Books, Nationalism, and History[†]

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In the annals of journalism, Canadian or American, *The Gammy Bird* of Killick-Claw, Newfoundland, would occupy a lowly place, what with its narrow outlook, its ad-driven news, and its obsession with stories about sexual abuse and car wrecks. Nor would its ace reporter Quoyale, a refugee from upstate New York with nowhere to go but the ancestral rock on the sea from which his family fled a generation before, get any respect. Fired from one insignificant small-town newspaper, only to land on another still more obscure, and deserted by a faithless wife whose death not long after in a car crash left him a single, forlorn parent with two little girls, Quoyale laboured and suffered in his provincial backwater. His assignment was simply to log the comings and goings of ships in the Killick-Claw harbour and the pile-ups of cars on the roads and of boats at sea. Yet, from that small perch, the descendant of 'omaloores' — large, clumsy, witless folk, according to local lore — found his calling in the 'shipping news.' Instead of a dull routine of mindless fact, the post was Quoyale's lifeline. Bound to the bleak, storm-battered coast and its quirky, resilient people, he gained at once a profound sense of place and a practical grasp of its links to the larger forces — the collapse of the fishing fleet, the intrusion of oil tankers, the ups and downs of public projects — that refuse to leave even Quoyale's sanctuary alone. Down at the harbour, collecting the shipping news, Quoyale ties together the local and the cosmopolitan, and in the nexus, finds a way back into the world.[†]

In that discovery, E. Annie Proulx's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Shipping News* (1993), offers a central theme for historians of

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the book, whatever their country. As the first mass medium, printing has drawn millions of Quoyles all over the globe out of isolation, brought them together as mass audiences, and forged new identities among them as fellow participants in the march of history. Out of that process, Benedict Anderson argues, have emerged those 'imagined communities' we now call 'nations,' impersonal aggregations of strangers, dispersed in far-flung settlements, joined together in mutual awareness and common citizenship thanks to their shared activity as a reading public. What better image for this achievement of collectivity than the sight of ordinary people, numbered in the thousands and millions, silently poring over the world's events in the press, repeating a secular ceremony day after day by which they are bonded to a single fate? Back in the early 1850s, Ralph Waldo Emerson saw that image on the commuter train, as he traveled from Concord into Boston:

For who are the readers and thinkers of 1854? Owing to the silent revolution which the newspaper has wrought, this class has come in this country to take in all classes. Look into the morning trains which, from every suburb, carry the business men into the city to their shops, counting-rooms, work-yards, and warehouses. With them enters the car — the newsboy, that humble priest of politics, finance, philosophy, and religion. He unfolds his magical sheets, — twopenny a head his bread of knowledge costs — and instantly the entire rectangular assembly, fresh from their breakfast, are bending as one man to their second breakfast. There is, no doubt, chaff enough in what he brings, but there is fact, thought, and wisdom in the crude mass, from all regions of the world.

That daily digest carried the news of the Fugitive Slave Law, of Bleeding Kansas, of John Brown and Harper's Ferry, of the mounting crisis that would weld outraged Northern readers into militant champions of the Union and turn the Transcendentalist sage into a nationalist spokesman for the party of Lincoln. Medium and message merged in the 'imagined community' of the North.²

It has become fashionable these days to follow Benedict Anderson's lead and stress the close connections between print culture and the invention of modern nations. That theme is surely familiar to a Canadian audience, given the influential writings of Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan on the history of communications. Out of Canada's long experience as a colonial producer of staples — fish, fur, wheat, and lumber — for exploitative metropolitan powers,

Innis derived a pessimistic view of technology and capitalism, as encapsulated in the printing press. The trouble started with Gutenberg. His ingenious invention, with its interchangeable parts, was the model of the modern machine, costly to build, inexpensive to operate, demanding large sales to compensate for the heavy capital investment. In the relentless quest for markets, succeeding generations of publishers pushed the dynamic logic of mass production to its limits. In the early modern era, print-capitalism promoted nationalism, spread vernacular languages, extended the power of state bureaucracies. But the long-term result was the erosion of nation-states, as evidenced in modern Canadian history. Before the publishers' onlaught fell the forests of the great north woods, serving up pulp for newsprint, which was devoured by the insatiable presses of New York and Toronto, Chicago and Montreal, all for the purpose of winning circulation and selling goods.

