1 | The past in pixels

In what shape or form do we read old books? In what shape or form may we expect to read them within the next few years? As the demand for e-publication and hand-held readers accelerates and follows the pattern of rapid adoption that has characterised other major breakthroughs in everyday consumer technology, for most people the answer is probably that they will increasingly be read in scanned versions on various hand-held screens, mostly at various scales of reduction. That will make old books immensely more accessible, in larger numbers, over a greater range of dates and genres and to more people in more regions of the world than ever previously. Even if the concept of universal availability will remain no more than that, a concept, we may still assume that the opportunity to read books from the past, in something approximating their original appearance, will be open to immeasurably more people than was possible when they were available only in libraries or to collectors. The decreasing stocks of older books available in antiquarian and second-hand shops have been replaced by this new kind of wealth – not material in a physical sense, but nonetheless immediately available, as virtual recreations.

In one respect, old books have never been so easily available. But they are available only at several removes from the form in which they were printed, published and sold before being read by generations of readers for whom paper was the natural vehicle. We now confront a world where knowledge of books in the form they have been known for five and a half centuries is declining. The angle of this decline will increase; the only questions are the speed at which this will happen in the near future, and how printed books will relate to the possibilities of electronic media.

For all the immense advantages that scanned images of books present, in widening access and enabling different ways of reading, there is one obvious and fundamental difficulty about reading and assessing images on screen. They generally require some prior knowledge of the physical form of the original object. This is the weakness in the position of any reader seeking more than the most superficial understanding of the past when he or she faces a book – or any kind of printed or manuscript document – that has been recast in two dimensions, stripped of its physical and material

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characteristics, and scaled to a uniform size. Books and manuscripts are not unique in this, but because the words and images that they contain can be reproduced on screen in a way that creates an appearance of reality – more or less the same shapes of letters and images – this reincarnation is tolerated. The elements of meaning conveyed in a book by its physical properties are suppressed, and in the absence of comparative knowledge of what books of a particular period look and feel like – their weight, their bulk, their colour or other features – it cannot be assumed that a reader will properly understand what is presented on screen. No amount of magnification, colour adjustment, page-turning software or other screen facilities can alter this. And even as use of large databases of images increases, so the proportion declines of people possessing any experience of handling originals.

As we face, and exploit, these changes, so we need to ask all the more carefully what we mean by old books, and what others have meant by them in past generations. Comparatively few early printed books survive in exactly the same form that they were received by their first readers, at the conclusion of a series of compromises reached between author, printer, publisher, bookbinder and bookseller consummated in what were called new books. The forms in which they were originally published were usually not only very different from what we now search for, and see, on screen. Often they have been physically adjusted several times over in the interval. We may gain much in our modern computer-aided search strategies, and in our ability to compare texts, copies and all kinds of physical properties of books in numbers unimaginable only a generation ago, but how much have we lost? And how much is this process of loss a new phenomenon?

As this book will seek to show, it is not a straightforward or speedy translation from original to screen. Material properties and their appearance have always been subject to change, to manipulation, to revaluation and to reinterpretation.

Over the last few years there has been increasing anxiety amongst scholars, teachers and book historians concerning the relationship between books as physical objects, artefacts, and their presentation in different media, as surrogates and similitudes.[1] In a damning indictment of the world of scholarship and librarianship alike, the late D. F. McKenzie spoke of 'a theft of evidence' in reproductions.[2] This is not a new issue, even if it has been given a new urgency by library managers faced with difficult decisions about budgets, space and the uncertain sustainability of electronic files. There is now an ever-growing tension between different kinds of reading and the realities of library costs. Unable or unwilling to provide the space, staffing and other supports for books on paper, and

beguiled by the promise of liberal access, librarians are faced with daily temptations to turn to electronic versions of past and present publications.

