

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-02143-2 - A History of Booksellers: The Old and the New

Henry Curwen

Excerpt

[More information](#)*THE BOOKSELLERS OF OLDEN TIMES.*

LONG ages before the European invention of the art of printing, long even before the encroaching masses of Huns and Visigoths rolled the wave of civilization backward for a thousand years, the honourable trades, of which we aim to be in some degree the chroniclers, had their representatives and their patrons. Without going back to the libraries of Egypt—a subject fertile enough in the pages of mythical history—or to the manuscript-engrossers and sellers of Ancient Greece—though by their labours much of the world's best poetry, philosophy, and wit was garnered for a dozen centuries, like wheat ears in a mummy's tomb, to be scattered to the four winds of heaven, when the Mahometans seized upon Constantinople, thenceforth to fructify afresh, and, in connection with the art of printing, as if the old world and the new clasped hands upon promise of a better time, to be mainly instrumental in the “revival of letters”—it will be sufficient for our present purpose to know that there were in Rome, at the time of the Empire, many publishing firms, who, if they could not altogether rival the magnates of Albemarle Street and the “Row,” issued books at least as good, and, para-

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doxical as it may seem, at least as cheaply as their modern brethren.

To the sauntering Roman of the Augustan age literature was an essential; never, probably; till quite modern times was education—the education, at all events, that supplies a capability to read and write—so widely spread. The taste thus created was gratified in many ways. If the Romans had no Mudie, they possessed public libraries, thrown freely open to all. They had public recitations, at which unpublished and ambitious writers could find an audience; over which, too, sometimes great emperors presided, while poets, with a world-wide reputation, read aloud their favourite verses. They had newspapers, the subject-matter of which was wonderfully like our own. The principal journal, entitled *Acta Diurna*, was compiled under the sanction of the government, and hung up in some place of frequent resort for the benefit of the multitude, and was probably copied for the private accommodation of the wealthy. All public events of importance were chronicled here; the reporters, termed *actuarii*, furnished abstracts of the proceedings in the law courts and at public assemblies; there was a list of births, deaths, and marriages; and we are informed that the one article of news in which the *Acta Diurna* particularly abounded was that of reports of trials for divorce. Juvenal tells us that the women were all agog for deluges, earthquakes, and other horrors, and that the wine-merchants and traders used to invent false news in order to affect their various markets. But, in addition to all these means for gratifying the Roman taste for reading, every respectable house possessed a library, and among the better classes the slave-readers (*anagnostæ*) and the slave-transcribers (*librarii*) were

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almost as indispensable as cooks and scullions. At first we find that these slaves were employed in making copies of celebrated books for their masters; but gradually the natural division of labour produced a separate class of publishers. Atticus, the Moxon of the period, and an author of similar calibre, saw an opening for his energies in the production of copies of favourite authors upon a large scale. He employed a number of slaves to copy from dictation simultaneously, and was thus able to multiply books as quickly as they were demanded. His success speedily finding imitators, among whom were Tryphon and Dorus, publishing became a recognized trade. The public they appealed to was not a small one. Martial, Ovid, and Propertius speak of their works as being known all the world over; that young and old, women and girls, in Rome and in the provinces, in Britain and in Gaul, read their verses. "Every one," says Martial, "has me in his pocket, every one has me in his hands."

"Laudat, amat, cantat nostros mea Roma libellos:  
Meque sinus omnis, me manus omnis habet."

Horace speaks of the repugnance he felt at seeing his works in the hands of the vulgar. And Pliny writes that Regulus is mourning ostentatiously for the loss of his son, and no one weeps like him—*luget ut nemo*. "He composes an oration which he is not content with publicly reciting in Rome, but must needs enrich the provinces with a thousand copies of it."

School-books, too, an important item in publishing eyes, were in demand at Rome: Juvenal says that "the verses which the boy has just *conned over* at his desk

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he stands up to repeat," and Persius tells us that poets were ambitious to be read in the schools; while Nero, in his vanity, gave special command that his verses should be placed in the hands of the students.

