

Literary Cultures and the Material Book



Eliot, Simon, et al (ed): *Literary Cultures and the Material Book*. London: The British Library Studies in the History of the Book, 2007. 444 pp, 64 ill. in black and white. ISBN 978-0-7123-0684-3. GBP 45.00.

This collection of essays is an addition to the still rather under-published *History of the Book*. The discipline is very new and each further contribution is welcome.

In 2004 the third of a series of international symposia was held in London. The intention was to broaden what had hitherto been the rather insular discipline of Book History, concentrating on national rather than global perspectives. The London meeting had as its subject the relationship of literary cultures and the material book.

One outcome of this symposium is this collection of essays. Thirty scholars contributed to a fascinating journey through time and around the globe. Well chosen illustrations accompany the text, which is in most cases leisurely to read and easy to absorb.

The editors *Simon Eliot*, *Andrew Nash* and *Ian Willison* deliver, apart from their own specialized papers, a very extensive and well structured introduction. Simon Eliot is Professor of the History of the Book in the Institute of English Studies, University of London, Deputy Director of the Centre for Manuscript and Print Studies, Director of the Reading Experience Database and editor of several publications. Andrew Nash, lecturer in English literature in Reading University, is known as an editor and author. Ian Willison is a Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of English Studies at the University of London. He contributed to the previous conferences in Sherbrooke, Quebec in 2000 and Prato in 2001.

Robert Darnton, director of Harvard University Library and founder of the Gutenberg e-program, delivers the preface and rounds up the aspiration of the book with one sentence: 'Its ambition is not to be encyclopedic, but to provoke thought'. I can only agree.

As conservators we might hear 'History of the Book' and think of the history of bindings and structures. Depending on our expertise we might observe the text block, the leaves, the media. But how many of us give thought to the trade, the authors, the reader or to the owner unless they are famous?

This collection of essays manages to awaken our curiosity and leads us to an expanded field of subjects. But is it really important? Would it change our treatment decisions in any way? Nevertheless to know about certain aspects of an object contributes to a closer understanding of the item. I might never work on a Russian Almanac, but after reading this very interesting essay on the 'thick journals' of the early 19th century, I at least understand their origin and purpose.

The first work is an introductory account of 'Some material factors in literary culture 2500 BCE - 1900 CE' by *Simon Eliot*. He starts with a very interesting illustration of the relationship of the material book with the development of literary cultures. The 'material book' is investigated through its physical form and the 'literary property' - for example copyright, the costs and with it the accessibility and distribution of the text.

His description of funerary texts, such as the Books of Dead is especially remarkable. The ritual texts available once only to kings, became over the centuries widely used due to the change of the physical form and with it the costs.

The book is clearly divided into four main sections: non-western traditions of the book, the western book in history, language empires and the Anglophone traditions. The first sec-

tion especially caught my interest. The essays range from 10th century China to 19th century Russia and give the reader an unusual angle to learn about the subject. The collection starts off with '1000 years of printed narrative in China'.

Glen Dudbridge gives a very interesting comparison of the layout of a medieval Chinese city with the book culture of the time—and with it the 'imperial model of categorizing'. He describes how in the 10th Century the Song emperor commissioned a 500-chapter encyclopedia, the 'Extensive records for the time of Supreme Peace', a collection of oral communication of tales from the street. The book disappeared and was forgotten until the 16th century with a revival of woodblock printing. This was the time when printing finally took over manuscript book production. The commercial book trade was in need of material for entertainment.

Illustrated editions of plays, romances and legends began to be produced on a large scale. And what better source is there than the 'extensive records'?

Peter Kornicki demonstrates in his essay 'Marketing the tale of Genji in 17th century Japan' not only how Chinese language in Japan becomes less important, but also how availability and accessibility of texts could influence a whole group in society. In this case the novel was seen as a potential corrupter of female morals.

The 'Pilgrims Progress' is a wonderful example of how literature can be distributed via means other than the bound book. *Isabel Hofmeyr* demonstrates with her essay on literary culture in Africa the relationship between cultural traditions and print culture. Literature was circulated in various forms such as post-cards, plays, tableaux. The text is being used as ritual.

The second part of this absorbing publication 'The western book in history' covers from 7th -8th century Greece with a fascinating account on

Homer's epic poems to early 19th century Russian Almanacs. *David Ganz* gives a splendid insight into the change of script as well as layout of the text with his contribution to Carolingian on manuscripts. Chapters were created to make access easier. The production of grammar and textbooks had to undergo changes, as Latin was now taught in schools and the demand was increased.

The book continues with 'Petrarch's collection of books'. This is the only known 14th century library owned by a scholar. Lots of the books have handwritten comments in the margin, which makes it also a good example of the discipline of provenance research as part of the history of the book studies.

The chapters on language empires deal with the promotion and distribution of Spanish, German and French literature throughout Europe and parts of America.

Maria Luisa Lopez-Vidriero explores the 'conflict of the canon' in 18th century Spain and Spanish America and presents the case study of the 1770 Mexican edition of 'Cartas de Relación' by Hernán Cortes. It is a very interesting paper and inspires further reading on the chronology of the Indies.

I was delighted to read the essays on the German reading revolution, German language and the book trade in Europe. It is very refreshing to see something different published regarding German book history than innu-

merable texts about Gutenberg's invention—though undoubtedly remarkable.

The collection's final part, the 'Anglophone Tradition' ushers the reader from the origin of the English literary canon in the 17th century to publishers of the 1920 and 1930s, the beginning of cheap paperbacks, copyrights and lending libraries, to the other side of the globe and the literary cultures and the material book of America, Canada, New Zealand and Australia.

The book's strongest point is the constant 'brain oiling'. It is very difficult to put aside. The editors give with their choice of papers the invitation to look out for similarities and find analogies between literary cultures and the material book throughout the ages and around the globe.

The book is thought provoking and stimulates further research.

David McKitterick's afterword considers the 'perspectives for an International History of the Book'.

The book is well structured with a clear list of contents and a generous list of notes at the end of each essay.

I can only suggest not to 'judge the book by its cover'. Everyone interested in book history, literary cultures or the history and development of reading should add this publication to their bookshelf.

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