

A COMPANION TO

THE *H*ISTORY
OF THE *B*OOK

EDITED BY
SIMON ELIOT AND JONATHAN ROSE



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A Companion to the History of the Book

A Companion to the History of the Book

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Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	viii
<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	x
 Introduction	 1
<i>Simon Eliot and Jonathan Rose</i>	
 Part I Methods and Approaches	 7
1 Why Bibliography Matters	9
<i>T. H. Howard-Hill</i>	
2 What is Textual Scholarship?	21
<i>David Greetham</i>	
3 The Uses of Quantification	33
<i>Alexis Weedon</i>	
4 Readers: Books and Biography	50
<i>Stephen Colclough</i>	
 Part II The History of the Material Text	 63
<i>The World before the Codex</i>	65
5 The Clay Tablet Book in Sumer, Assyria, and Babylonia	67
<i>Eleanor Robson</i>	
6 The Papyrus Roll in Egypt, Greece, and Rome	84
<i>Cornelia Roemer</i>	

<i>The Book beyond the West</i>	95
7 China	97
<i>J. S. Edgren</i>	
8 Japan, Korea, and Vietnam	111
<i>Peter Kornicki</i>	
9 South Asia	126
<i>Graham Shaw</i>	
10 Latin America	138
<i>Hortensia Calvo</i>	
11 The Hebraic Book	153
<i>Emile G. L. Schrijver</i>	
12 The Islamic Book	165
<i>Michael Albin</i>	
 <i>The Codex in the West 400–2000</i>	 177
13 The Triumph of the Codex: The Manuscript Book before 1100	179
<i>Michelle P. Brown</i>	
14 Parchment and Paper: Manuscript Culture 1100–1500	194
<i>M. T. Clanchy</i>	
15 The Gutenberg Revolutions	207
<i>Lotte Hellinga</i>	
16 The Book Trade Comes of Age: The Sixteenth Century	220
<i>David J. Shaw</i>	
17 The British Book Market 1600–1800	232
<i>John Feather</i>	
18 Print and Public in Europe 1600–1800	247
<i>Rietje van Vliet</i>	
19 North America and Transatlantic Book Culture to 1800	259
<i>Russell L. Martin III</i>	
20 The Industrialization of the Book 1800–1970	273
<i>Rob Banham</i>	
21 From Few and Expensive to Many and Cheap: The British Book Market 1800–1890	291
<i>Simon Eliot</i>	
22 A Continent of Texts: Europe 1800–1890	303
<i>Jean-Yves Mollier and Marie-Françoise Cachin</i>	
23 Building a National Literature: The United States 1800–1890	315
<i>Robert A. Gross</i>	
24 The Globalization of the Book 1800–1970	329
<i>David Finkelstein</i>	
25 Modernity and Print I: Britain 1890–1970	341
<i>Jonathan Rose</i>	

26	Modernity and Print II: Europe 1890–1970 <i>Adriaan van der Weel</i>	354
27	Modernity and Print III: The United States 1890–1970 <i>Beth Luey</i>	368
28	Books and Bits: Texts and Technology 1970–2000 <i>Paul Luna</i>	381
29	The Global Market 1970–2000: Producers <i>Eva Hemmungs Wirtén</i>	395
30	The Global Market 1970–2000: Consumers <i>Claire Squires</i>	406
Part III Beyond the Book		419
31	Periodicals and Periodicity <i>James Wald</i>	421
32	The Importance of Ephemera <i>Martin Andrews</i>	434
33	The New Textual Technologies <i>Charles Chadwyck-Healey</i>	451
Part IV Issues		465
34	New Histories of Literacy <i>Patricia Crain</i>	467
35	Some Non-textual Uses of Books <i>Rowan Watson</i>	480
36	The Book as Art <i>Megan L. Benton</i>	493
37	Obscenity, Censorship, and Modernity <i>Deana Heath</i>	508
38	Copyright and the Creation of Literary Property <i>John Feather</i>	520
39	Libraries and the Invention of Information <i>Wayne A. Wiegand</i>	531
Coda		545
40	Does the Book Have a Future? <i>Angus Phillips</i>	547
Index		560