Since long before the nineteenth century, every generation has sought new visual means to harness the past. In the early 1870s, the New England bookseller and bibliographer Henry Stevens put forward ideas for the microphotography of parts of books as a means of bibliographical control.[3] In 1931 the Anglo-American conference of historians heard a paper by the Tudor historian G. B. Harrison comparing the advantages of collotype with the Replika process for the full-size reproduction of manuscripts and early printed books.[4] In the 1930s, Eugene B. Power, based in Michigan, began a programme of mass microfilming of early printed books and, even more importantly, publishing the microfilms so that any library with the necessary money could buy them.[5] It was useful in saving rare originals from wear, or saving library storage space, or saving expensive research trips. But it was not a panacea, as the Harvard rare books librarian W. A. Jackson explained in a vigorous paper delivered in Cincinnati (well away from the obvious major collections of early printed books on the east and west coasts of America) in 1940.[6] The microfilms that he castigated then were in the same programme that has since become the basis of much of EEBO, *Early English Books Online*, the essential resource today for anyone working on British and North American books before 1701. The faults remain. With the move of books from paper to celluloid began the process of recreation of which today's scanned books, read on a computer screen rather than as light cast on a white screen, are direct descendants. The questions, opportunities and implications of surrogates are not new.

What is new is the immensely greater, more varied and cheaper accessibility that is now available to readers. So too are questions of escalating costs in maintaining the world's libraries, the repositories of human memory. This is a challenge that affects everyone: not just readers or library managers, and not just everyone who contributes through taxes or charitable giving to the maintenance, rebranding, development or destruction of institutions that share a history in recognisable form dating from the ancient world. The costs of libraries in our own world, with all their complexities and challenges, are still only partly grasped. The present book is indirectly about these questions that need much better contextual understanding than the usual ones that are advanced. It is concerned with bibliographical values more than financial ones. By taking contemporary questions as its starting point, it attempts to be more than another history of book collecting, though many figures familiar in this genre also make their appearance in the following pages.

It has been written in the years immediately after several large libraries disburdened themselves of collections that had been assumed to be in safe hands.[7] The New York Public Library had a seemingly undiscriminating drive to reduce its research collections, in a programme that showed little or no knowledge of what was being discarded. It was far from alone among American research libraries which, led by the Library of Congress, had since the Second World War developed a belief in the replacement of originals by microfilms, as the only feasible means of preserving fragile originals, and incidentally saving expensive shelf space. Where America led, others followed. The British Library advertised dozens of runs of newspapers dating from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, and offered them free to any library, in any country, willing to take them. The defence for this dispersal was that these newspapers were all on microfilm. Despite a great deal of special pleading, it remains that neither filmed nor scanned images are adequate substitutes for original documents. Their format does not mimic the experience of opening up a newspaper, and seeing a double-page spread, all legible at a glance. They do not reflect the ways in which newspapers are put together, the stories carefully graded in prominence so that what seems most important to the editorial team is noticed first. They do not capture the quality of photographs – black and white or colour – that have been selected, cropped, placed and printed with considerable thought and care.[8] Much of this is true also of printed books. Put briefly, the two-dimensional screen cannot illustrate adequately a three-dimensional object that constantly changes shape as its leaves are turned. Nor (to repeat) can it provide a sense of weight, or of materials. It would be pleasant to be confident that these destructive practices are matters of the past. While microfilming is now out of date as a technology, scanning presents an even bigger temptation to librarians pressed for space, money and other resources. There will be further similar cases in the future. For this reason, it is imperative that librarians and the committees that govern them understand more clearly not only what is gained, but also what is lost by the disposal and dispersal of evidence in its original form. Librarians caring for research collections (a term that encompasses far more than just what is held in departments of special collections) are trustees for the past. It is a betrayal of trusteeship to assume that a surrogate will answer sufficiently not just for the immediate present but also for the future.

