
The Industrial Book, 1840–1880 is the third volume of the planned five-volume A History of the Book in America. The general editor is David Hall, and the project as a whole is facilitated by the American Antiquarian Society. Between volumes 1 and 3 (volume 2 has yet to appear) a new publisher was found and the price greatly reduced. Volume 4 is due out in 2009. Despite a dust-jacket claim that it “narrates the emergence of a national book trade,” The Industrial Book is not narrative; and it is not only about trade. It is a reference work that aims at a broad account of print culture in the period, albeit with a materialist emphasis. Eleven chapters, some subdivided, by twenty-two contributors, treat topics that range from the palpable (technology, labor, commerce) to the abstract (“Cultures of Print”). The Industrial Book is generously illustrated, and numerous tables and graphs make statistically dense chapters accessible. Referencing tools—the index and bibliographical essays, in particular—are excellent. I recommend it without hesitation.

Yet The Industrial Book is also a troubled enterprise, hints of which appear in its curious mislabeling (recent advertising drops the term “narrative”) and in the seven years it took to emerge after volume 1. The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World (2000) was equally accomplished. A project long anticipated, it assembled great swaths of colonial book history, much of it obscure, with chapters by leading authorities in the field. Amid wide, well-earned praise, criticism was understandably muted. But there was some, especially from literary critics who found its trade history approach jarring, for both the severity of its materialism and an approach to topics typically the concern of literary studies that did not take language as its primary object. The Colonial Book presented the history of the book like the history of any other commodity. While not exactly wrong, Michael Warner commented, treating books as though they were “furniture” seemed “well, illiterate” (William and Mary Quarterly 58 [2001]: 696). Michael Moon pointed out that, for all its virtues, The Colonial Book ignored a large body of specifically literate “paradigm-shifting work . . . which has transformed our understanding of the complex agencies involved in the acts of writing and reading” (American Literature 72 [2000]: 868). There is little to suggest that the editors of volume 3 sought to address faults of the kind Warner and Moon observed. Indeed, what was treated as a lapse in 2000, in 2007 looks more like a purge.

What troubles The Industrial Book troubles book history generally. In some respects, all interdisciplinary fields must negotiate differences in method, expectation, and territorial claims that stem from professional training and affiliation. Yet
for many who have turned to it seeking a broader disciplinary base, book history has been increasingly dismissive of means and materials that have come to define literary studies as a discipline: texts, theory, cultural politics, and close reading. Language is nearly absent from *A History of the Book in America*, as either a source of data or an object to be explained in its own right. How book history became illiterate involves both doctrinal issues (“what the history of the book means or how it should be told,” as Warner put it [696]) and its own history in the form of bibliography and textual scholarship, which generations of literary critics convinced of interpretation’s higher calling dismissed as mere antiquarianism. Whether payback or dialectical correction, dropping language from even the most material of book histories has consequences, for book history and literary criticism. “Disciplinary suicide” is how Jane Gallop describes the trend in English departments toward an atextual, post-theoretical, largely descriptive historicism that threatens to reduce literary studies to third-rate cultural history (“The Historicization of Literary Studies and the Fate of Close Reading,” *Profession* [New York: MLA, 2007]: 184).

This is not to deny trade history its due. If *The Industrial Book* vexes, it also fascinates, in part because most know so little about the material artifact. Chapter 1 provides a case in point. Authored by Michael Winship, a bibliographer and coeditor of the volume, “Manufacturing and Book Production” describes the principal technologies used to make books industrially and how they changed over time. Winship’s writing is crisp and informative without being pedantic. Beyond describing the mysteries of electrotype and remarkable advances in high-speed printing, he succeeds in the difficult task of explaining progress while avoiding the pitfalls of determinism, technological and geographic: the United States was a large, diverse, book-producing nation, and even in publishing centers like New York the means of manufacture developed very unevenly.

Compelling as it is, Winship’s empiricism has limits—which he himself posits with a kind of happy stoicism. He refuses to generalize technology’s relationship to book production, something we may expect given the importance he attributes to it, even if this requires a degree of abstraction to which he is not prone. He also stays resolutely within the material confines of his topic. Nothing is allowed to disturb the objective serenity of machinery and how it worked, neither nontechnical factors that affected its development nor consequences, including how it affected words on the page. In a revealing moment, Winship concedes such effects in the shift from moveable type to page plates, which while efficient and durable, were not easily modified: “The extent to which plates served to freeze a text, discouraging its correction or revision, is not clear” (46). He then explains how printers did alter and repair plates when costs were warranted. The original 1852 plates of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* were still in use twenty-five years later, we learn, an achievement Winship regards as extraordinary.