Illustrations

3.1	Number of titles published in nineteenth-century Britain	42
5.1	Map of ancient Iraq showing major cities	68
5.2	A Type II tablet from House F	72
5.3	Scribes using writing boards and parchment	75
5.4	A tablet from Nineveh recording the myth of the goddess Ishtar's descent to the Underworld	76
5.5	Shamash-êtir's intellectual network	78
5.6	A tablet from Hellenistic Uruk	79
7.1	Standard format of traditional Chinese printed books and manuscripts	98
7.2	Frontispiece woodcut and initial lines of text of the <i>Jin'gang jing</i>	104
7.3	Woodcut scene depicting the late Ming commercial publisher Yu Xiangdou	108
8.1	A page showing chrysanthemums from <i>Genji ikebana ki</i> (1765)	114
8.2	A page from the 1797 edition of <i>Chunchu jwa ssi jeon</i>	120
8.3	A woodblock-printed school textbook printed in Vietnam in the late nineteenth century	123
17.1	The circuit of the book	233
17.2	The book trade in the early seventeenth century	234
20.1	The Albion press	275
20.2	Koenig printing machine of 1811	277
20.3	Hoe's eight-cylinder printing machine	278
20.4	Hoe's bed-and-platen book-printing machine	278
20.5	A double-letter Linotype matrix	282
20.6	A line of single-letter Linotype matrices and spacebands	283
20.7	A Monotype matrix case	284
32.1	William Caxton's advertisement for <i>Commemorations of Sarum Use</i> , c.1478	435
32.2	Receipt from Robert Allardice, bookseller and stationer, 1831	437

32.3	Bill from Joseph White, bookseller, printer, and stationer, 1830	440
32.4	Trade card for W. Porter, bookseller, stationer, and binder, c.1830s	441
32.5	Trade card for Bettison, bookseller, publisher, and stationer, c.1830	442
32.6	Price list for Roach's Circulating Library, c.1830	444
32.7	Notice from the Wandsworth Public Library, 1889	445
32.8	Bookplate, Thomas Burch of Petersfield, early nineteenth century	446
32.9	Reward of Merit, c.1860s	447
32.10	Packaging label for reading lamp candles, c.1890	448
32.11	Advertisement for the "Reading Easel," c.1870s	449
36.1	Francesco Colonna, <i>Hypnerotomachia Poliphili</i>	497
36.2	Pierre-Simon Fournier, <i>Manuel typographique</i>	498
36.3	Geoffrey Chaucer, <i>Works</i>	500
36.4	H. C. Andersen, <i>Sneedronningen</i> [<i>The Ice Queen</i>]	504
36.5	Tatana Kellner, 71125: <i>Fifty Years of Silence</i>	506

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Introduction

Simon Eliot and Jonathan Rose

The history of the book is a new scholarly adventure, still in its pioneering phase, which offers an innovative approach to studying both history and literature. It is based on two apparently simple premises, which have inspired some strikingly original work in the humanities. The first is that books make history. In *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (1979), Elizabeth Eisenstein argued that the invention of print technology made possible the scientific revolution, mobilized the Protestant Reformation, and broadcast the achievements of the Italian Renaissance. Meanwhile, Robert Darnton was making the case that scurrilous underground literature undermined France's *ancien régime* to the point where it collapsed in 1789. They inspired other scholars to pose similar questions about books and historical causation. Did escalating press rhetoric precipitate the French Reign of Terror and the American Civil War? Did *samizdat* literature contribute to the implosion of Soviet communism? Can the arrested development of Middle Eastern print culture, hemmed in by censorship, help to explain problems of modernization in that part of the world? Book historians do not claim that books explain everything, but they do recognize that books are the primary tools that people use to transmit ideas, record memories, create narratives, exercise power, and distribute wealth. (That remained true even in the twentieth century, when cinematic, broadcast, sound recording, and digital media became increasingly pervasive.) Therefore, when we study any literate human society, we must ask what books it produced, where they were distributed, which libraries held them, how they were censored (or smuggled past the censors), where and how they were translated, and who was reading them. We should also be aware that readers can read the same book in a variety of ways, with important consequences: after all, wars have been fought over differing interpretations of scriptures and treaties.