The modern media shrank the globe, annihilating time and space. Millions read the same news, saw the same images, craved the same goods. Theirs was a standardized experience of mass culture, and if the content differed from nation to nation, the effects did not. Popular tastes, shaped by the dominant media, transcended national boundaries. For Canada, in Innis's view, that meant the unwelcome invasion of American publications; unfortunately, to beat them, Canadians had to play the same game. 'Canadian writers must adapt themselves to American standards,' Innis lamented. 'Our poets and painters are reduced to the status of sandwich men.' In the face of U.S. cultural domination, Canadians were turning as shallow as their neighbors to the south. Bombarded by a constant stream of ads and news, North Americans experienced a world of ceaseless change, whose momentum lay beyond their control. Mentally, the past receded from view, and in its wake, people were trapped in an evanescent present, avidly consuming information and entertainment — and an hour later hungry for more. Satisfactions proved transient, lives fragmented. Politically, democracy waned. There was no escape, not even in Killick-Claw.³

It may seem a long way from these metahistorical musings to concrete studies in the history of the book. Of what use is Anderson or Innis to the practical tasks at hand, notably, compiling imprint lists, reconstructing patterns of literacy, profiling printers' careers, investigating publishers' archives, tracking reader reception? Imprisoned in technological determinism, Innis allows no autonomy to individual readers; in his astringent view, mass culture is bereft of meaning, and it is pointless to ask, as Janice Radway has

done so compellingly, what popular romances mean in women's lives.⁴

Anderson, by contrast, exaggerates 'the national imaginary' in popular consciousness. Sharing a common language, governed within a national framework, northerners and southerners should have grown closer with the expansion of antebellum printing. Yet, the more they communicated, the farther apart they drew. English-speaking Canadians reacted similarly against the Yankee presence. Heedless of borders, the printing press recast political loyalties and cultural affinities time and again, on the levels of town, region, nation, and beyond. Marx and Engels discerned that 'cosmopolitan' process long ago in the classic view of *The Communist Manifesto*:

The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country. . . . In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal inter-dependence of nations. And as in material, so in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature.⁵

The making and unmaking of nations, then, forms a central theme in the history of books. Therein lies the challenge. All over the Western world, scholars are organizing large, collaborative projects in this field on national grounds, according a priority to distinct political formations, born of the last two centuries, that may not coincide with the currents of social and cultural history. In the world of *The Shipping News*, people shuttle between communities, like author Annie Proulx, peripatetic resident of Newfoundland and Vermont, and readily cross the national space between the local and the cosmopolitan. If that is so today, it must have been equally so for the participants in the great historical movements of people — the transatlantic migrations and the western settlements — that have formed Canadian and U.S. history. We need to admit these experiences and to acknowledge, too, the permeability of national borders in the realm of culture. Otherwise, we may find, the 'solid' histories we aim to build will shortly 'melt into air.'

Easier to say than to do. I have no prescriptions for writing a history of the book anywhere, much less in Canada, where such advice from visiting Americans is surely not appreciated. I may

already have tread out too far on the thin ice of my ignorance. Nor have I been able to do more than read the advance reports for this conference and to peruse a few recent titles in Canadian book history. Alas, the leisurely intentions of fall 1996, when I accepted your kind invitation to speak, have long since been superseded by the crowded actualities of spring 1997. My intention is to use these sources as a jumping-off point to explore the problematic challenge of organizing a *national* history of the book, as I have observed and experienced in my dual roles as a member of the general editorial board of the American Antiquarian Society's collaborative, five-volume venture, *A History of the Book in America*, and as co-editor (with Mary Kelley of Dartmouth College) of the volume covering the period 1790–1840, entitled 'An Extensive Republic: Books, Culture, and Society in the New Nation.'

Happily, from the little I have read, common themes recur in our separate histories, joining both halves of British North America in a shared experience in which the crucial line runs not between north and south but stops at the Atlantic coast. That experience is colonial, the dependence of peripheral places on a powerful, superior metropolis. Like it or not, Anglo-Americans of privilege were once subalterns in an imperial world.

