Introduction

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This volume begins with the manuscript book in Britain as it was when Geoffrey Chaucer died in 1400. It ends with the printed book as it was in 1557, the year in which the English book-trade was consolidated with the grant by Philip and Mary of a charter to the Stationers' Company of London. In this year also were published, in London, the *English Works* of Thomas More and, in Geneva, an important translation into English of the New Testament, the forerunner of the Geneva Bible.[1]

The first of these two books was printed and published, as its contents had been written before the Reformation, in the Catholic interest, then again briefly in the ascendant in England. It drew verbally on a vernacular poetic tradition in its echoes of Chaucer's phraseology, as well as spiritually on the authority of the Church, laying particular stress on the Church's role as arbiter of scriptural interpretation. The second book was the successor of several earlier reformed English Bible translations, of which one in particular had received the endorsement of Henry VIII. Taken together, these two volumes reflect changes and upheavals in British society during a century and a half. At the same time, they bear witness to continuities.

Continuities in change may be seen in all aspects of the book during our period, whether in the message of its text, the script or print in which that message was conveyed, or the modes of its dissemination, use and even suppression. On the social, political and religious conditions that they mirror, books may exert an influence both at home and abroad. As we shall see, books produced in the British Isles during our period had less authority and prestige outside Britain. Not being innovative in production technique and preferring to use English as an expressive medium, they are indicators of a historical process of nationalization and

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1. *STC* 18076 and 2871.

secularization. The advance of this process, and the reversals, may be clearly seen in the rise of the vernacular and the growth of literacy in the British Isles. British vernacular literacy itself goes along with a constant, though fluctuating, presence of French, particularly at upper social levels and not merely in England during the Dual Monarchy. It goes along, too, with a gradual decline in the ascendancy of Latin, even in learned circles. This decline was accelerated on the one hand by anti-clerical sentiment, which also discerned a decline in clerical learning. It was slowed, on the other, by the introduction of Renaissance humanism from Italy, with France often the mediator. Secular humanism, however, did not achieve great strength in Britain, though translation flourished. Catholic Latin culture was virtually destroyed by the Reformation, and not long afterwards Protestant humanism also yielded to the vernacular.

At our beginning the professional author had not yet appeared, and even at our end is hardly to be seen. Chaucer's living came in large degree from his civil service appointments and throughout our period writers were sustained by patronage, religious and secular. Sometimes an author would receive support from both arms, as notably did John Lydgate, monk of Bury St Edmunds, whose work of translation, as well as his occasional verse and other poems, was materially supported by princely and noble benefactors as well as by his religious order. Scholars, too, found support from the same sources, but also from the universities, which were in some respects extensions of the monastic programme of study. Changes within these patterns of patronage become more apparent towards the end of the fifteenth century and the beginning of the sixteenth. Monastic patronage, supporting scholars working in Latin to a greater extent than writers in English, entirely disappeared with the dissolution of the monasteries; the royal, noble and ecclesiastical patronage, often exercised for political reasons, which then largely replaced it was much concerned with the vernacular. Study of Latin on the Italian humanist model, introduced into England in the early fifteenth century, received favour from such patrons as Humfrey, Duke of Gloucester, one of Henry V's brothers, whose support of humanism and attempts to create in England a humanist entourage on the Italian model were determined and sustained. His gifts of manuscripts were the founding collection of a university library in Oxford. A little later, the new methods of studying the classics, experienced in Italy and practised by churchmen such as Bishop William Gray and nobles such as John Tiptoft, Earl of Worcester, gained strength in the universities. Greek later came into

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favour on a par with Latin. The generation that was born and grew up under Henry VII – John Colet, Thomas More, Thomas Linacre and others – much influenced by Desiderius Erasmus, was largely responsible for the change of emphasis in the study of Latin and Greek towards the evangelical humanism that flourished under Henry VIII and Edward VI.

