishing, the reader is directed to the entries in relevant reference works.³

Also included in Part III is a chapter on magazines and periodicals, an area linked more closely to the newspaper industry than to the book industry in terms of production and financing. Like the previous volume in this series, this book does not present a separate account of the newspaper press – a huge topic that demands a history of its own – but its scope extends beyond the 'book' as narrowly conceived. Newspapers are frequently referred to, especially in the context of reading. From the consumer perspective, the reading of a magazine or newspaper and the reading of a book are patently part of the same activity, even if they can be viewed differently. The synergies between the 'book' and other kinds of printed matter, including magazines, periodicals, pamphlets and newspapers, are thus very much part of this volume's concerns, whether, as in the case of magazines, or comics and graphic novels, it represents an area of print production closely linked to the newspaper industry, or, as in Gail Chester's discussion of the radical, alternative and minority book trade, it epitomises the way diverse forms of print have circulated in society for particular cultural or political purposes. The chapters on 'Literature' and 'Popular science' (to select only two) also demonstrate the importance of the magazine market to authors as a site of cultural production and income, especially in the first half of the century.

Part IV offers a more conceptual approach to some of the main themes and issues raised throughout the volume. The chapters presented here, though frequently structured chronologically and responding to the changing world of the period, adopt a less strictly historical approach. They aim to articulate more explicitly the distinctiveness of the period through examining some of the cultural, political and socio-economic contexts of the book. Chapters on books and the media, copyright and intellectual property, the book in wartime, and imperialism and post-imperialism offer synoptic accounts of major topics introduced throughout the volume. Other chapters discuss changing cultural attitudes to the book in the context of broader

³ For example, Suarez and Woudhuysen (eds.), *The Oxford companion to the book*.

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debates about class, democracy and value, and map the intersections between the book and civil society or political cultures and social movements.

Region and nation

The Cambridge history of the book in Britain has been written and produced alongside separate histories of the book in Scotland (scheduled for completion in 2019) and Ireland (ongoing), and a single-volume study of the history of the book in Wales.⁴ When complete, these four projects will together amount to seventeen volumes – an indication not only of the size of the history of the book as a field of study but also of the complexities involved in producing a ‘national’ history of the British Isles in any subject. Like the previous volume in the *Cambridge* series, the existence of specialist histories dedicated to Scotland, Ireland and Wales has influenced the structure and approach of the present volume, and it should be read alongside the coverage of the post-1914 period in these separate projects. The founding of the Irish Free State in 1922 means that the larger part of the island of Ireland lay outside the United Kingdom for all but the earliest years of this history. The civic and cultural distinctiveness of Scotland, however, is visible in areas such as bookselling and, notably, education (see Chapter 10). Scotland also remained an important location of printing and a publishing centre of significance for certain areas of the trade, such as maps and cartographical publishing, where for much of the century Edinburgh was the largest centre of production in the UK (see Chapter 20).

Britain is a small island, and London and the south-east of England have proved an increasingly powerful magnet for components of the trade. As David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery observe in Chapter 5, conglomeration in the 1980s hastened ‘a process of geographical concentration as well as amalgamation of imprints, leaving London as the undisputed centre of publishing in the UK’. Nevertheless, as other chapters show, the ‘regional’ dimension of the book has continued to be felt in many ways. Small regional publishers (often local museums or newspapers) sustained the area of local history, while the dominance of the ancient universities in England meant that Oxford and Cambridge remained the most stable centres of academic publishing in the period, with other towns and cities outside London intermittently productive in this field. From the consumer perspective, the story is

⁴ *The Edinburgh history of the book in Scotland*, gen. ed. Bill Bell; *The Oxford history of the Irish book*; Jones and Rees (eds.), *A nation and its books*.

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one of growth outwards from large cities to smaller urban, suburban and rural areas. In the inter-war period the spread of twopenny libraries to villages and suburban areas brought books within a closer reach of a large part of the reading public (see Chapter 7). Similarly, the story of the expansion of the public library system is one of growth outwards from metropolitan centres to greater provision via branch libraries and in rural and suburban areas, especially after 1945. The bookselling system was also for much of the century marked by a significant geographical reach. Although Q. D. Leavis complained in 1932 that ‘shops existing solely to sell books are rare outside the university towns of Oxford, Cambridge, and Edinburgh, certain parts of London and a few big cities’,⁵ Iain Stevenson demonstrates in Chapter 6 how bookselling actually operated for much of the period via a ‘model of local dominance’. Although London had the greatest concentration of book-selling, the independent town centre bookshop was as distinctive a part of the nation’s consumer culture as were the ubiquitous chain stores of W. H. Smith and John Menzies: ‘Virtually every town or city above a certain size possessed a privately-owned bookseller which often became synonymous with literary life in local society.’ In the second half of the century, the growth of literary festivals (beginning with Cheltenham in 1949) and book towns (Hay-on-Wye was first designated as such in 1961) also introduced a markedly regional accent to the book environment. As explored in Chapter 30, such book-related activity ‘attests to the values (social, cultural and financial) of such events to local economies and communities’.