Aside from the fact that, extraordinary or not, technology qua technology has limited appeal for many, textual questions are left hanging, from those concerned with the reciprocal relations between language and machines, to others that are social in nature—and hard to ignore when the language is Harriet Beecher Stowe’s. Answers to such questions are inevitably “not clear,” which has not stopped people
from venturing them. That they are not ventured by Winship, or others in *The Industrial Book*, may reflect compartmentalizing natural in a project such as this. Yet, neither are the contents of books irrelevant to their material histories, nor does interpreting them necessarily distract from properly delimited subject matter. In her book on copyright, *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834–1853* (2002), Meredith McGill includes readings of Nathaniel Hawthorne, Charles Dickens, and Edgar Allan Poe that enhance her legal history at least as much as they do our understanding of the three authors. And in his work on signs and other writing that adorned the streets of antebellum New York, *City Reading: Written Words and Public Spaces in Antebellum New York* (1998), David Henkin reads texts of another kind to reflect on the lives of those who read them. The literacy of such work is notably curtailed in *The Industrial Book*, where texts are reduced to the service of illustration—when they appear at all.

Indeed, topics that would require more than passing textual treatment are missing. We find copyright in chapter 5, “The Role of Government,” with Scott Casper on the census, Post Office, and government printing. But censorship is hardly mentioned, strange in a period when obscenity, military reporting (the Civil War), and Comstock laws raised issues concerning the regulation of U.S. media that are still debated today. Stranger still in a volume purporting to be about trade is the absence of genre. From general trends (realism, sensationalism, sentimentality) to specific types (moral tract, dime novel, historical romance), genre became the principal way books were marketed and consumed. It could be argued that without an adequate (including theoretical) account of how genre helped readers negotiate an expanding cultural marketplace and publishers manage the risks of growing capital investment, it is impossible to understand the industrial book at all.

The “illiteracy” of *The Industrial Book* is most noticeable in chapters where language would be expected to play a large role but does not. The “acts of writing and reading” have been a major preoccupation of literary studies, and while not all text based, this work adds to the question of why in treating these acts we should proceed as if their primary objects—texts written and read—tell us nothing about them. In “Authors and Literary Authorship,” Susan Williams has a somewhat easier time as a professor of English coming from a tradition that has privileged writers, but that, since the “death of the author,” has itself turned from individual genius to other determinants, the marketplace included. Articulate and reflexive, Williams recalls not only the professionalization of authorship, but our shifting views of it. Still, what writers wrote is largely omitted. In addition, her focus is middle-class and canonical, a bias that has been hard to shake in literary studies, even in its turn to the book. Including authors who labored in the period’s so-called “fiction factory” would usefully have linked Williams’s work to the topics that precede it in the volume: Winship on technology and Bruce Laurie on labor. For the first generation of U.S. Grub Street writers, survival required flexibility in the workplace, doing all variety of tasks, from editing and typesetting to sweeping up. Those who made the professional turn, like moralist T. S. Arthur, did so by exploiting genre markets. Others, like sensationalist George Thompson, who enjoyed some success in the 1840s and 1850s, failed to adapt to new conditions and disappeared into the ranks of wage labor.
Reading is harder. As a historian, Barbara Sicherman is more democratic in her sample, treating “cheap reading” much better than Williams does its writers. “Ideologies and Practices of Reading” includes an entire section on pleasure reading, a topic addressed nowhere else in the volume (another odd omission in a book supposed to be about trade). But Sicherman’s credentials carry other prejudices, as her carefully worded title suggests. While conceding “some innovative recent scholarship,” she declares that the “consumption of books is almost wholly uncharted territory,” which to investigate requires “focused studies of readers’ interactions with print” (279). The last fifty years has produced an immense body of work on the consumption of books. Admittedly, much of this emphasizes language over empirical practice. Yet what would an account of “readers’ interactions with print” entail if it did not include words printed, other than ink-smudged fingers or what famously reticent readers may have said (but probably did not) once they finished? Rather than an enhanced materialism, the illiterate territory we have entered only takes us farther from our material object.

Many will sing the praises of The Industrial Book—and they should. Its virtues far outweigh its faults. But insofar as it has faults, these are systemic, emerging from book history in America as a current and also historical practice; they persist despite repeated, at times obvious, criticism from within the field and without; and they involve a calculated dismissal of relevant disciplinary expertise. The faults and virtues of The Industrial Book invite us to reflect on the turn to book history in literary studies and, more broadly, as does Gallop, on the kind of historicism we now embrace and to what end. They also invite us to reflect on book history itself, which, however material, only diminishes itself by its turn from language.

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AFLOAT AND ASHORE, OR THE ADVENTURES OF MILES WALLINGFORD.

The latest addition to “The Writings of James Fenimore Cooper” project, Afloat and Ashore, or The Adventures of Miles Wallingford (1844), in two parts, edited with a historical introduction and text established by Thomas Philbrick and Marianne Philbrick, is a noteworthy step forward in making available the complete works of James Fenimore Cooper. The overall project (henceforth referred to as WJFC) will, when complete, produce scholarly editions for all of Cooper’s novels and other fiction and nonfiction writings, a monumental endeavor first conceived in the 1960s by James Franklin Beard. Establishing both editorial and textual guidelines, Beard and the editorial board of the WJFC began publishing the Cooper