Conversely, books are made by history: that is, they are shaped by economic, political, social, and cultural forces. No book is created solely by its author: printers, publishers, literary agents, editors, designers, and lawyers all play a role in molding the final product. Critics, booksellers, and educational bureaucrats can proclaim a book a classic

or consign it to oblivion. And every writer must take into account the demands of the reading public and the laws of literary property.

These issues have engaged a growing body of scholars working in a range of fields: history, literature, librarianship, art, sociology, religion, anthropology. Recently, these scholars have come together to build the apparatus of a new academic discipline of their own, including undergraduate and graduate courses, monographs, textbooks, bibliographies, conferences, and journals. In 1991, they organized the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing (SHARP), whose website (www.sharpweb.org) is the most comprehensive and up-to-the-minute source of information about the world of book historians. Academics have worked collectively on multivolume national histories of the book in France, Britain, the United States, Scotland, Ireland, Canada, and Australia. What has been lacking is a wider, more comparative history of the book, surveying all historical periods, distilling the best of recent scholarship. We have designed this volume to fill that gap. Our intended audience includes specialists, students, and lay readers alike – in fact, anyone who needs a broad, general introduction to the whole field of book history and the questions that it addresses.

Book history uses the word “book” in its widest sense, covering virtually any piece of written or printed text that has been multiplied, distributed, or in some way made public. This means that a book historian is interested in graffiti on a wall in Pompeii as well as in a letter by Cicero, in an eighteenth-century German chapbook as well as in Diderot and d’Alembert’s *Encyclopédie*, in a catalogue of the Great Exhibition of 1851 as well as in a first edition of *David Copperfield*. Given the discipline’s breadth and depth, and in order to make this very rich subject fully accessible, we offer a number of different but complementary ways of approaching it.

Part I, “Methods and Approaches,” introduces the reader to a number of techniques used by book historians and allied specialists, ranging from the long-established disciplines of bibliography and textual scholarship to newer, frequently IT-based, approaches such as bibliometrics.

Part II, “The History of the Material Text,” offers a chronological survey of the forms and content of books from the third millennium BC to the third millennium AD. It is too easy for us to think of the “book” as always having looked like the volume that we today take off a library shelf or buy in an airport lounge: a “codex” to use the jargon. However, for roughly the first three thousand years of its existence, the “book” would most usually have taken the form of a clay tablet or a roll of papyrus. The section “The World before the Codex” therefore begins with two chapters that study this long and important stage in the evolution of the material text, too often overlooked by those of us brought up on the Western codex. Similarly, and all too frequently, book historians in the West (and by this we mean mostly Europe, North America, and Australasia) devote themselves exclusively to their relatively small part of the world. However, we forget the book beyond these narrow confines at our intellectual peril. The section “The Book beyond the West” therefore has chapters devoted to China, to Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, to South Asia, and to Latin America, which, though it became an extension of Western print culture after the arrival of Europeans in the sixteenth century, had

a long and separate textual culture before that event. This section also focuses on two important religious and linguistic traditions of the book that mainly employ non-Roman alphabets: the Hebraic and the Islamic book. The section “The Codex in the West 400–2000” returns to more familiar territory to study the evolution of the codex from the early centuries of the first millennium to the present day.

Part III, “Beyond the Book,” moves us away from conventional forms to look at other types of text that are less traditional but no less important: the development of periodicals and periodical publishing; the significance of all sorts of ephemeral printing, and the emergence of new textual technologies from the microform revolution through CD-ROMs to the World Wide Web.

Finally, Part IV, “Issues,” discusses broader themes, including the concept of literary property, the relationship between obscenity and censorship, the book as an aesthetic and ritual object, and the nature and function of the library. The *Companion* concludes with an exploration of what the book might become in the future.

A common theme runs through every chapter in this volume: that is, the book has always been inextricably embedded in the material world. Though literary critics and theorists feel able to talk about a text as though it were some disembodied entity, for the book historian the text always takes an embodied form. In entering the world of things, a text becomes an object created out of certain materials and taking characteristic forms (a clay tablet, a papyrus roll, a parchment codex, a printed book on paper, an image on a screen). The manufacturing of a book using these materials is a process through which the nature and cost of the materials, and the strengths and weaknesses of the human beings using them, will influence the product, sometimes to the extent of modifying or significantly changing the original text and thus its meaning.