Beginnings

Volume 6 of the *Cambridge history of the book in Britain* covered the period 1830–1914. While 1914 has obvious significance as a date in European history, in book trade history more significant dates occurred in the decade or so before the outbreak of war. For this reason, most chapters in this volume reach back to earlier foundational moments such as the introduction of the Linotype and Monotype composing systems in the 1890s, the establishment of the Net Book Agreement (NBA) in 1900, and the passing of the Copyright Act of 1911. Broader cultural and commercial shifts from the late nineteenth century, such as the enormous growth of the newspaper and magazine industry and the Victorian information revolution, also form the backdrop for the discussion of certain topics.

⁵ Leavis, *Fiction and the reading public*, p. 4.

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The opening section of Chapter 5 summarises how increasing trade organisation in the late nineteenth century led to the establishment of professional structures that ‘would sustain business success for much of the century’. Chief among these was the NBA. As David McKitterick has argued, the NBA ‘helped to stabilise publishing and bookselling [but] also demonstrated the very limited extent to which competition would be tolerated. The book trades remained intensely protectionist.’ As outlined in Chapter 6, the origins and establishment of the NBA, and its survival in the 1960s in the face of examination by the Restrictive Practices Court, meant that business practices, and therefore the whole character of publishing and bookselling, were slow to change during the century, certainly in comparison to developments in the United States.

Until the late 1920s retail price maintenance was the only significant form of cooperation between the two main branches of the trade. As the publisher Harold Raymond commented in 1938, maintenance of the NBA was ‘almost the only contact between the Publishers and the Booksellers’ Associations’.⁶ Indeed, in the early decades after its implementation, the Publishers Association was far from energetic in its policing of the trade and acted only reluctantly when called upon by the Associated Booksellers to enforce the NBA’s terms.⁷ However, stricter control of price competition arose out of the increased cooperation in the trade that emerged in the late 1920s. During that decade book trade organisation became an urgent concern for publishers like Stanley Unwin, who had previously worked in the German trade with what he termed ‘its excessive regulation’. Unwin found the British trade, by contrast, to have almost ‘no organisation at all’.⁸ The formation in 1925 of the National Book Council led in 1927 to a Joint Committee of the Publishers Association and the Associated Booksellers which produced a series of reports outlining recommendations for smooth practice, if not outright regulation, of all areas of the trade.⁹ It did not, however, result in the establishment of an agreed rate of discount between manufacturer and retailer, which existed in other fixed-price trades. Raymond rightly pointed out the anomaly that prevailed whereby the NBA had eliminated bargaining between bookseller and customer but not that between publisher and bookseller. The Joint Committee nevertheless evolved a form of consensus in the trade that produced a series of amendments and additions to the NBA throughout the 1930s, allowing it to withstand potentially disruptive elements such as the

6 Raymond, *Publishing and bookselling*, pp. 18–19.

7 Taraporevala, *Competition and its control*, pp. 95–6.

8 Sanders (ed.), *British book trade organisation*, p. 7. 9 The reports are reproduced in *ibid.*

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growth of book clubs and the sale of books by coupon schemes. Agreed practices were also established around the supply of books to public libraries.¹⁰ Such consensual arrangements persisted for much of the century. It was not until the collapse of the NBA in the 1990s that the protectionist character of the trade was blown. The only remnant of the traditional argument that, compared to other goods, 'books are different' – a phrase used in the unsuccessful challenge to the agreement in 1962¹¹ – is that print books are still one of the few goods that are VAT-exempt.

While the NBA stabilised prices, changes in copyright law introduced a more controlled legislative structure for authorship and publishing. As Chapter 24 outlines, the 1911 Copyright Act established a new framework for literary property, extending the term of copyright to fifty years after the author's death. With the rise of the literary agent in the late nineteenth century, and the emergence of the royalty system as a standard contractual arrangement between authors and publishers, maintenance of literary property was already a priority for most authors, although, as noted in Chapter 4, practices still varied. Under the new Act, however, copyrights became more valuable. Of equal importance was the new protection afforded to translation, and dramatisation and adaptation rights. With the growth of the film industry in particular, such rights could prove highly lucrative to authors.