Most of the themes raised in this first chapter concern current or quite recent changes in the ways that books are published, sold and managed. Like all changes, they are partly defined by what happened previously. And like all changes, they also affect attitudes in the present. They affect the ways in

which the past is viewed, and the ways it is valued. We can only see the past through our present experiences. The following pages offer an enquiry into how various kinds of old books, as distinct from new ones, have been presented, viewed, evaluated and often changed, from the early eighteenth century to the development and application of photography in the late nineteenth century. By that date, most of the technologies that are of most relevance to this discussion were in place. The audiences include scholars and the book trade, and what we might, somewhat hesitantly, call collectors and ordinary readers. These and other various groups of readers and possessors of books are not discrete. There has always been substantial overlap. How have old books been brought before the public at various times? How has public interest in old books changed, and how have different publics changed? Given that most people's attention is drawn constantly to new books (a preoccupation reflected in dozens of studies in book history), these questions might seem divergent, but there is a pattern in changing attitudes to older books that offers much common ground. The following pages are mainly concerned with 'old' as defined by those published before the nineteenth century, and the historical thread of the chapters ends in the first years of the twentieth century. That is partly the accident of where much work has been focussed by some kinds of recent scholarship. It is not meant to be exclusive. Indeed, very similar threads can be found in later periods. The questions are the same for more recently published books and for periods since.

If there is a common theme, it is one of time. The computer screen suppresses a sense of time. It is not just that it is quicker than going to a library. Because everything is available at much the same speed, on the same screen, in a universal format defined not by the materials or shapes of original manufacture but by software that has been deliberately written to be as widely applicable as possible, all images possess common qualities that are actually designed to suppress chronological relationships. On the other hand, in viewing or handling artefacts, we bring visual and tactile accumulations of knowledge and experience to make judgements over the relative age and status of what is before us. We may be more or less adept at this, and it can be difficult to appreciate shorter or longer historical periods: many people tend (for example) to have a more nuanced understanding of a recent life-span of, say, eighty years than they do of a usually shorter life-span in, say, the fifteenth century. But the uniformity and near immediacy of the computer screen do not, in themselves, contain the values and experiences that enable us to judge time with anything like the same ease.

The values we set on any object depend on the meanings we attach to it or draw from it, on the extent to which we value or ignore its history, on the content as it is appreciated by the world at large. Further, while it is generally accepted that an original artefact, be it book or painting, has a value bearing only a distant relationship to any reproduction of that same object, nonetheless our understanding of either original or reproduction depends on what we have learned, or can learn, from the other. Reproductive engraving has ensured this since the sixteenth century, and photography has strengthened the relationship since the mid-nineteenth. But what happens when an object becomes universally accessible – also in two dimensions – on the computer screen? There is substantial evidence that wide public availability on screen not only extends awareness and opportunities. It also generates its own extra interest in original artefacts.

Hence the importance of trying to understand why and how we have come to our present assumptions and beliefs, concerning what we consider important when faced with an object in either its original or its surrogate form. Hence, also, the importance of recognising the fragility of digitised texts dependent on software that (as the short history of computing has repeatedly shown) may not be maintained.[9] Hence, too, the importance of recognising even some quite basic inadequacies and differences in digitisation programmes.

A new world

This book has been written partly as a companion to my earlier study *Print, manuscript and the search for order* (2003). During the brief period between the appearance of that book and today, attitudes to books, the means whereby we acquire them and the economics underlying their production and circulation have undergone profound changes. Paper is no longer necessarily the most obvious way for an author even of a straightforward novel or monograph to reach the market. What formerly would have been marketed first on paper and then electronically is often now presented in the reverse order. As for paper, on the one hand books have met a large-scale welcome in non-traditional places of sale such as supermarkets, while on the other hand the large stock-holding bookshop of a kind that has existed since the eighteenth century has gone into a probably permanent decline. Many of the latter have closed. Whether small independents or large chains, and whether offering new books or old, none seems to be immune. While it is not always clear how far their demise is due to poor management decisions,