One characteristic of postcolonial status is 'belatedness,' by which I mean the retrospective anxiety literary nationalists frequently betray at the failure of their predecessors to measure up to metropolitan standards of achievement. Hence, the excessive attention bestowed by historians of American printing on the first appearance of a press, colony by colony, state by state, as the U.S. expanded across the continent and on the first fruits of native production in the field of letters. I notice a similar nationalist regard for the step-by-step advance of local printing in each Canadian province: Halifax, 1751; Quebec City, 1764; Montreal, 1776; Kingston, 1811; Rossville Mission, 1840; Victoria, 1858; and so on. Such moments herald the cultural coming-of-age of Canadian people, just as they signal the ritual maturation of American settlers on Turner's frontier, from Cambridge, Massachusetts, to Williamsburg, Virginia, and across the continent to Virginia City, Nevada.⁶

Slow to establish native publishing, the colonial inhabitants on both sides of the border were often casual about their accomplishments. They were meeting practical necessities, not performing at cultural recitals, and in the course of political debates, commercial transactions, and missionary crusades, they gave little attention to recording and preserving their enterprises. Later generations could

have cared less. Eager to prove themselves to the metropolis, intellectuals neglected the native inheritance for the high culture abroad. Consequently, scholarship in book history is spotty for both countries. 'The history of book dealers and stationers of St. John's and the major outports has still to be written,' notes the report on print culture in Newfoundland. 'No publishers' records survive from the nineteenth century.' Nor is there 'much evidence for a history of reading and writing.' So, too, for the Maritimes, where 'the place of reading' in everyday life 'is a largely unexplored historical territory.' A similar dearth greets the would-be historian of books in British Columbia. 'There is a need for critical scholarship in all the aspects of the history of the book in British Columbia,' observes Gail Edwards. 'In most areas, even the basic research is lacking.' As for the Yukon, there is no gold to be found.⁷

The shortage of scholarship involves more than belatedness. It reflects the fundamental character of print culture in British North America for two centuries. This was a world of scarcity, in which all the elements of printing — presses, type, paper, ink, binding material — had to be imported from abroad. So, too, were the operatives to employ them. Massachusetts Bay lured its first pressman, a semi-skilled teenager named Matthew Daye, away from his English master and transported him across the Atlantic to run the press at Harvard College. Likewise, eighteenth-century Halifax borrowed its printers and booksellers. It was a brief stopping-off point for London's James Rivington en route to greater enterprise in New York and for a youthful apprentice named Isaiah Thomas, who got his inattentive master Anthony Henry into trouble with fiery protests against the Stamp Act in the *Halifax Gazette*. An angry government canceled Henry's printing contract, and the master had no more use for the boy, shipping him back to Boston, where he would prove his mettle in the Revolutionary movement. In exchange, the Patriot insurgency supplied replacements to Halifax, in the form of the Loyalist printers John Howe and William Minns.⁸

Even when printing houses were well-established, they were modest operations, ill equipped to compete with imports from the mother country. Imperial copyright barred the pirating of English books that became the staple of American printing after Independence. Absent that restraint, colonial enterprise would still have proved wanting. Seldom could a printer afford to invest in ambitious projects. To tie up type and press on a lengthy work paved the way to debtor's prison. With small, local markets, printers were on call to meet short-term demands: a political pamphlet, a sermon, a

weekly newspaper, an almanac, a broadside for a runaway slave. Benjamin Franklin tempted fate when he issued his own edition of *Pamela*; he didn't repeat the experiment.⁹

Not that ambitious men of letters would have sought out the local printer. Looking to England for cultural legitimacy, Anglo-Americans arranged, whenever possible, to have their books issued in London. The enterprising Halifax printer Joseph Howe thought he had made a smart move publishing Thomas Chandler Haliburton's *The Clockmaker* in 1837, and he was right. The 'sayings and doings of Samuel Slick, of Slickville' gained quick popularity on both sides of the Atlantic to become 'British North America's first best-selling work of fiction.' Sadly, Howe derived little profit from the success. Not only did the London publisher Richard Bentley pirate the text as soon as it reached England, but he was soon flooding Canadian bookstores with his edition. To make matters worse, it was Bentley's version, *not* Howe's, that the Philadelphia publisher Carey, Lea and Blanchard recycled for American sales. Howe's loss was Haliburton's gain. With Bentley as his publisher, the colonial man of letters earned 'handsome' sums and high standing 'at home' in England, 'the only country this side of paradise' he deemed 'worth living in.' He was also gratified by the fine appearance of Bentley's edition, 'printed on quality paper' and 'attractively and sturdily bound in purple vertically ribbed cloth.' Howe's homespun product couldn't compare to the cosmopolitan model. 'Colonial books are a dingy, democratic lot . . .,' Hugh Amory concludes from a survey of early American presswork. Even so, printers were occasionally tempted to typographical fraud, putting fake English title pages on their imprints, in hopes of larger sales.¹⁰