At the beginning of our period the professional scribe already existed, as well as the scribe who supplied from within a religious house the Latin works required for use in monastery and in church. There is evidence that authors who wrote in Latin, who were sometimes their own scribes for copies of varying degrees of luxury, also retained a scribe or a group of scribes. Copyists were also early in reacting to both Latin and vernacular commissions from owners and readers. The burgeoning London book-trade produced the scribal vernacular publisher: John Shirley, for example. If his productions and commissions are not to be compared in numbers, size or elegance with those of such scribes and booksellers as Vespasiano da Bisticci in Florence a little later, Shirley nevertheless played an important pivotal role, making more widely available not only the Chaucerian tradition but also other texts. As far as the history of the book is concerned, however, the most profound change during our period was the transformation of the comparatively restricted manuscript culture of the time of Chaucer and his successors into an ambience where printed books gradually became the norm. The process was all but complete by our terminal date of 1557. Manuscripts continued to be written throughout, however: printed books were sometimes copied in that way, and devotional works and English lyric poetry circulated in handwritten form.

The transformation wrought by the invention of printing and by its introduction into Britain twenty years later, by William Caxton in 1476, was far-reaching. It was, all the same, neither instantaneous nor, from some aspects, even radical. Caxton aimed to improve the quality of English life by translating into his mother tongue works embodying the lively and more widespread literary ambience he had come to know in Flanders. During his many years of residence in the Low Countries he had observed how a culture initially confined to the Burgundian court and its entourage had taken firm hold in a much wider social circle of civil servants, merchants and other citizens, within a flourishing urban context. Through his translations into English of works that had become popular in the social *milieu* with which he had become familiar, he blended a foreign culture with the continuing preoccupations of English

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and Scottish literary life. He made available in print the works of
Chaucer, Lydgate, Gower and Thomas Malory in their original language,
and he sought to enrich the expressive power of the vernacular at the
same time as giving it a common and generally intelligible form. He also
sought financial profit. To these purposes he brought an exceptional
ability as a translator, as well as a sound commercial instinct, including
how to find patronage. A short involuntary exile in Cologne, at a time
when it was rapidly developing as a centre of printing, opened his eyes to
the new technique for disseminating texts. Later he applied the new
technique in an enterprise where, however, as stationer and book-seller,
he continued an earlier tradition.[2]

The English book-trade in which Caxton was engaged had before his
day been peopled largely, if not exclusively, by native artisans, who could
supply both vernacular and Latin needs. Caxton, a native Englishman,
was instrumental in introducing from the Low Countries and Cologne
the skills, techniques and materials required for the new craft, and also
men versed in them. English printing relied on these men for a long time.
During Caxton's lifetime, legislation was passed to encourage book arti-
sans to reside in England and for the next fifty years printing and publish-
ing were predominantly in the hands of the non-native-born.[3] In the
reign of Henry VIII encouragement began to be directed at the English-
born, culminating in the Act of 1534, which asserted that printing was by
now thoroughly naturalized and that Englishmen were able to take
charge.[4] Foreigners continued their activity, however. Books in Latin were
throughout the period imported rather than printed in Britain, but by
now they were intended specifically for a smaller proportion of those who
could read than before.[5] British printed output, chiefly in the vernacular,
was directed at the much enlarged constituency who could read English.[6]

Such was the new-grown power of the printing press that suppression
played almost as large a part as dissemination, especially in the rapid
changes of Reformation and Counter Reformation.[7] The fortunes of
Thomas More's writings are instructive, in this respect as well as others.
Utopia, his most famous work, a humanist jest of which the Latin editions
were printed abroad, seems to have circulated freely in this changing
context. Ralphe Robynson's translation of 1551 is not, however, included
in More's *English Works* of 1557, which comprises almost entirely works
of unimpeachable Catholic orthodoxy, nine-tenths of them controversial

2. Hellinga, below, pp. 65–8, 73–5.   3. Appendix, p. 608.   4. Appendix, pp. 608–10.
5. Ford, Trapp, below.   6. Trapp, below, pp. 34–8.   7. Neville-Sington, King, below.

