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The Uses of Script and Print 1300-1700

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Julia Crick

Alexandra Walsham

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H. R. Woudhuysen

The recent publication of two volumes of the Cambridge History of the Book in Britain, covering the period from 1400 to 1695 in just over 1600 pages, indicates something of the way in which the study of the book, or of books, has been transformed in the past few years.⁽¹⁾ The subject has moved from its traditional areas of investigation, the history of printing and publishing, the establishment and editing of texts, the description and cataloguing of early printed books and manuscripts, into new fields. It is no longer seen as the usual preserve of, say, literary scholars and librarians, but has become a sort of common currency among scholars of all disciplines and interests. One only has to think of the work of Robert Darnton in relation to publishing during the Enlightenment or of Adrian Johns on the development and circulation of knowledge, especially scientific knowledge, in Britain during the early modern period to realise that historians of various kinds have played a major part in this transformation. If, as some of its proponents might claim, all history is book history, then it might be argued that historians have a particular duty to investigate the role books play in their chosen fields of inquiry.

This makes the collection of essays, *The Uses of Script and Print 1300-1700*, edited by Julia Crick and Alexandra Walsham particularly welcome, since all but two of the thirteen contributors to the volume are professional historians; they are also largely associated with British academic life. The collection has

developed out of a conference held at Exeter University in the spring of 2000, yet for a book so concerned with the relations between the oral and the written or printed, it bears few traces of its spoken origins. It is a substantial and well-produced book, but it has a disappointingly small number of illustrations ? just six. There is a reasonably full index which goes beyond simply listing authors, titles of books and places, although entries such as 'scribes: as copyists 69-106' or 'scribal culture: medieval ... 29-69' are not as useful as they might be. The book lacks an index of manuscripts cited, which is rather a pity since this is often the easiest and fastest way to discover whether a particular subject has been covered in a book of this kind.

The question of what kind of book it is should not be too difficult to resolve. There are helpful and stimulating essays at the beginning of it by the editors and at the end by Margaret Aston, which by argument and summary seek to weave the twelve essays in the volume together. The essays themselves are helpfully divided into four sections, each containing three contributions. The sections are all organised under headings of 'Script, Print and ?'; they deal with 'Late Medieval Religion', 'Textual Tradition', 'Speech' and 'Persecution'. The 'script' and 'print' elements in the book are well balanced by a concern with the oral, both spoken and sung. With the exception of David d'Avray's more continental concerns and some brief excursions for Reformation and Marian exiles, the contributors are mainly concerned with English matters. Their time frame, stretching from 1300 to 1700, certainly allows the reader to take a long view of these matters, but as the editors rather optimistically say, 'The disciplinary frontline between historians of medieval and early modern culture is steadily withering away.' With one exception the contributors are directly concerned with material objects ? printed books and broadsides, manuscripts, archives and documents ? and tend to avoid the theoretical concerns which are necessary to the study of the book in history, but can so easily dominate it. Yet even with the best efforts of the editors and Margaret Aston, the volume has a slightly heterogeneous feeling to it. This is almost bound to be the case with these kinds of essay collections, organised around such large and general topics. Nevertheless, several distinctive concerns emerge in the course of the book and help to make it one of those volumes in which one can learn something of use and interest from every essay.

One of the strongest threads running through it is a repeated concern to show that Elizabeth M. Eisenstein's arguments for a 'shift "from script to print"' need to be modified. Just as disciplinary frontlines are said to be withering away, so 'the boundaries between the cultures of speech manuscript and print' can be refined, and the continuities as well as the interactions between the three can be brought out. In some ways the book is most successful when it addresses received ideas relating to religion and to religious dissent. The focus here is mainly on the Reformation, but Anne Hudson's important work on the Lollards rightly plays a major part in determining how the subject is approached. The argument can be simply put, that historians should not place Protestantism and print in one camp and monasticism and manuscripts in another, and equally that, as Ann Hughes puts it in relation to Thomas Edwards's *Gangraena* (London, 1646) 'simple contrasts between radical and orthodox Protestant ? do not survive analysis of the polemical constructions that originally inspired them'.

Margaret Aston poses a related question, which can be pursued through large parts of the volume:

Did the Reformation succeed, where medieval heretical movements had not, through the ability of the printing press to disseminate texts in numbers and ways not possible for scribal copyists?

Of course there is no simple answer to this, but it does suggest profitable ways of thinking about the role of books in history. In a characteristically well-informed essay Thomas S. Freeman deals with some of these when he considers 'the scribal culture of the Marian martyrs'. In particular he is concerned with why they 'relied more heavily on the written than the printed word as a means of communicating with their followers'. The advantages of manuscript over the clandestine press were that it was less visible and so safer to use, but also that letters and documents could be edited to conform to agreed doctrines and the current political position: 'problematic and embarrassing passages' could be 'all air-brushed away'. The new religion, Alexandra Walsham shows, did not 'disdain to use print as a vehicle for pursuing their vicious internal

quarrels' or for disseminating the new faith. Rather, she is concerned with 'The bias of dissenting groups towards script and print', when so much reformed religion placed such emphasis and value on the spoken word. She argues clearly that this was often the result 'of expediency and pragmatism, less a match made in heaven than a marriage of convenience'. In a world in which Protestant ministers were harassed and persecuted, 'books and manuscripts could stand in for faithful shepherds and wear the shoes of spiritual directors'.