Thus, altogether, there must have been a large book-buying public, and this fact is still further strengthened by the cheapness of the books produced. M. Geraud\* concludes that the prices were lower than in our own day. According to Martial the first book of his Epigrams was to be bought, neatly bound, for five denarii (nearly three shillings), but in a cheaper binding for the people it cost six to ten sestertii (a shilling to eighteen pence); his thirteenth book of Epigrams was sold for four sestertii (about eightpence), and half that price would, he says, have left a fair profit (Epig. xiii. 3). He tells us, moreover, that it would only require one hour to copy the whole of the second book,

"Hæc una peragit librarius hora."

This book contains five hundred and forty verses, and though he may be speaking with poetical licence, the system of abbreviations did undoubtedly considerably lessen the labour of transcribing, and it would be quite possible, by employing a number of transcribers simultaneously, to produce an edition of such a work in one day.

In Rome, therefore, we see that from the employment of slave labour—and some thousands of slaves were engaged in this work of transcribing—books were both plentiful and cheap.†

\* "Essai sur les Livres dans l'Antiquité."

† For a very interesting article on this subject, see *Cornhill Magazine*, vol. ix.

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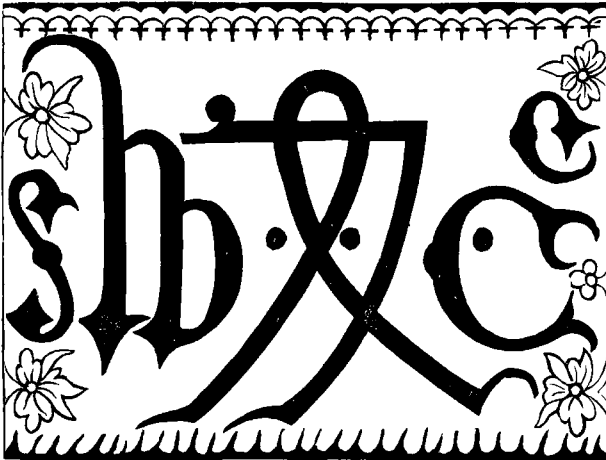
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1471



William Caxton. The first printer at Westminster.  
1410—1491.



Caxton's Monogram.  
(Facsimile from his Works.)

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In the Middle Ages this state of things was entirely altered. Men were too busy in giving and receiving blows, in oppressing and being oppressed, to have the slightest leisure for book-learning. Slaves, such as then existed, were valued for far different things than reading and writing; and even their masters' kings, princes, lords, and other fighting dignitaries, would have regarded a quill-pen, in their mail-gloved hands, as a very foolish and unmanly weapon. There was absolutely no public to which bookmakers could have appealed, and the art of transcribing was confined entirely to a few monks, whose time hung heavily upon their hands; and, as a natural result, writers became, as Odofredi says, "no longer writers but painters," and books were changed into elaborate works of art. Nor was this luxurious illumination confined to Bibles and Missals; the very law books were resplendent, and a writer in the twelfth century complains that in Paris the Professor of Jurisprudence required two or three desks to support his copy of Ulpian, gorgeous with golden letters. No wonder that Erasmus says of the *Secunda Secundea* that "no man can carry it about, much less get it into his head."

At first there was no trade whatever in books, but gradually a system of barter sprung up between the monks of various monasteries; and with the foundation of the Universities a regular class of copyists was established to supply the wants of scholars and professors, and this improvement was greatly fostered by the invention of paper.

The booksellers of this period were called *Stationarii*, either from the practice of stationing themselves at booths or stalls in the streets (in contradis-

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tion to the itinerant vendors) or from the other meaning of the Latin term *statio*, which is, Crevier tells us, *entrepôt* or depository, and he adds that the booksellers did little else than furnish a place of deposit, where private persons could send their manuscripts for sale. In addition to this, indeed as their chief trade, they sent out books to be read, at exorbitant prices, not in volumes, but in detached parts, according to the estimation in which the authors were held.