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writings in defence of the Church and in support of its activities as censor and destroyer of heresy. These had been written and printed in the late 1520s and early 1530s, when More and his King still seemed united in defence of the faith, as they had previously been when writing in Latin against the German reformers. Proclamations were issued during 1529–30 in Henry's name against the import of Lutheran books in English. During the twenty years after More's execution in 1535 for his refusal to accept a secular ruler as head of the Church – an act of treachery according to Henry – these English works of his could not have been printed in England. They circulated only under risk there. In 1557, with Philip and Mary on the throne, More was openly a martyr. John Cawood, the Queen's Printer, bore part of the production costs.

In the first decade of the sixteenth century, the English clerical arm had moved against printed books. One of its chief concerns, since the beginning of the previous century, had been translations of Scripture into English, which had not been approved by Church authority. These had been the special object of condemnation in the Constitutions of Oxford of 1409. Copying and circulation in manuscript of Wycliffite New Testament translations and other works continued nevertheless, though their witness to the Word was not reinforced by diffusion other than in manuscript. By the time they came to be printed, they had long been superseded by other versions. In 1526, William Tyndale's New Testament had had to be printed abroad, and brought in clandestinely. The Henrician versions of the 1530s, at first printed abroad for different reasons, and later in England, were disseminated by royal command. The English version most widely used in the latter part of the sixteenth century had again to be produced abroad – in Geneva by a small group of Marian Protestant exiles – in 1560 and could not circulate freely in England until the time of Elizabeth I.

These examples are elaborated briefly in this introduction, and in detail and at length in the chapters that follow it.

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Our period witnessed a vast increase in the sheer numbers of books that became available, first through scribal production, but largely as a result of the arrival in England of the new invention of printing and of a flourishing import trade in both manuscripts and printed books, in which supply – as ever – partly satisfied and partly created demand. The times witnessed great growth in vernacular literacy in the sense of ability to

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read, and a smaller but possibly proportional increase in ability to write. In the older-fashioned literacy, which defined the *literatus* as someone who could read Latin, the extension was less marked, despite the expansion of the universities, the growth in numbers of schools and the beginning and consolidation of humanism and the Renaissance movement. The increase in vernacular literacy was accompanied, from the second half of the fourteenth century onwards, by a concomitant and cumulative increase in what was written in English, both originally in the native language and translated. There was also a growing dissatisfaction with the Church and its practices, chief among grievances being the sense that the Christian message was being withheld from those whom it ought to benefit by clerical insistence on the privileges of the clergy and on retaining the Scriptures and the liturgy in Latin. Fifteenth-century Lollardy, with its anti-clericalism, levelling doctrines, vigorously proselytizing and laicizing character, was the first popular heresy to manifest itself on any scale in Britain. Many of its tenets, particularly its insistence on Scripture in English, reinforced by Lutheranism from the 1520s onwards, and by Henry VIII and the Reformation from the later 1530s, were the most powerful of factors. This did not mean that the English Church abandoned Latin for its offices, however, until the last years of Henry VIII and during the reign of Edward VI; and Latin was restored under Mary. In Scotland the Latin mass was not abolished until 1560.

A transformation took place also, about the middle of our period, in the ways in which words were recorded on the page, the material – parchment or paper – of which that page was made, the quantity of such pages made available, the ways in which the pages were disseminated by their producers and through the book-trade, as well as where and for whom these processes were set in motion, and what kind of book, in what language, was being made. Printing indeed wrought a dramatic change, not only in methods of book production, but also in the book-trade. This change in turn had an effect on communication and on intellectual life in general that was both profound and lasting. To characterize the production change in terms of binary opposites – bespoke to speculative – is clearly too stark. Nevertheless, there is truth in it. The transformation, moreover, was not wrought overnight; nor did it affect everyone in equal measure. Communication depends on language, and language is one indicator of the distinct social groupings affected by the word spoken, written and printed, and therefore by the production of books and, in particular, their movement from place to place at the behest of owners and readers.