What alternatives were there? Constrained by inadequate demand, printers cobbled a living from official patronage, boasting when their newspapers were published 'by Authority,' yet squirming for neutrality when royal governors and local assemblies engaged in the bitter quarrels that rocked politics well before the Revolutionary era. That resource was not enough. Successful printers followed a strategy of diversification, carrying on multiple activities to lose no possible revenue, careful to offend nobody whose custom might count. As with farmers and other craftsmen in the unspecialized economy, the watchword of the printer was 'safety first.'¹¹

Independence enabled the American book trade to break free of these limits. Political controversy in an expanding population, it turned out, was good business. In the Revolutionary crisis, fighting

for principle could bring financial rewards, as Isaiah Thomas discovered when he sought out a readership among Boston's mechanics for his militant *Spy*, skillfully adapting the educated discourse of the Whig elite for general consumption. With the popularization of politics after 1776, newspapers proliferated, and they identified themselves with republicanism, the reigning ideology of the new nation. Promoted by politicians of all parties, in the interest of fashioning an educated citizenry, and allowed to circulate freely through the mails, newspapers quickly emerged as democracy's favorite medium of print. Even so, most presses required political patronage to survive in a fiercely competitive trade. Most were destined to short lives.

At the same time, booksellers saw their opportunities and took them. No longer were they obliged to accept whatever discards English suppliers were disposed to remainder on the colonial market. It was the lot of a 'dull' author, Alexander Pope once sneered, to be exiled to 'ape and monkey lands'; in the metropolitan mind, North America was a dumping-ground for losers, in print and in life. But the victors in the War for Independence turned the tables after 1783. Unfettered by English copyright, they became privateers of culture, plundering the domain of eighteenth-century British publishers with abandon. In the quarter-century after 1775, American presses poured forth 982 reprints, a sixfold increase over the comparable period before Lexington and Concord. Title pages trumpeted these debuts; instead of pretending to be English imprints, books now entered the marketplace forthrightly as 'First American' or even 'First Worcester' edition. Even Canadian printers tried this tactic, despite the confines of British copyright law. Only a year after Richard Bentley published John Galt's popular *Life of Lord Byron* in 1830, Niagara, Ontario's energetic Henry Chapman was advertising his own 'First Canadian edition.'¹²

Within that nationalist frame, American publishing continued to import its texts from abroad, even as it printed them at home. Still transatlantic in their tastes, the citizens of the new republic attended closely to Old World letters, politics, and religion in the tumultuous age of the French Revolution. Down to the early 1830s, a majority of the books on the shelves of the Concord (Mass.) Social Library had been written and originally published abroad. That situation altered decisively after 1835, at the very moment Ralph Waldo Emerson, a shareholder in the voluntary association, was announcing that the American scholar had 'listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe;' he accordingly issued a declaration

of cultural independence. Unfortunately, American publishers weren't listening. In the 1850s, Emerson signed up with the Boston house of Ticknor and Fields, which had been ostentatiously affirming its devotion to native literature. True enough, for a brief while, the firm issued a largely American list, but by the time Emerson was on board, the tide had reversed. Profiting from sales of Walter Scott, Tennyson, De Quincey, and Charles Kingsley, among others, the company set aside literary nationalism in the interest of furnishing an expansive Anglophilic market.¹³

If proud patriots remained culturally dependent on England, notwithstanding Sydney Smith's taunt — 'Who reads an American book?' — what could one expect from Anglo-Canadians, many of whom were Loyalist emigrés who opted to make new lives in Halifax or Saint John rather than abandon loyalty to the Crown? That cultural orientation was sustained by economics and law. The population was small, the number of readers even fewer. Dependent on government for a living, without the legal protection or ideological mission accorded their U.S. counterparts, Canadian printers followed the familiar course of caution. Newspapers fostered commerce, publicized government notices, and sustained genteel culture in a distant outpost of the Second British Empire.