how much to an overburdened trade structure, how much to the manipulation of credit arrangements or – in the case of new books – how much to competitive discounting, and how much to broader commercial pressures from trade rivals, publishers or suppliers, the rise of major web booksellers has undoubtedly contributed massively to this shift. Some of this was foreseeable, but much has happened more quickly than was anticipated. In Britain, the demise of the Net Book Agreement in 1997 obliged independent firms dealing in new books to come to urgent decisions, and some moved quickly to establish themselves in different parts of the book market. Yet, more recently, many firms and their shareholders have been taken by surprise even while overall sales remained buoyant for some kinds of books on widely popular subjects sold through non-traditional classes of shops such as supermarkets. This same period of what is widely perceived as a crisis, and by more sombre observers even as a juddering finale, has also witnessed some of the most remarkable publicity campaigns and best-selling phenomena in the history of bookselling.[10] It remains to be seen how publishers will react to changes in consumer habits, and the saturating effects of social media, that will inexorably influence the kinds of books that can be most easily published. Meanwhile, the number of titles published each year increases. In 2009 the UK publishing industry produced over 133,000, up 3.2 per cent on 2008 and up about 33 per cent on fifteen years previously.[11]

On another hand, publishers have responded with programmes for e-publishing, both for new books and for their backlists. To this 2009 figure needs to be added a further 24,000 digital titles.[12] Some publishers are turning to a mixture of non-commercial Creative Commons licences,[13] alongside print-on-demand for paper copies. For paper, the development and improvement of print-on-demand technology and of digital printing for extremely short runs have transformed new publishing, stock control and the ways in which backlists can be exploited. The economics of publishing are changing, and no model has yet proved ideal. There is almost as much confused activity amongst authors and readers as the world comes gradually to terms with multiple arenas of paper and screen, print and an increasing range of electronic forms of delivery.

Amidst all this, long-held and deeply ingrained attitudes to the place of print and manuscript are being modified. Print-on-demand is changing the market for old books. Whether or not books will continue to be published in the form that they have been known for centuries (and so far there is no evidence to suggest that they will not), attitudes to books of all kinds, new and old, are being irreparably altered.

Ever since the work of Gutenberg in mid-fifteenth-century Mainz, most printed books have been generally published according to a pattern. An edition of so many copies was printed, in one place, and if all went well it paid for itself and sold out within a reasonable time. That is no longer the case. In about the last twenty years, not only have most print runs shrunk dramatically; it is now widely expected that editorial, manufacturing and selling costs should be recovered within a very few months, not years. In their own turn, booksellers have been forced – often by the banks on whose loans they depend – to seek to sell books within a very few weeks. The bookshop that could once afford to hold stock for months or years on end is now in a diminishing minority. The most obvious changes in the manufacture of books include: the advent of digital printing, making extremely short runs economically feasible; the concept – learned from long-standing practices in newspaper publishing, where printing has been distributed in different cities and countries for many years – of printing to market (and thereby no longer incurring very heavy transport costs); and, perhaps most importantly, the advent of print-on-demand. These and other new procedures both offer benefits and pose challenges to publishers. Subject to technology and customer bases, for some booksellers they might offer an opportunity. Niche bookselling has become possible at negligible risk. Again, the wholesale and retail price structures need to be re-thought. At least in theory, books – on paper – need no longer be considered as being out of print. Quite apart from the disagreements between publishers, authors and literary agents that have resulted from this, as each group has sought to grasp at new 'rights', the advent of such a restructuring entails still greater changes for the traditional bookshop. It also poses questions about ways in which libraries might be further exploited, restructured and brought within the book trade.

The downloadable e-book, so long talked of by journalists, publishers and trade analysts, is only a small part of the story of the last few years. As its sales represent an ever-increasing part of all book sales (a majority in some parts of the market), its full impact has yet to be felt. One thing is clear: it will drive the market into further segments both with respect to customers and with respect to the kinds of books that are published. It does not need a management consultant to advise that any large or middle-size firm must invest, with some imagination, in e-publishing in order to survive. Realistic pricing policies have yet to be established, for the true cost centres for such publishing are very far from clear, and market opinion has yet to be measured in more than the most preliminary ways. Furthermore, e-books are well suited to some kinds of publication and reading, but much less so to

others. Whatever the pattern, they will further affect the ways in which books, whether paper or electronic, are written, chosen, designed, presented, understood and considered. The current lack of a trade standard for downloadable books and for the devices on which they are read immediately affects choices for buying, and is unsustainable if e-books are to be properly developed as they deserve. It dominates much current discussion, but it is unlikely to be a long-term issue. It should take less time to settle than, for example, the arguments some years ago over different voltages offered by different power companies within a single national boundary, a world even in Britain still easily within living memory, or the somewhat older arguments about railway gauges, still unresolved in some countries and leading to economic inefficiencies.

