Il faut féliciter les autorités de la Bibliothèque de l’Assemblée nationale du Québec d’avoir pris l’initiative d’organiser ce colloque pour souligner le deuxième centenaire de leur institution. Malgré la qualité variable des textes, les actes ont le mérite de marquer l’état des connaissances sur ce type de bibliothèque. Ils incitent surtout à poursuivre la recherche sur le sujet, à l’instar de ce qui a été réalisé au Québec depuis deux décennies.

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It is hard to deny the appeal of a cozy, sombrely-lit second-hand bookshop. Even the “big box” chains of bookstores threatening the very existence of the independent bookseller recognize that a bookstore is much more than a repository of books for sale. Hence the heady aroma of freshly brewed coffee and deep comfy leather chairs. For many of us, book buying is an aesthetic, tactile, and social experience, and booksellers go a long way to accommodate our needs. It is, then, difficult to imagine that three centuries ago, a learned gentleman desirous of acquiring Isaac Newton’s latest work, _Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica_, would have had to purchase this influential treatise in loose sheets from a box behind a counter, convey those sheets to a bookbinder, and then wait for an indeterminate amount of time to have it bound. And yet the consensus among scholars, librarians, booksellers, and book collectors is that, until the nineteenth century, individuals had to purchase their books in sheets, or at best, in plain paper wrappers. Stuart Bennett’s lavishly illustrated book challenges this firmly entrenched belief, positing that as early as the mid-seventeenth century, trade bookbinding — the process of binding books for retail — was an integral part of the English book trade. This suggests then, that our learned gentleman not only bought Newton’s _Principia_ “ready bound,” but more than likely had the choice to buy it in a simple plain sheep binding or an elaborately tooled Moroccan goatskin binding.
Bennett’s extensive experience in the rare book trade and as an independent bookseller no doubt compelled him to consider the practical retail issues when first considering this debate. As he states, “retail book buyers could pick and choose their books ready-bound in the form that pleased them best and that best suited their pocketbooks. That most books were sold ready-bound makes far more intuitive sense than the notion that retail customers had to buy their books in sheets.” That a profit could be made by keeping customers happy would not have been lost on a seventeenth-century publisher or bookseller, and yet the theory championed by Michael Sadleir in 1930 still predominates. A quick survey of recent literature relevant to this subject, such as Mirjam M. Foot’s *Studies in the History of Bookbinding* (1993), P.J.M. Marks’s *The British Library Guide to Bookbinding: History and Techniques* (1998), and John Carter’s venerable, but widely read *ABC for Book Collectors* (1956, but in its 8th edition), all reinforce the idea that books were sold in sheets until the nineteenth century, and that the leather bindings that have survived are “bespoke” bindings, i.e., commissioned by the buyer. There have been a few dissident voices who have objected to this view. Graham Pollard in 1996 pointed out what seems to be rather obvious to me, that booksellers had a hard time selling their books unless they were bound. However it will be Bennett’s contribution to this debate that will have a lasting and considerable impact, for he uses some rather compelling, albeit sparse, evidence to prove that selling books “ready bound” was a mainstay of the English book trade.

Bennett even goes as far as to suggest that booksellers were probably selling their books in leather bindings as early as the 1500s thanks to the surviving sales records of an Oxford bookseller, John Dorne, who wrote in 1520 that he “sold ready bound books roughly six times as often as those in sheets.” Sadly, such sources are extremely rare, forcing Bennett to consider other forms of evidence. Bennett relies primarily on surviving book catalogues, which begin in the mid seventeenth century, and bookbinder price lists to make his case. From the outset, the proliferation of ready-bound books advertised for sale in the John Starkey and Robert Clavell book catalogues (1668 to 1671) becomes readily apparent. Bennett calculates that of the books sold on these lists, 80 percent were offered in leather bindings. Another source which demonstrates the primacy of trade bookbinding during this period is the bookbinder’s discounted price lists for booksellers. Bespoke bindings were much more profitable for bookbinders, but Bennett infers that the majority of their work
came from trade bookbinding. These broadsheets gave a detailed list of prices for various bindings, ranging from simple trade bindings to the more elaborate heavily embellished bindings. Depending on the bookseller's needs, his clientele, and the status of his shop, he then could choose from a wide variety of binding styles at a set price. Having a regulated price structure ensured the bookseller could advertise his books at "prices bound" and that the binder could realize some, albeit insubstantial, profit.

