Mexican Waves
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Historians have increasingly participated, some indirectly, some by design, in multidisciplinary endeavours designated "the history of the book", reformulating questions of textual production, dissemination and reception. Literary scholars have in turn been drawn to a literary history transformed by such scholarship. This is true of Nancy Vogeley and David M. Stewart, who have both used "book history" and a regenerated historical bibliography to make contributions to nineteenth-century American social and cultural history. Each demonstrates the potential of exploiting unusual sources, overlooked archives and once popular texts; each also highlights the historical limitations of using primarily, in Vogeley's case, book trade correspondence, and in Stewart's, a textually based interrogation of the practice of reading.

Vogeley, a distinguished scholar of early Mexican and Spanish American literature, stumbled on a cache of letters written in 1822-3 by Thomas Robeson to the man who sent him as a book agent to Mexico, the Irish-born Philadelphian publisher Mathew Carey (1760-1839), the subject of several acclaimed bibliographical studies. In The Bookrunner, Vogeley deftly explores the contribution Carey made to a new inter-American book trade, making good use of the twenty or so letters, which are one-sided and run for less than a year. More ambitiously, she relates book cargoes to political debate and the formation of national identity in Mexico. She challenges received nationalist accounts of Mexican political culture in the early nineteenth century, and examines the significance of the dispatch from Philadelphia of seminal republican and radical texts. Stewart, in his book Reading and Disorder in Antebellum America, offers a "rendering of texts" that seeks to evaluate male working-class reading of middle-class reform literature, serials, children's literature, and sensational cheap fiction. Most is what he labels "trash". His sources also embrace diaries and letters that tell of intimacies, social perspectives and, to a limited extent, reading practices. For Stewart, this reading matter is proudly "noncanonical".

The historical attraction of otherwise valueless material is evident in an enthusiastic examination of texts that are unread today, but were popular among early and midnineteenth-century American working men. The examination of racism, misogyny and nativism dominates historical accounts of antebellum working-class culture. Stewart's close reading of texts produced for, or appealing to, the just-literate, together with a consideration of their reading experiences, takes us closer to understanding such undesirable attitudes in their own terms. His book demonstrates the value of the history of reading in offering a new view of antebellum social life, emphasizing not so much the underlying insecurities and emotional volatility, but the economic and market forces that transformed lives and created very particular industrial and urban communities in a predominantly rural and agricultural nation.

The more such studies of book orders and of reading habits are produced, the more evident are some archival and interpretative weaknesses.
Vogeley is aware of fragile and absent connections in the story she weaves, and at one point confesses that "we do not have much information as to how Mexicans received the new foreign authors" (whose importation in the convoys from Carey were hardly large). This painstaking history does, however, provide a provocative reinterpretation of Mexican literary attitudes at this period, notwithstanding doubts about the nature and extent of the actual market and the motivation and capability of the readership. It is a transnational and transcultural history that will spur others to identify further sources and generate new perspectives. It offers welcome support for those of us concerned that many "national" history projects have tended to marginalize an essential feature of books, pamphlets and newspapers - that they are often livres sans frontières.

Stewart offers a more bullish reconsideration of what reading means. In his formulation, it was an activity that "engaged workingmen bodily in an activity that re-formed them bodily". But real readers are largely absent, despite the suggestive use of a few diaries and letters. Distinctions, for example, between "good" and "bad" reading are derived from the texts themselves, and we really cannot be sure that these idealized or denigrated practices bore any direct relation to what actually happened when working men (or indeed others) read such texts. This is not, however, to belittle a close reading of books, periodicals and magazines that offers a convincing description of the rhetoric that sought to coerce and affect conduct.

There are a few misconceptions in both books. To use (as Vogeley does on several occasions) the word "Britisher" is perhaps imprudent, but to apply it emphatically to D. F. McKenzie, a pioneering figure in the new bibliography and a proud New Zealander, is an error that should have been eliminated by better editing.