Embodying the text has two contrary effects. It becomes fixed, unlike most oral performances. It can also be copied, though copying opens up the possibility of variations, intended or accidental. But once written down, even those variations seem to claim an authority through permanence that orality cannot (and probably would not wish to) match. Some texts remain pretty firmly fixed: quite often those that are copied only a very few times or exist in few places, such as the early texts of the Book of the Dead carved in the walls of Egyptian tombs or the Chinese texts inscribed in stone which could be copied by means of a rubbing. Some cultures in India have preserved, through a tradition of very careful copying, a culture of limited textual variation, as have the Jewish and Islamic traditions of meticulous scribal reproduction. But in most other cultures, the more copies, the more variations; the more generations through which a text passes, the more errors, as though book production were some epic game of Chinese whispers (or “telephone” as it is sometimes known) conducted over time and through space.

Distribution is another aspect of the inescapable materiality of books. Until the coming of the railways in the nineteenth century, transport, particularly of vulnerable and often bulky merchandise such as books, was usually slow, difficult, and consequently expensive. Until the arrival of mass literacy and mass production in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the number of people who could afford to buy books

within a modest ride of the place of production was often too small to represent a profitable market, so books had to travel great distances to sell sufficient copies. It is quite possible, for instance, that the first book printed on movable type in the West, Gutenberg's forty-two-line Bible, would not have sold so well without the easy transport route to other parts of Europe offered by the Rhine. Getting books to their markets, how they are sold when they get there, their place of sale, their price, and the other goods that are sold with them are all material factors that concern our contributors.

For much of the past, many books, unless they were single sheets or small rolls or pamphlets, were relatively expensive. As an alternative to outright purchase, readers often borrowed, rented, or perused reading matter in (for example) bookshops, libraries, and coffee houses. Such different physical circumstances of reading would have influenced to a significant extent what the reader derived from it. In fact, readers, even in the best and most comfortable circumstances, often read and use books in ways unintended by their makers: reading inevitably generates difference, diversity, and dissension. No wonder books, unless their production and distribution are under strict control, have often been regarded as potentially dangerous and in need of control or censorship for religious, political, or moral reasons – or for a mix of the three.

As books spread out, a counter-movement becomes evident. This is the desire to bring copies together: to collect, to compare, to preserve, to edit, to control, to censor. If not quite as early as the earliest books, libraries, in the form of archives that contained mainly bureaucratic records but also preserved versions of myth-based literature, can be found as early as 2250 BC (Casson 2001: 3). But even the grandest and the oldest collections, such as the Alexandrian Library, faltered, declined, and had their collections dispersed. And so the distribution of their books began again.

As we can see from the contents of early Sumerian collections, texts in the past were, as they still are today, overwhelmingly practical and functional. "Literature" tends to come later and always occupies a smaller part of most collections. Indeed, even in nineteenth-century Europe and North America, when literature in general and fiction in particular became so commercially significant, no more than a fraction of all titles was devoted to it. This *Companion* gives due attention to non-fiction publishing, ranging from textbooks to timetables.

Access to books has always been a pressing and difficult matter, and this is why institutional collections in royal palaces, schools, monasteries, great men's houses, universities, and local public libraries have always been so important. But it also explains why, at various stages in history, attempts have been made to make texts cheaper. The introduction of printing in mid-fifteenth-century Europe, and particularly the application of steam power to printing and papermaking in the early nineteenth century, made real mass production possible. There is, however, much earlier evidence for cheap books: the text of a play in classical Athens, a cheap leaf or two from the Book of the Dead in Ptolemaic Egypt, a collection of Martial's poems in imperial Rome. However, much of what was cheapest and most readily available has not survived: as with most historical evidence, it is the best and most valuable that has tended to be preserved. But, by good luck, just occasionally one can perceive – in the dust heaps of Oxyrhynchus, in a

poorly copied student text of the late medieval period, in a seventeenth-century newspaper, or a Victorian advertising poster – the remarkable world of cheap and accessible texts that we have mostly lost.

