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Nicolas Barker. *Form and Meaning in the History of the Book: Selected Essays*. London: The British Library, 2003. xiv, 514 pp.; \$90.00. ISBN 0712347771.

Nicolas Barker is one of the distinguished storytellers of the bibliographical world, and as such he is almost alone in the field today. Others may sketch a wider theoretical perspective, yet others possess technical skills that make their audience very narrow. Only Barker has the narrative gifts, the broad competence, and the contacts that make it possible for him to address – and usually to instruct – both kinds of reader. His imagination makes him a risk taker, but compensating for the occasional tumble are his deep technical knowledge of typesetting and bookbinding, his easy Latin and Greek, his range of literary and historical reference, and the fact that for 40 years he has known and played host to everyone in printing, bibliography, libraries, and book history both in England and abroad, from the haughtiest aristocratic collector to the least of aspiring graduate students. If there are few reviewers of a book by Barker without bias (he is an acute but generously irenic reviewer himself), I must here declare my own, which is heartily in favour of imagination.

So prolific is he that this massive collection of his academic and editorial writings (including some journalism) has had to omit much, not only the notable obituaries he produces for *The Independent*, but selections from the hilarious but fundamentally unanthologizable “Christmas Catalogues” he issues in *The Book Collector*, which assemble the howlers that book dealers have made in recent descriptions of material for sale. I’ve learned more from poring over these brain twisters, trying to figure out what went wrong, than I have from many a heavier tome. *Form and Meaning in the History of the Book* nevertheless fairly represents both Barker’s scope and his achievement. It is divided into seven sections and a coda (for which the publishers have rather meanly failed to provide half-titles): 1) Books and Texts, Medieval and Later; 2) Typography and Early Printing; 3) History of the Book; 4) Forgery; 5) Books and People; 6) Book Selling;

7) Libraries or Who Cares About Old Books. The brief coda, entitled with grim humour “The Edible Book,” considers bookselling as a form of gastronomy, with the poor reader as “consumer.” Some of the material has been outdated by later developments such as the digital revolution, but reading the collection from cover to cover – as the various pieces were of course never intended to be – one is impressed by Barker’s prescience decades ago about the need for resources such as today’s on-line catalogues, and his willingness to conclude an article with the observation that better information may change everything, and what a good thing that will be.

Since 1965, throughout most of his years in publishing and library administration, Barker has edited *The Book Collector*, a journal both amiable and exacting. Every quarter he produces a lengthy unsigned editorial essay in the third person, surveying – engagingly but with authority – a group of related new books, or reporting on some current book history fracas. One piece begins with a funny account of being mistaken for Nicholson Baker, but then soberly goes beyond Baker’s apparent contribution (the need to rescue superannuated card catalogues) to assess the limitations of his argument. The selection of these editorial essays, which I re-read with pleasure and even further profit, includes “Caxton’s Quincentenary: A Retrospect” (1976), buttressed by his “Caxton’s Typography” of the same year, “The History of the Book from Documents” (1977) with its prophetic stress on the fluidity of texts, the very knowing “The Kraus Saga” (1983), the regret of “Sion, Evelyn, and What Next?” (1977), and the *saeva indignatio* of “The Rape of the Rylands” (1988). Also included is some of his forensic work on forgeries, which blends bibliographical expertise with the journalist’s rapid-fire handling of breaking news. Among Barker’s strengths are his competence in ancient languages. A very noted Latinist indeed once told me that being edited by Barker involved an ongoing conversation, conducted in the margins first of manuscript and then of proofs, with an equal. In these evil times few of us are well-educated enough to be able to allude without ostentation to texts ranging from Apuleius to C.S. Lewis, or as Barker does, humbly correct himself in a postscript (502) when he mistakes the trans-Atlantic textual variation between Mick Mulligan and Mike Mulligan (yes, he of the steam-shovel). At the same time he is keenly aware of the rapidity with which the bibliographical scene changes, and will begin a scholarly article with “the tentative conclusions set out here will have to be revised” (187) or conclude an editorial essay with “this plan is more hopeful” (37).