That pattern shifted noticeably in succeeding decades, as urbanization and technological change spurred the development of a penny press, 'the poor man's friend,' in the words of the Saint John *News*. The pursuit of large audiences on the American plan drove the press from the mid-1830s on, Paul Rutherford informs us, but not till the 1850s did cheap dailies become a regular feature of urban life. George Brown's *Globe* matched Bennett's *Herald* and Greeley's *Tribune* in the adept use of advanced technology, notably, the power press and the telegraph, in the aggressive quest for news, and in the lively promotion of reform. Journalistic leaders marched to a similar beat in Canada and the U.S., though they set off at different times.¹⁴

Clearly, major differences separated the print cultures of the two countries. From the mid-1830s on, Boston, Philadelphia, and New York began their rise to dominance in American publishing. Harper and Brothers led the way, reprinting British titles in cheap 'family libraries' that swept competitors aside. For a brief period in the 1830s, the company was supplying nearly 40 percent of the Concord Social Library's acquisitions. When Henry Thoreau asked in *Walden*, 'Why should we leave it to Harper & Brothers . . . to select our reading,' he knew whereof he spoke. Canadian booksellers, by contrast, eschewed such grand ambitions. Through commercial

alliances with British and U.S. publishers, they extended the suzerainty of London and New York; such arrangements enabled Toronto's eventual ascendancy as the publishing and distributing center for English-speaking Canada. Cheap postage and free trade accelerated the American advance. Canadian readers benefited from a larger abundance of books at lower cost, but cosmopolitanism was purchased at the price of deepening dependence on outside interests for cultural fare. That circumstance aroused little concern, in English and French Canada alike. Not till the twentieth century did intellectual elites embrace a 'national project' in literature.¹⁵

We have thus advanced into Marx and Engels's territory, the realm of modern capitalism, where local customs, in trade and taste, give way before the demands of the market. 'In printing a newspaper,' the circulation manager of the *Boston Globe* observed in 1901, 'the primary object is to make money.' Benjamin Franklin would have readily agreed. But now the strategy was different. Colonial printers had nursed infant enterprises on public patronage; mid-nineteenth century editors, in the pay of political parties, had put their energies into enlisting votes. Starting in the late nineteenth century, newspapers were reinvented again, this time as vehicles to advertise the consumer goods pouring out of American and Canadian factories and on sale in urban department stores. Turning from 'politics to profits,' as Minko Sotiron aptly puts it, the press became big business, managed by the same rules of cost-cutting and profit-maximizing that propelled other industries. In the new commercial framework, readers were viewed less as citizens than as consumers, to be bundled up in great quantities and auctioned off to eager advertisers. To this end, newspapers tailored their contents, allowing the paymasters to dictate the placement of ads, to insert 'reading notices' — what we would call 'infomercials' — and to demand advocacy of business interests. Those concessions came easily to entrepreneurs whose self-image as public servants accommodated the quest for profits. To woo consumers and especially the women who bought brand-name goods for the home, newspapers shed partisanship, claimed political independence, and offered up a 'cafeteria of information,' full of human interest, domestic advice, and family features — 'something for everyone.' In sum, Gerald Baldasty concludes, 'news had become a commodity to be shaped and packaged with an eye turned towards the goal of increasing circulation and subsequently advertising revenues.'¹⁶

In this capitalist enterprise, national borders were immaterial to the drive for profits. To be sure, Canadian publishing laboured under

the heavy burden of the agency system, centered in Toronto, through which London and New York sustained their dominance over the English-language market. Subject to a double colonialism, Canadians pressed for more favorable arrangements to suit their needs. Ironically, when that freedom came, it enabled entrepreneurs to pursue their own North American version of manifest destiny. Harlequin Books, publisher of the popular romance novels that flourished in the 1970s, started out in Winnipeg, moved to Toronto, and aspired to capture female readers all over the English-speaking world. 'We tend to think of North America as being borderless,' product manager David Sanderson gloated in 1977. 'The border doesn't really exist for us.' It was equally invisible to Janice Radway, whose remarkable ethnography of female romance readers is surprisingly indifferent to the national origins of those texts. In a rare moment of historical justice, the content derived from England, where Mills and Boon had pioneered the fictional formula, and was distributed to the North American audience through the mediation of Toronto, *not* New York. Patriarchy, in league with capitalism, creates consumers all over the Western world.¹⁷