The first three chapters discuss the relationship between the bookbinder and the publisher/bookseller, and the importance of the book catalogues and price lists. The last chapter in effect illustrates through numerous colour illustrations what Bennett was discussing in the previous chapters. This chapter, while not an exhaustive study, can stand alone as an excellent illustrated introduction to the evolution of English trade bindings from 1660 to 1800. This, however, is where some of Bennett's analysis falls short, for he is unable to establish a definitive link between the illustrated bindings and the individual binderies or booksellers of that time. In fact, there are too many instances where Bennett cannot conclusively state whether or not the binding described was a trade binding or a bespoke binding, a shortcoming to which he readily admits.

One of the crowning achievements of this book, however, is the sheer volume of colour illustrations of bindings that Bennett uses to help convey his meaning. For this, Oak Knoll and The British Library presses must be commended. Unfortunately, many of the photos are blurry and pixilated, through no fault of the publishers, as I am sure Bennett was taking photographs with his digital camera hunched between the stacks of rare book libraries in the United States and the United Kingdom. Despite the fuzzy pictures, the numerous illustrations are extremely useful for anyone interested in examining the evolution of English bookbinding styles throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

This work is likely to receive a lot of criticism from scholars who will challenge Bennett on the paucity of resources and over-reliance on book catalogues and bookbinders' price lists. And yet, what is impressive about this work is that Bennett was able simply and effectively to challenge a long-established view in a 150-page monograph. It will force not only academics but anyone who works in the rare books trade to re-examine this debate more closely.

So how might this debate affect the rare book dealer and serious collector? Can a bookseller justify charging an extra few thousand
dollars because Newton’s *Principia* is in “original” uncut paper wrappers or boards? If we are to accept Bennett’s conclusion, then the “contemporary” leather-bound copy and “original” uncut copy very well could have been issued, bound, and sold at the same time! How will this affect the highly regulated cataloguing practices for auction houses, antiquarian book catalogues, and special collections libraries? Obviously, much more research must be done to identify bindings with bookbinders and the corresponding relationships between the publishers/booksellers and the binders they employed. Yet, this was one of Bennett’s stated purposes for publishing this book at the outset.

Bennett is hopeful that with the advent of digital technology it will be much easier to catalogue binding styles and tool impressions so that a central database can be created and the identification of bookbinders and their bindings will be made easier. Until then, rare book librarians can breathe a sigh of relief, for re-cataloguing their entire collections will not have to happen for a few years yet.

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La Nouvelle-France mystifie. Si les pratiques d’écriture, tant ordinaires que littéraires, préoccupent peu les historiens, les littéraires se sont montrés pour leur part particulièrement féconds depuis la fin des années 1970. Tout n’a pas été heureux, tant s’en faut! La confusion peine à se lever sur l’appartenance des productions écrites des XVIIe et XVIIIe siècles réalisées principalement par des immigrants temporaires (civils, militaires ou religieux), au terme ou au cours d’un passage en Nouvelle-France à la durée et aux finalités variables. Pour d’aucuns, ces récits, imprimés dans différents centres typographiques de l’Europe et parfois traduits en plusieurs langues, sont à placer à l’acquis des fondements d’une littérature créole, née de l’américanité pionnière, alors que leurs auteurs n’attendent pourtant qu’un lecteur : celui de l’Europe et de leurs cours dispensatrices de privilèges et de