Most forms of text (very special forms, such as Buddhist scriptures, excepted) have a value in history because of their potential to be read or used in some way or other. However important the author, the manufacturer, the distributor, the seller, or the librarian, books would mean little without readers or users of books. Thinking about readers in history raises the difficult problem of how one determines literacy rates in cultures and times remote from our own: what proportion of the population could read or (a very different question) write? Still more challenging is the recovery of the actual experience of past readers: how did they interpret and respond to *The Waste Land*, dime novels, *The Social Contract*, the Qurʾān? In what sources can we find evidence of something so internal and non-material as reading? This may be one of the most intriguing questions that book historians confront, and this *Companion* reports some fascinating answers.

Yet reading is only one of many ways of accessing a text. We should not underestimate oral and aural traditions, which did not cease when writing was invented. Right up to the present day, many people have had their first and sometimes only experience of a text by hearing it. The oral delivery of text has a lively history even in the most literate of societies: monks of the Benedictine order listening to readings as they worked, a newspaper being read out in a pub by the most literate member of a group of working men, the enormous success in the past few decades of audio books on cassettes and CDs. Just as writing complemented rather than replaced orality, so too manuscript culture did not vanish when printing arrived. Many collections of high-status verse were circulated in Italy in the sixteenth century and in England in the seventeenth century in manuscript rather than be subject to the vulgar and commercial process of printing. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century readers often compiled handwritten commonplace books in which favorite verse and prose would be laboriously copied out to create an individualized anthology of texts. Writing is vital in that frequent dialogue between a published author and a reader (sometimes an exasperated one) which often takes the form of handwritten notes or marks in the margin of a printed text. In addition, such dialogues often provide an invaluable form of evidence for reading experience in the past. This *Companion* recognizes that book history involves a continuous interplay of orality, writing, and print.

The book is a survivor. Over its more than five thousand years of history it has moved from one material form to another and spread to almost all cultures and climes. It has taken on roles and then relinquished them. It has recorded, informed, entertained, provoked, inspired, and outraged. In the past couple of centuries it has been threatened with extinction by the telegraph, by the cinema, by radio, by television, and by computers and the Internet. It rarely meets these challenges head on but, like the endlessly protean form that it is, it adapts and reconfigures and comes back in new forms offering new services. The computer may be the book's latest challenger, but go into any bookshop and look at the rows of books devoted to getting the best out of your computer,

or its software, or its peripherals. Go to any newsagent and count the number of magazines devoted to the use of that very electronic hardware that was supposed to replace the book. As virtually every book historian who has given a public lecture will attest, the question of whether or not the book as we know it has a future is almost always the first and most pressing question asked. Given the book's adaptability and its ability to migrate from one material form to another, one might be inclined to be optimistic. However, whatever the future of the book may be, we hope that you, the reader, having perused this volume, will agree that the book has had quite a past.

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PART I

Methods and Approaches

Why Bibliography Matters

T. H. Howard-Hill

Year by year millions of copies of books are published and distributed to all the countries of the world. Books are printed on paper, on vellum or parchment, on wood, and on metal: any surface capable of bearing ink can carry text. The common codex – a collection of leaves hinged at the left – is given paper covers, or none, or covers of cloth, pasteboard, plastic, leather, or even human skin. Books are disseminated to institutions, warehouses, bookshops, libraries, private collections, and households so that they are omnipresent: it is unusual for anyone to be far from books. Books are among the most widely dispersed artifacts in world culture, and the book is still the commonest form of transmitting information and knowledge.

It is primarily the task of bibliographers to deal with the flood of books that issues from the world's presses. Bibliographers are the good housekeepers of the world of books. Even though most books declare their origin and auspices on the title page or its verso, bibliographers must determine a host of crucial details that many people would think transparently obvious. There are books with title pages in unexpected places and books without title pages at all. Many books do not have clear author statements. Many official publications, for instance, credit the contributions of so many committees, commissions, departments, and offices that it is difficult to decide which of them gives the books their author-ness or authority. A significant portion of popular modern books such as novels are published pseudonymously; unless authors' real names are discovered, such authors will be deprived of part of their work and their literary biographies will be inadequate. This is only one area in which potential obscurities in the identification of a book must be resolved.