Perhaps, in our post-NAFTA age of global capitalism, with British, Dutch, and German firms now controlling major U.S. publishing houses and with the media empire of erstwhile Australian mogul Rupert Murdoch gobbling up the Los Angeles Dodgers and Manchester United, the erosion of national borders in the flow of culture should be expected. But that circumstance is hardly new. Small and portable, books can slip past authorities with ease. Back in the early modern era, Louis XIV could no more seal France off from subversive works, smuggled across the Swiss Alps, than the United States today can stem the drug trade from Mexico. When New England Puritans silenced dissent at home, it took ship, enlisted willing printers in London, and returned as cargo on the next voyage. No colony felt obliged to aid its neighbour in stamping out noxious opinions. Nor was the federal government under the Constitution much help. Its early effort to punish seditious writings in the 1790s proved a political disaster; censorship was left to the several states.¹⁸ In Canada, links between provinces were even looser, and so they remain today, confounding a definition of the very unit whose story we propose to recount:

What does it mean to write a history of the book for Newfoundland or even Canada [William Barker and Sandra Hannaford ask]? The political entities to which we grant a history are not stable. New-

foundland was not a consistent entity until the early 19th century. . . . it was and is still an agglomeration of disparate communities, strongly aware of difference. . . . This is even more true with the nation, or — perhaps we should say, the notion of Canada.¹⁹

'Nation' is not the only term to elude the historian's grasp. The 'book' and 'print culture' resist fixed definition. Within the category of book are encompassed a vast array of artifacts and genres — broadsides, magazines, newspapers, pamphlets, commercial documents, advertisements, engravings, calendars, comics, and the codex itself in all sizes and shapes, bound and unbound, each with its own morphology and permutations over time. Genres refuse to stay in their own niche. They simultaneously support and poach on one another. Newspapers serialize novels, issue Sunday magazines, steal narrative techniques from fiction, constantly change appearance, and in the electronic age make themselves available on-line. Sober reporter and journal of record one moment, comic book and racing sheet the next: newspapers, like the novel, indulge in Bakhtin's 'carnavalesque.'

Categories of readers are as permeable as genres. The name 'American' contains multitudes, far more types than Whitman dreamed, and so does 'Canadian.' For this presentation, I have slighted the diversities of race, class, and gender and neglected the heterogeneity of ethnicity, region, and religion. That is a common flaw of comparative national history. The spotlight on 'nation' can obscure as much as it reveals. My emphasis reflects, too, the limits of available knowledge. Is the scholarship sufficient to compare the labour history of printers in our two countries? To generalize about men's and women's reading? To trace the uses of print in African-American and Afro-Canadian communities? Judgments on such matters are surely premature. There is a final reason for my caution. Consider the example of gender, which has been fundamental to shaping personal identity and social experience in American life. Elite males, it was once thought, disciplined their minds on the classics; women expressed their emotions through novels. That view derived from eighteenth-century notions of the 'head' and the 'heart,' and it misled historians for years. When Linda Kerber inspected the record of eighteenth-century reading, she discovered a different story. Men wept over Werther and laughed with Uncle Toby; women cultivated piety and love of liberty through Cato's *Letters* and Paley's *Natural Theology*. Gender and genre were not invariably linked. A century later, Philadelphia publisher Cyrus

Curtis learned that lesson when he launched a male counterpart to his successful *Ladies' Home Journal*. The new periodical, *Saturday Evening Post*, appeared destined to failure, because advertisers would not support a magazine addressed exclusively to men. It was wives who managed family finances, and to reach them, Curtis was obliged to revamp his plan. The *Post* became the most popular periodical in twentieth-century America by appealing to a mixed audience. It succeeded as a family magazine, in whose pages middle-class wives could find favourable accounts of suffragettes alongside the ads. Public and private came together in women's reading.²⁰

Social class is no more fixed than gender. 'Some books are read in the parlour and some in the kitchen,' observed the canny clock-maker of Nova Scotia, Sam Slick, 'but the test of a real book is that it is read in both.'²¹ In nineteenth-century America, many titles moved upstairs and downstairs with no trouble. Booksellers could profit by tapping into social divisions; but like Sam Slick, they preferred to strike it rich on the bonanza of a best seller for one and all.