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During the years covered by this volume, at least half-a-dozen lan-
guages were current in the British Isles: English (in the variety of regional
forms that moved Caxton to express his perplexity about which to
choose), Latin, French, Law French – the peculiar legal idiom (quite dis-
tinct from the language current in France) that had developed in the Inns
of Court of London – and Middle Scottish, as well as Gaelic in its Scots,
Welsh and Irish forms. The Law French constituency was perhaps the
smallest and most homogeneous: the lawyers of the Inns of Court. In no
other context are writers and readers, production and trade, so narrowly
defined and connected. Similarly, the Latin which was the exclusive
vehicle for canon law kept readership within a field that was closely
confined to the clerical, legal and administrative classes, those in short
who were *literati* in the strict sense. Not until the common lawyers'
attack on the ecclesiastical jurisdiction from the later 1520s onwards were
matters of canon law aired in print in the vernacular. The current law of
the realm, in the form of parliamentary statutes, on the other hand, was
published in English from the time of Henry VII onwards. The body of
earlier legislation was also issued in English in 1519 (John Rastell's
Abridgements)[8] and 1533 (Robert Redman's *Great Booke*).[9] It seems clear
that wider access was being encouraged.

It is hardly more difficult to characterize the public for books in Scots,
Welsh and Irish than that for such books of professional concern to
lawyers or the clergy,[10] nor for those in the French of France, though in
all these cases actual readership is less narrowly confined. For 'French of
Paris' there is evidence of female readership. The core constituency for
French books is to be deduced from the books acquired by the monarch
and by the royal entourage, under the immediate influence of the French
and Burgundian courts. The collection of John, Duke of Bedford, once
formed part of the French royal collection; Edward IV and his sister,
Margaret of York, Duchess of Burgundy, commissioned their French-lan-
guage manuscripts in Bruges, Ghent and Brussels; Henry VII received
printed books in French from Antoine Vérard in Paris, and employed as
his librarian the francophone Bruges scribe, Quentin Poulet.[11]

Reading French was not limited to the royal court and its members
and the upper nobility. French nevertheless did not, as it did in many

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8. *STC* 9515.5.   9. *STC* 9286.
10. The history of the book in Scotland, Ireland and Wales will have separate treatment: *Book
Trade History Group Newsletter*, 27 March 1996, pp. 2–14 and now Jones and Rees 1998.
11. Stratford, Backhouse, Carley below.

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continental countries, become the language of polite society. Translation
from the French, on the other hand, was an important element in English
culture throughout our period: John Lydgate's major translations, his
Troy Book, *Siege of Thebes* and *Fall of Princes*, were all from French rather
than directly from Latin; Margaret of York's well-known patronage of
Caxton's first efforts as translator related to renderings from the French;
and French influence remained profound. It is not too much to say that
these versions had a dramatic effect on the extension of the English-
reading public among the professional and merchant sectors. Caxton had
witnessed the same extension in the cities of Brabant and Flanders,
before his return to England.

Throughout the century and a half covered in this volume, the situa-
tions of English and Latin, the two chief book languages of the country,
shifted in relation to one another.[12] If initially use of the two languages
indicated two distinct circles of readership, those circles can be observed
gradually drawing closer to each other, until finally they overlap. In spite
of this overlap in readership and in intellectual impact, however, the two
tongues present us with opposites in terms of the production of, and the
trade in, books. Latin was written and read everywhere in the educated
world of Europe; English in the British Isles only, and outside them only
in the special circumstances and restricted circles of successive genera-
tions of expatriates. The production of and trade in Latin books knew no
boundaries, though the administration of the British kingdoms could
and did exploit geographical situation to control, rather more efficiently
than other European states, the importation of books.

A flourishing local production of manuscripts, augmented by imports,
in particular of illuminated manuscripts, from France and the Low
Countries, was sufficient to supply demand. This changed when printed
books began to appear on the market. For books printed in French and
Latin, the British Isles came to rely almost entirely on what could be
imported from the Continent. With few exceptions, the only Latin
books produced in England during our period were those which could
not more conveniently be obtained from elsewhere. Exceptions to this
are all the more intriguing. The brief and unsuccessful attempt in the late
1470s and 1480s to establish a press in Oxford, and the later encourage-
ment by Cambridge of the printing activities of John Siberch in the early

12. Mss. and modern editions of British Latin writers up to 1540 are listed by R. Sharpe 1997.

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1520s, are understandable, since university demand accounted for a large part of the Latin market.[13] What, however, induced the merchant William Wilcok in 1481 to commission the printing of the *Expositiones super Psalterium* of Thomas Wallensis from the first printing press in the City of London?[14] This anomaly should not obscure the fact that early English printing in Latin was almost exclusively limited to liturgies and books of hours (some of which also were ordered from printers in Paris, Rouen or the Southern Netherlands), to school-books and to jobbing printing of texts that happened to include Latin, or to short texts in that language, such as indulgences.