In order to put books – or at least bibliographical records – in their right places, at the very least bibliographers must establish who wrote a book or at least assumed intellectual responsibility for its content; its title (if it is a translation, the title in the original language); the edition (whether the book has been published before and where the edition stands in relation to the title's previous publishing history); the place of publication and the name of the publisher (that is, the issuing body); and the date of publication, possibly the most crucial datum of all, about which more will be said.

The process of putting books into their right places and of recording where they are is *bibliographical control*. Without such fundamental instruments of bibliographical

control as bibliographies (lists of books) and catalogues (libraries', booksellers', publishers'), and their modern extensions into cyberspace, particularly as databases and OPACs (online publicly accessible catalogues), the complex modern literary culture that we take for granted would scarcely exist. Without these tools, which the Internet is making more widely and usefully accessible, the information explosion of the past decade or so could not have occurred. Modern students are more familiar with electronic databases (for instance, the MLA International Bibliography or the English Short Title Catalogue [ESTC]) than catalogues and bibliographies, but in most cases they depend on print. Historians of the book particularly should not neglect the printed works that lie behind the electronic records, or the artifacts that underlie the printed records.

Bibliographical control probably began when an individual or an institution had too many books to recall their titles or their position in the collection. To classify or even to arrange books on a shelf in alphabetical order of authors' names or titles is a form of bibliographical control whether or not the arrangement is accompanied by a written list. However, early librarians found that it was not efficient to arrange all their books, ranging from huge elephant folios to miniature books like thumbnail Bibles, in a single sequence on the shelves. It was better to classify the books by size or form (as maps are in most large libraries). Alternative forms of classification could be considered, from which arose the considerable physical complexity of modern libraries, where catalogues must reveal not only which books are in the collection but where they might be found. Librarians are the foremost of the bibliographers who exert control over the multifarious products of the world's presses.

So the merest neophyte in book history studies is already the beneficiary of three or more thousand years of bibliographical activity: the discipline of bibliography has a long history and an extensive literature. Its essence is taxonomy (classification), which bibliography shares with such studies as botany, paleontology, and astronomy, and therefore depends on logical principles common to most sciences. Of this kind is *enumerative* (or systematic) bibliography, *analytical* (or critical) bibliography, and *descriptive* bibliography, to employ common distinctions (Stokes 1969). The greatest English bibliographer of the first part of the twentieth century enlarged the simple definition of bibliography to "the science of the transmission of literary documents" (Greg 1966: 241, see also 75–88, 207–25, 239–66). Therefore, often regarded as a further division of bibliography is *textual* bibliography, in which bibliographers or textual critics study the taxonomy of the texts that are transmitted through documents that may have a different taxonomy. Finally, there is *historical* bibliography, which in itself is basically not taxonomic. (This chapter and the illustrative examples it cites necessarily depend on my experience with British books and bibliography.)

Enumerative Bibliography

Bibliographers, particularly enumerative bibliographers – those who make lists or catalogues of books – consider books from several viewpoints. Titles can be selected for

inclusion in a bibliography on the basis of their *period* of publication: hence the well-known printed short title catalogues of English books printed 1475–1640 (Pollard and Redgrave 1976–91) and 1641–1700 (Wing 1972–88) and lists of *incunables* (books printed before 1500). There are lists of books written or printed in particular *languages* (for instance, Lloyd 1948), or printed or published in particular *places* (Cordeaux and Merry 1981), or produced by particular *printers* or *publishers* or *binders* (Isaac 1989), or printed in particular *types* (Carter 1967), or – too common to require illustration – books written by individual *authors* or classes of authors like women or children. And, of course, innumerable bibliographies gather together records of books on particular *subjects*. Of paramount importance to historians of the book are the bibliographies that take bibliography and book history as their subjects. A principal example for English bibliography is Howard-Hill (1969–99); for American bibliography, Tanselle (1971). These bibliographies are readily approached through such general reference guides as Harner (2002).