The 1911 Act also arrested the downward trend in book prices which was a feature of the nineteenth century.¹² With the extension of the term of copyright there was less pressure to issue very cheap editions of recently published works, because the threat of quick competition had lessened. It also became harder for series of cheap classics, such as Everyman's Library, to issue the work of authors from recent generations. For example, Robert Browning's work up to 1869 had been published in Everyman's by 1911 but the final two volumes could not appear until 1940 (Browning having died in 1889).

The downward trend in prices was fully halted during the First World War, but a variety of factors in the immediate post-war period again stimulated the production of cheaper books, especially in the fiction category.¹³ As William St Clair points out, one of the effects of the war was 'the destruction of the material plant from which the printed texts of the Victorian era were manufactured' as

¹⁰ On these topics see Taraporevala, *Competition and its control*, chapters 9 and 10.

¹¹ Barker and Davies (eds.), *Books are different*.

¹² McKitterick, 'Introduction', pp. 70–3; Eliot, *Some patterns and trends*, pp. 59–77.

¹³ The tables in McAleer, *Popular reading and publishing*, pp. 43–5, illustrate that, in sharp contrast to trends in all classes of books, the annual number of reprints of works of adult fiction consistently exceeded the number of original works over 1923–41.

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Intro.1 Cheap fiction from the 1920s published by Collins and Cassell. (Private collection)

government calls for scrap metal led to the melting of huge stocks of stereotype plates.¹⁴ No longer able to rely on printing new impressions of old works from plates, and confronted by an additional pressure ‘to increase revenues dramatically’ to meet ‘steep rises in production costs’,¹⁵ post-war publishers were, in Joseph McAleer’s words, forced ‘to accelerate the movement towards cheaper-priced new books, and to accommodate more closely the tastes of the lower-middle and working classes, the ever-expanding “new reading public”’.¹⁶ Lower profit margins encouraged the publication of fewer titles with larger print-runs and a lower retail price. Cheapness and value for money became a noticeable part of the marketing and visual appearance of books (fig. intro.1). However, the price structure of British books was intimately connected with the supply chain. Publishers built their lists around specific outlets: bookshops, bookstalls, non-specialist retailers and, most importantly, libraries in all their varieties.

If the foundation of the NBA and the passing of the 1911 Copyright Act provide the obvious starting points for an understanding of book trade

¹⁴ St Clair, *The reading nation*, p. 430. ¹⁵ McAleer, *Popular reading and publishing*, p. 54.
¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

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structures and business practices in this period, the outbreak of war in 1914 offers the first large social, cultural and political context which impacted upon those structures and practices. The problem of sourcing raw materials (especially paper), rising costs of production, labour shortages, and government strictures and censorship were matched by the opportunities provided by an increased demand for reading, new markets and distribution schemes, and partnership with the War Propaganda Bureau at Wellington House. A similar pattern occurred during the Second World War, when the effects of rationing and aerial bombardment were set against the enormous demand for reading matter. Especially important during 1939–45 was the propaganda work of the Ministry of Information which not only allowed commercial publishers to partner with a government office but also gave writing opportunities to authors (see Chapter 4). The chapters in this volume each discuss the impact of both World Wars on the topics they cover, demonstrating how wartime strictures impacted upon the look and feel of the book, the kinds of printed matter that circulated, and their channels of distribution. Part IV also includes a focussed account of the book in wartime by Jane Potter which provides a holistic view of the two World Wars and considers the impact of other political and military conflicts on books and the book trade.

‘A nation of book-borrowers’

One way of identifying what is characteristic about the book in Britain in the twentieth century is to begin with perhaps its most iconic product – the Penguin paperback. Allen Lane’s experiment in 1935 with sixpenny paperback reprints of recently published titles helps identify some of the distinctive aspects of the British book system as it developed over the course of the twentieth century and beyond, especially around price, format, distribution, and institutions of reading.

Lane’s venture was first and foremost a challenge to the pricing structure of the British book, which for most trade titles (especially new works of fiction) was built around sales to subscription and public libraries. As evidenced throughout this volume, library borrowing and library reading remained throughout the century a central component of the trade, one which affected not only the reading public but also the practice of authorship and the policies of publishers.¹⁷ For trade publishers of the inter-war period

¹⁷ See also Black and Hoare (eds.), *The Cambridge history of libraries in Britain and Ireland*. 3. 1850–2000.