Nation, book, gender, class: the categories are unstable, fluctuating with experience. They refer to processes and relationships, not to states of being. In the face of this dynamism, the challenge is, in the words of my colleagues Carl Kaestle and Janice Radway, to place the book 'at the center of a set of complex economic, social, and cultural relationships organized by the various parties who struggle over the form . . .'²² In those tensions and struggles, we may discern the multiple meanings of key terms. Is the name on the title page 'the author'? That designation helps to identify, classify, and commodify texts, but it seldom reveals who did what in the making of a publication. The credit often belongs to publishers and agents, who conceive works, assign them to writers, edit the manuscripts, and package and promote the results. In many cases — Beadle dime novels, the Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew series, Harlequin Romances — the author is a mere hireling, writing to order and paid by the word, or more precisely, a host of hirelings, collectively hidden within a pseudonym. Behind the title page lies a tale of Grub Street, American-style.

Then again, who is the publisher? A corporation subject to changing ownership; the latest CEO; the studio that arranges the book deal after it has made the film; the various editors who came and went along the way? Any and all, by my reckoning. Every term on the title page poses its mystery.

Delving into such secrets may never resolve the ambiguities of

books, nationalism, and history with which we started. But it will clarify our senses and concentrate our minds. That's what happened to Quoye, 'the third-rate newspaperman' with 'no aptitude for detail' and 'a fatal flair for the false passive.' One of life's losers, he missed the crucial connections in every story he covered in upstate New York. But in Killick-Claw, he was transformed. There Quoye untied the knots and unraveled the mysteries. His perceptions sharpened in the stark, unforgiving landscape, Quoye noticed the world around him and discerned his personal entanglement in its public life. In the pages of *The Gammy Bird*, he gained a direct, active voice, thought globally, and acted locally. It was a labour of love. 'A paper has a life of its own,' Quoye observes, 'an existence beyond earthly owners.'²³

So it is with book history. Uncharted territory, with hazy boundaries and fluid forms, it awaits our clear-sighted forays in what promises to be a rich, collaborative, transnational community of scholars.

RÉSUMÉ

Les nations qui se font et se défont constituent un thème central dans l'histoire des livres. C'est ce qu'affirme cet essai en interprétant les recherches sur la notion d'auteur, sur l'édition et la lecture au Canada et aux Etats-Unis du dix-huitième siècle jusqu'au début du vingtième siècle. Examinant les interprétations influentes d'écrivains canadiens tels que Harold Innis et Marshall McLuhan et du critique britannique Benedict Anderson, l'auteur évalue le projet de rédaction des histoires nationales du livre dans le monde occidental.

Cette entreprise peut se montrer nécessaire dans le monde des états-nations de la fin du vingtième siècle, ceux-ci ayant leurs idiomes nationaux et leurs complexités d'édition. Cependant, l'expérience historique de l'Amérique du nord britannique et des Etats-Unis, longtemps des colonies culturelles d'une métropole impériale à Londres, montre bien la fluidité des limites nationales du mouvement international de la culture et du commerce. Montrer aussi cette fluidité les efforts pour forger et maintenir des identités nationales parmi les deux voisins nord-américains. Les livres et l'imprimerie sont des armes à deux tranchants; peu soucieux des frontières, ils ont renouvelé les loyautés politiques et les affinités culturelles à plusieurs reprises, au niveau de la ville,

de la région, de la nation, et au delà. En effet, la catégorie de 'livre' est aussi instable que celle de 'nation'. Une histoire nationale du livre doit donc être entreprise dans un esprit post-moderne, confrontant et traçant sa propre nature insaisissable: son sujet fluide, ces limites perméables, ses formes constamment changeantes.

NOTES

- 1 E. Annie Proulx, *The Shipping News* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994).
- 2 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (revised edition, London: Verso Books, 1991; originally published, 1983); Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'The Fugitive Slave Law,' in Carl Bode, ed., *The Portable Emerson* (New York: Viking, 1981), 541-42.
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