On the Continent, certain printers, in Venice, Basel, Nuremberg, Lyons and elsewhere, quickly began to dominate in certain fields – law, Bibles, the Fathers, liturgy, for example – selling their books far and wide, so as to render competition from elsewhere hardly worthwhile. No other country with a lively book culture, however, confined its production so much to its own vernacular and was almost wholly reliant for its Latin books on what was produced elsewhere. In this respect, the British Isles are unique.

It follows that printers in England (and, from the early sixteenth century, in Scotland) printed what could not be obtained from outside Britain: books either in English or Scots, or books for use exclusively in the British Isles. The printers were responding to patronage, to political conditions, or to more widespread and general demand. The link between the provision of Latin and of English books is therefore an intimate one, in that it shows a constant interaction between production at home and importation from abroad. In both pre- and post-Reformation times, English poetry, as well as Scripture, heterodox sermons and devotional material in English, often circulated in manuscripts not produced by professional scribes. That circulation, however, was restricted by considerations of private taste or of public legality.[15] In the age of printing, the book-trade was the primary force in the provision of reading matter for the educated classes.

The pattern which was to remain characteristic for British printing over the whole period was set from the beginning by William Caxton in 1476, although in his activities a number of functions are found together

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13. Roberts 1997; Ferdinand 1997.   14. *STC* 19627.
15. Croft 1973; Beal 1980; Marotti 1995; Woudhuysen 1996.

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which, not much later, could be expected to be spread over a range of skilled occupations.[16] Caxton prepared texts as editor and translator. He introduced a significant section of contemporary literature in French into the English literary tradition, and in doing so made it accessible to readers to whom it had largely been unknown. He contributed substantially to the creation of a wider readership among the merchant and professional classes, mostly in London. The twenty or more years of his life spent in Flanders and Brabant in a similar metropolitan society may have encouraged him on this path. In the flourishing cities of these parts, burghers had become used to reading and owning books, as can be seen in surviving inventories. At the same time, Caxton played a considerable part in the diffusion of Burgundian chivalric ideas. He also commissioned the preparation of texts when he knew himself to be out of his depth, as with the secular Latin texts edited by Pietro Carmeliano or written by Lorenzo Guglielmo Traversagni.[17] The same is presumably true of publications such as the Psalter, the books of hours and the *Directorium sacerdotum* produced by his press.

Caxton organized a many-sided publishing business, which was thriving at the time of his death in 1492, and stable enough to be taken over successfully by Wynkyn de Worde. Initially wholly oriented towards the Netherlands and Cologne, Caxton imported not only his newly acquired knowledge of printing and publishing procedures, but also all materials required for printing: cast type, paper, presumably recipes for printing ink, and he engaged at least one skilled workman from the Netherlands. Less noticed is that he was probably also instrumental in importing books from overseas, as witness the extant volumes, printed in Basel, Lyons, Cologne, Nuremberg, Venice and Ghent, with bindings which can be related to him and his workshop.[18] Styles of book production changed drastically during his lifetime, and evolved into forms which became recognizably 'English', but he and his successors continued to rely on imported printing types, largely from Paris and Rouen. Although illustrations, invariably woodcuts, were usually produced by local craftsmen, printed books, whether printed in England and Scotland or imported, continued to show visible links with Western European countries throughout the first half of the sixteenth century.[19]

16. The most recent bibliography on Caxton is found in Blake 1985. See also Corsten and Fuchs 1988–93, pp. 662–84; and Hellinga, below.
17. Trapp below, p. 289.   18. Nixon 1976, pp. 94–6.
19. Hellinga, below, pp. 72–9, 97–108.