All these changes in the book trade are affecting the ways in which books are regarded, as well as the ways in which they are used.

Loss and gain

It is improbable that there will ever be a time when all the books that have ever been published, and that survive, will be available electronically. But very large numbers have been scanned already, and not only in the major western languages.[14] Like the microfilming programmes of early English books that were set in place in the United States in the 1930s partly so as to ensure that books would survive in some form even if Britain's major libraries were destroyed by war, some of the more recent – and vastly larger – scanning programmes are built on weak foundations. They are hugely beneficial, and have transformed the ways in which we access and read books. But despite millions of pounds or dollars of investment, the goods offered to the world too often show lamentable quality control. Not all of them confess to their imperfections with quite such candour as the following warning that accompanies the *Edinburgh Review* digitised from film and published online:

Vol.173 wanting. Best copy available for photographing. Pagination is irregular, some pages are missing. Several pages are torn or stained and have print faded with some loss of text. Several title pages are misdated. Cols. [sic: presumably Vols.] 1 and 169 lack title page. Vol.18: p.274 is bound and photographed out of order. Vol.173: January-April, 1891 is missing.[15]

The sense of editorial exhaustion is palpable. It is also misplaced. This is certainly not the 'best copy available for photographing', for many libraries

possessing this widely held title were not asked. It is also not clear how one page can be bound out of order, for single pages cannot be bound, whereas a single leaf (two pages) can. The danger is not so much in these mis-statements as in the fact that the existence of an easily purchased digital copy of an otherwise space-hungry run of a journal will lead to the discarding of hard copy – in favour of this inferior and incomplete digitised version. Entirely unnecessarily, and thanks to the publisher, readers are placed in a situation worse than that enjoyed previously. The evidence on which any serious scholarship depends is being taken from them.

For the early microfilming projects some of the difficulties were technical (the film stock has not always survived well), and some were bibliographical (sometimes the wrong edition was chosen, sometimes an incomplete copy). Pages were sometimes cropped in order to fit in the screen, exposure – especially in the early years – was variable. The resolution was deliberately set low. Notwithstanding constant attempts to monitor photography in dozens of libraries on both sides of the Atlantic, and the insistence on attention to specified standards, the images that result – perhaps especially in the transition from film to scan on screen – can be of disappointingly limited use. This is especially noticeable in the reproduction of many engraved illustrations and decorations, which cannot be studied in any serious way. Originals are compromised in other ways as well. Colour printing becomes black and white. Paper quality is indeterminable. In a reversal of history, the codex is turned into a scroll as volumes filmed or scanned opening by opening, or page by page, are set out side by side. Nonetheless, despite such difficulties and despite the most obvious fact of all, that a three-dimensional product was turned into one of two dimensions, the publisher of *Early English Books Online* (EEBO) has claimed to provide 'cover-to-cover full-page images that show the works exactly as they appeared in their original printed editions', so that modern readers can see 'exactly what the original readers saw, back when the Wars of the Roses still raged'.[16] The files, which perfectly understandably have concentrated on the printed texts ever since the first microfilms were made in the 1930s, certainly do not provide cover-to-cover images in the sense that has become familiar in some more recent – and current – scanning programmes. Nonetheless, problems persist in more recent projects. Missing pages, wrong editions, missing volumes from sets, and hands intruding in front of the lens are all familiar to even casual users of non-copyright material that is, at present, mostly free on screen. There is no reason why in the future it – good and bad – should not incur a financial charge. Indeed, and quite apart from any unavoidable charging régimes for in-copyright material, this will