All of these bibliographical attributes can exist in different combinations in a single bibliography. However, in every instance, the compilation of a list depends on the bibliographical (analytical) examination of copies of books. The longest bibliography starts with the first copy. Not even book historians appreciate the extent to which their work depends on the products of enumerative bibliography: that is, lists of books. Enumerative bibliographies and library catalogues are constructed from descriptions of copies of individual books that are taken to represent, more or less faithfully, individual works that contain distinct texts. Incorporating the products of analytical and descriptive bibliography, it is enumerative bibliography that provides the basic material for the history of books. If books incorporate the collective memory of humankind – that is, preserve what is worth preserving – then without enumerative bibliographies access to the record of civilization would be random: civilization itself would experience a kind of Alzheimer's disease. Enumerative bibliographers and library cataloguers bind together the elements of civilization and society, providing access that magnifies the power of each element. The increasing sophistication of libraries and the development of bibliographical method exactly parallel the progress of civilization as we know it, not merely as a consequence but as an essential enabling factor. More narrowly, as book historians participate in the extension of knowledge, they build on foundations erected by bibliographers.

I will elaborate more specifically. Usually, bibliographical description for any purpose starts with a single copy of a document. (I will use “bibliographer” for “cataloguer” mostly hereafter.) Identification of the copy to hand is the first concern of the bibliographer. When the cataloguing is “original” (that is, when the bibliographer is not simply matching the copy to hand against a description written by someone else), identification may not be easy, particularly if the work itself was hitherto unknown to bibliographical history. Information sufficient to identify the work or book may be lacking or be false, or the bibliographer may not have the means to make a correct identification. To illustrate this, there are records of twenty-five Hookham and Company Circulating Library catalogues, scattered amongst eleven libraries in my database. For all but three of the

catalogues, the dates are conjectural, in some instances pro forma. For instance, the Bodleian Library conjectures “[1829]” for a volume (Bodleian Library 2590 e.Lond.186.1) that consists of a catalogue that contains “Addenda 1821” and a separate 1829 supplement with its own pagination, register, and printer. The Bodleian cataloguer apparently dated the book 1829 as the year in which the three parts were issued together, but that obscures the fact that the volume was produced in three different years.

Further, the extent of anonymous and pseudonymous books in the early period is considerable and the bibliographer may have great difficulty in determining what the authority of such a book is (Griffin 1999). Many books lack much of the information that may allow a bibliographer readily to put them into their historical context exactly. Of 10,904 monographs recorded in my database in June 2002, 1,058 (roughly 10 percent) did not identify the author on the title page, 129 were pseudonymous, 1,407 were anonymous, 2,672 did not supply the place of publication, 2,587 did not give the name of the publisher or printer, 2,293 did not give the date of publication, and in 1,087 records the date of publication is doubtful. Identifying such books is essentially an historical enterprise because the author of an anonymous or pseudonymous book can rarely be identified without recourse to *external* biographical or literary information. Sometimes also the bibliographer must interpret the text of the document, as in the case of *Proposals by the Drapers and Stationers, for the Raising and Improving the Woollen Manufacture, and Making of Paper in England* (1677), a broadside signed “H. 1000000”, that is, Henry Million (Wing 1972–83: no. P3715D).

A glance at the *National Union Catalog* (NUC), in which square brackets are employed to denote information not supplied by the title page, illustrates the extent to which the fundamental basis of authority in intellectual discourse is the creation of bibliographers operating within and on book culture. In an age in which accountability is a prevalent social concern, the bibliographer’s attribution of authority and therefore responsibility for the contents of books has larger than bibliographical relevance. In earlier times, when the press was often under state control, the consequences of a bibliographer’s attribution of responsibility for works were generally more serious. Bibliographers interpret the individual written responses to the common (human) condition and, by interpreting and classifying them, enable readers to participate fully in the world’s business. Further, a work may survive in only a few copies, but the record of its existence is disseminated in a multitude of bibliographical descriptions that may even sometimes be more numerous than the number of copies of the work originally printed: such dissemination enlarges immeasurably the work’s possible intellectual influence. Enumerative bibliographies amplify the effects of books in all communities.

A catalogue or bibliography is fundamentally a work of historical interpretation, as can be seen even more clearly when we consider the bibliographer’s paramount obligation to place a book in its correct place in history. Just as many early books are anonymous, so were many issued without a statement of the date of issue. A date may not have been perceived to be necessary at the time for purchasers, for the publishers knew when it was published and the readers knew when they read it as a contemporary document. This is particularly true of early library catalogues, in which modern book