In Paris, where the trade of these *stationarii* was best developed, a statute regarding them was published in 1275, by which they were compelled to take the oath of allegiance once a year, or, at most, once every two years. They were forbidden by this same statute to purchase the books placed in their hands until they had been publicly exposed for sale for at least a month; the purchase money was to be handed over direct to the proprietor, and the bookseller's commission was not to exceed one or two per cent. In addition to the *stationarii*, there were in Paris several pedlars or stall-keepers, also under University control, who were only permitted to exhibit their wares under the free heavens, or beneath the porches of churches where the schools were occasionally kept. The portal at the north end of the cross aisle in Rouen Cathedral is still called *le Portail des Libraires*.

In England the first stationers were probably themselves the engrossers of what they sold, when the learning and literature of the country demanded as the chief food A B C's and Paternosters, Aves and Creeds, Graces and Amens. Such was the employment of our earliest stationers, as the names of their

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1493



Wynkyn de Worde. 1493—1534. The second printer at Westminster.  
*(From a drawing by Fathorne.)*



Headpiece of William Caxton.



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favourite haunts—Paternoster Row, Amen Corner, and Ave Maria Lane—bear ample witness; while the term stationer soon became synonymous with bookseller, and, in connection with the Stationers' Company, of no little importance, as we shall soon see, in our own bookselling annals.

In 1292, the bookselling corporation of Paris consisted of twenty-four copyists, seventeen bookbinders, nineteen parchment makers, thirteen illuminators, and eight simple dealers in manuscripts. But at the time when printing was first introduced upwards of six thousand people are said to have subsisted by copying and illuminating manuscripts—a fact that, even if exaggerated, says something for the gradual advancement of learning.

The European invention of printing, which here can only be mentioned; the diffusion of Greek manuscripts and the ancient wisdom contained therein, consequent upon the capture of Constantinople by the Turks; the discovery of America; and, finally, the German and English religious Reformations, were so many rapid and connected strides in favour of knowledge and progress. All properly-constituted conservative minds were shocked that so many new lights should be allowed to stream in upon the world, and every conceivable let and hindrance was called up in opposition. Royal prerogatives were exercised, Papal bulls were issued, and satirists (*soi-disant*) were bitter. A French poet of this period, sneering at the invention of printing, and the discovery of the New World by Columbus, says of the press, in language conveyed by the following doggerel:—

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“I’ve seen a mighty throng  
 Of printed books and long,  
 To draw to studious ways  
 The poor men of our days ;  
 By which new-fangled practice,  
 We soon shall see the fact is,  
 Our streets will swarm with scholars  
 Without clean shirts or collars,  
 With Bibles, books, and codices  
 As cheap as tape for bodices.”

In spite of this feeling against the popularization of learning and the spread of education—a feeling not quite dead yet, if we may trust the evidence of a few good old Tory speakers on the evil effects (forgery, larceny, and all possible violation of the ten commandments) of popular education—a feeling perhaps subsiding, for a country gentleman of the old school told us recently that he “would wish every working man to read the Bible—the Bible only—and *that* with difficulty”—a progressive sign—the world was too well aware of the good to be gathered from the furtherance of these novelties to willingly let them die, and though the battle was from the first a hard one, it has been, from first to last, a winning battle.

It will be essential throughout this chapter, and indeed throughout the whole work, to bear in mind that it was not till quite modern times that a separate class was formed to buy copyrights, to employ printers, and to sell the books wholesale, to which their names were affixed on the title pages—to be in fact, in the modern acceptation of the word, Publishers. There was no such class among the old booksellers; but they had to do everything for themselves, to construct the types, presses, and other essentials for printing, to bind the sheets when printed, and finally, when the