James G. Clark discusses the other side of the matter in his account of 'the Benedictines and the press'. He usefully surveys the provision of books in monastic life between about 1470 and 1550, examines early provincial printing at St Albans, Tavistock, Abingdon and Canterbury, and concludes that by the beginning of the sixteenth century monks and some nuns would have come across (would have been 'exposed to') print. Ann Hughes pursues arguments about the nature of print and its supposedly impersonal authority in relation to Edwards's 800-page *Gangræna*. He was aware of 'The harmful power of print' and while he praised its ability to convey truthfulness, he was also conscious that it lacked the authenticity of oral discourse. Hughes states persuasively that for the anti-sectarian author (Milton's 'shallow Edwards') print was 'embedded in relationships founded on personal ties and neighbourhood links, with conversation and written records'. It follows that speech, manuscript and print were not separate elements, but intimately bound up with each other. Scott Mandelbrote, who with considerable learning examines the Bible in print during the seventeenth century, takes the story of the word and the book further. The need for accurate versions of the book might lead to demands for proof-readers and the elimination of typographic errors, but there was a deep-seated reluctance to interfere radically with its text and to return to ancient manuscript sources. The process of textual revision was almost circular: 'Printed books', he states, 'seemed to suffer from many of the failings of manuscripts', yet 'manuscripts and their histories retained an ability to challenge and undermine, as well as to uphold, traditions that were supported by print'.

The other essays in the volume follow and take up some of these important themes. In an elegant and densely argued essay, David d'Avray looks at 'mass communication before printing' and the means by which heretical sects were able to spread throughout Europe before the coming of moveable type. He focuses on the friars, their sermons and the use of the *pecia* system for the copying of manuscripts. His larger argument is that it is not printing which made the Reformation possible, but the absence of state repression at a crucial stage. At a more specific level he is concerned to show that manuscripts containing the same texts found in surviving master copies used in the *pecia* system show that 'the loss rate of medieval sermon manuscripts really was colossal' and that the 'huge loss rate' can be calculated: textual evidence confirms this. In other words, the friars had an extremely powerful means of disseminating their preaching even before the printing press came into operation. Felicity Riddy asks a related question concerning the ways in which authors published their works or reached a public before printing. From the general issue of what has been understood until now in medieval studies as 'publication', she turns to the specific example of the recluse Julian of Norwich's *A Revelation of Love*. She discusses the various theories relating to publication put forward by R K Root, Harold Love and Ian Doyle and argues for publication not as an event but as a process in which 'general discussion', what we might call literary gossip, plays a part. "'Publication"?, she concludes, 'is short for public conversation', which took place in the 'medieval public sphere'.

Although Jonathan Barry is refreshingly sceptical about their applicability, Jürgen Habermas's widely influential ideas also play a part in his account of script, print and speech at Bristol between 1640 and 1714. Like other contributors to the volume Barry is keen to look for and to find 'considerable continuity in forms of authority in communication'. He examines two different means of communication: newspapers, which owed an obvious debt to manuscript newsletters; and Grand Jury presentments, which began as speeches but were then transformed into manuscript or print. The decision as to which medium to use, he concludes, carried 'practical and ideological considerations'. Provincial concerns also lie behind Andrew Butcher's account of medieval clerks and urban records at Hythe. This is the most heavily theorised piece in the volume and although he draws attention to the use that can be made of *maletotes*, household taxation accounts, his essay is rather distanced from the actual material itself. There is plenty of theoretical argument ('The "speech/text" community of the town is a multi-ethnic complex involving a network of discursive

interrelationships of personal, collective, and institutional kinds'), but, except for one example, it is not supported by actual first-hand evidence.

Anthony Musson shows that it is possible to take a large subject, in this case 'legal authority and judicial accessibility in the late Middle Ages', and produce work which makes important general points about oral and textual traditions, yet which is rooted in detailed discussion of particular points. His theme is 'The reduction of law to written text', and he looks at the dissemination of statute law, the role of orality in proclamations, as well as at year books, plea rolls, writs, bills, legal education, the effect of printing and the emergence of precedent. The essay covers a great deal of ground, but like the work of J H Baker in whose footsteps he follows, Musson is always clear and to the point. Julia Crick's account of 'The art of the unprinted', in which she surveys the relationship between the antiquarian transcription of pre-conquest Latin charters and political discourse, is equally satisfying. She pays particular attention to Coke and Selden as well as to Robert Cotton's central role in these discoveries, which was intended to allow contemporaries 'to view English royal government arrayed in its pristine state' and to uncover 'the imperial past of the monarchy'. Finally, Christopher Marsh contributes a lively essay on early modern ballad tunes, in which he argues simply but effectively that 'Melody made meaning'. New words were continually fitted to existing tunes, allowing 'listeners to think the unprintable'. Popular tunes let ballad writers make use of 'hidden code of meanings', which might be sexual or political. He writes well of 'the noisiness of Restoration literature', but his piece has wider implications for earlier periods which would be worth developing.

One of the many difficulties with writing about books in history and the history of the book is that of getting a suitable balance between asking large questions and publishing much smaller, but still significant, discoveries. The subject is a relatively new one and often seems to want to make huge claims for itself, while turning its back on the sort of research which needs to be done to allow a history to be written. *The Uses of Script and Print 1300-1700* successfully negotiates this difficult path through the wood and between the trees. One of the incidental pleasures it brings to light lies precisely in its use of details: the gaoler who is to be bribed with a cheese; the dried ink and penknife detected in a roasted pig sent to a prisoner; a prisoner telling a warder that a copy of Coverdale's version of the Bible, wrapped up in a handkerchief, is in fact a piece of powdered beef; a servant forcing a messenger to eat the writ, seal and all, that he has been sent to serve on the wonderfully named Bogo de Clare. The essays collected here will do much to stimulate further work on the overlapping cultures of speech, manuscript and print.

Notes

1. Lotte Hellinga and J B Trapp, eds, *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*. Vol. 3, 1400-1557 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) and John Barnard and D F McKenzie, eds, assisted by Maureen Bell, *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*. Vol. 4, 1557-1695 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).[Back to \(1\)](#)

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