The collection begins by presenting Barker's strictly academic credentials, in two sections that collect the most arduous and detailed of his separate studies, all bringing together manuscripts, typography, and binding evidence. His wide knowledge of the first is apparent in the index's nearly two columns of manuscript references. As he has startlingly observed: "When people talk of 'print culture' I wish I had a revolver to reach for" (27). As for the second, he has the eye for the minute details of a typeface, the visual gift that Albinia de la Mare also points out is essential to the palaeographer studying a written letter form. "The reason why letters have not been studied, as they should be, as *organic* structures" (245), he writes passionately, is the need for such trained eyes. As he notes in passing, he was "bred as a printer" (321) and loves factories and industrial processes; he thus brings both his eye and his hands-on experience to such questions as the identification of the first native English punch cutter and type founder. This deeply researched essay on the St Albans Press has good reproductions and tables, and there are ample reproductions when he turns to another craft, that of binding, in two important pieces on the Scales binder. (But why does the historically prior piece – in terms of both publication and content – mysteriously follow the second?) It is these densely argued and carefully documented technical studies which sustain Barker's authority when, as has occasionally happened, his imagination leaps where others refuse to follow, or under pressure of time he produces a compilation rather than an argument. He has earned the right to say, as he does near the end of the St Albans essay, "Let us risk a guess" (134). The risks taken have been worth it, and the compilation mode not too frequently in evidence.

Apart from the needful half-titles and a very few typos, I have only one regret: Barker's important article "A New Model for the Study of the Book" (co-authored with Thomas R. Adams and published in the Barker-edited *A Potencie of Life*, 1993) has not been included. Its contribution to the revision of Robert Darnton's theory of the "communications circuit" has been substantial. Nevertheless, the rationale behind the "form and meaning" of the book's title becomes apparent in a remark buried in his Hanes Lecture, "The Future of Typographical Studies" (1989), important for the historical panorama it sketches, though a bit too much of a compilation. In differentiating between *forensic* evidence and *historic* evidence (230), a distinction he scrupulously traces back to Mabillon, Barker is pointing to the continuing theme of all his writings and authorizing their eclectic practice: the essential need to connect the hands-on

experience of the typographer, the binder, the cataloguer, with the archival and theoretical work of the bibliographer, the book historian, and the sociologist of culture. The search for meaning should not be undermined by either the limits of a given discipline or the narrowness of a conceptual skepticism. Books, he has several times said, are the most frequently occurring of human artifacts (more than dwellings? but let it pass); understanding them is one of humankind's most important cultural projects. Just as he sees the book trade of yore as a fundamentally social process (438), so too he sees the book world's collective experience representing a process rather than an assortment of fortresses defended – better rendered by a verb, perhaps, than by a noun.

This collection marks Barker's seventieth year, and it is worth thinking about the transformations he has witnessed and, it must be said, absorbed. The "small boy, in Trappist seclusion on one of the blue chairs on the left as you go into the [Cambridge] University Library" (135) – waiting doubtless for his father, the historian Sir Ernest Barker – was born into a world of monotype, linotype, intimate bookstores, gentleman publishers, and auction house partners. Today his world – and ours – is one of digitization, big box retailers, international publishing cartels, and auction house sharks. Barker has not only lived through and chronicled this transformation, but survived it seemingly undamaged; nostalgia afflicts him only at justifiable moments such as the commemoration of old bookseller friends. One senses that he is eternally ready for "fresh woods and pastures new" and in these fast-moving times those are surely the places for which we should be setting out.

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Jacques Michon dir. *Histoire de l'édition littéraire au Québec au XX^e siècle*, volume 2 : *Le temps des éditeurs. 1940-1959*, Montréal, Fides, 2004, 534 p.; 39,95 \$. ISBN 2-7621-2199-x

« La guerre, yes sir! » se serait écrié Roch Carrier, car c'est bien cette guerre européenne qui est au cœur de ce second tome de l'*Histoire de l'édition littéraire au Québec au XX^e siècle*. Le conflit mondial a non seulement polarisé l'opinion québécoise concernant les questions