Since 1997, the History of the Book in Canada project has been quietly getting on with the business of researching the story of how books and print culture spread across the vast geographical space of upper North America. This volume is the first in a projected three-volume series, and takes on the challenge of charting the development and use of print from the settlement of New France and British North America in the 1600s through to the union of Lower and Upper Canada in 1840. This initial volume (published in both English and French) is rightly ambitious, and in its ambitions joins other international book-histories publishing initiatives, such as the History of the Book in Britain, the History of the Book in Australia, and the History of the Book in America, all of which have recently published similar volumes of groundbreaking material, in setting important research parameters and questions for future generations of scholars to expand on.

Like all such pioneering works, the History of the Book in Canada stretches to encompass a diversity of subject areas and themes – from oral and symbolic cultural representations of native peoples, the collision of fluid oral and pictorial systems of representations with the linear, rational world of written and print communication, to the development and use of print for didactic, political, and religious purposes, and the evolution of an indigenous literary culture as communities evolved and literary aspirations emerged. Many of these points will be familiar to those who study the incursion of print into the overseas spaces and places colonized between the sixteenth and late nineteenth centuries by the British, French, Spanish, Portuguese,
and others, evident in places as diverse as New Zealand, Australia, Tahiti, India, and Mexico, among many. The patterns of cultural collision, resistance, assimilation, and print-culture development that mark such colonizing efforts are evident, as this volume makes clear, in early Canadian book and print-culture history.

Prior to the establishment of the first printing office in British North America in 1751 (in Halifax), print and textual material was mainly to be found as imports in response to specific needs of early European settlements and settlers, often arriving by unusual means – as in the case of French fur trappers and English employees of the Hudson Bay Company, whose book orders from France and Britain would reach far-flung outposts after arduous travel through the interior by canoe. Early works about Canada between 1530 and 1760, as chapters by Réal Ouellet, Christian Blais, and Ian MacLaren detail, were mainly travel and missionary texts, often produced in diary form by individuals traversing the interior of New France and British North America, and subsequently reshaped in European printing houses for consumption by French and British audiences. Ian MacLaren is particularly good in demonstrating to what extent the raw material of exploration and missionary travel was refashioned to construct particular cultural views of the possibilities and pitfalls found in the New World. Of particular note is the manner in which such early travel texts (whether accurate or not) were reused and referred to by subsequent explorers, sometimes, as in the case of Sir John Franklin’s expedition across the Canadian tundra in 1821, to disastrous effect.

As this volume clearly demonstrates, the lack of indigenously based printing presses until the 1750s significantly impeded print-culture developments. In New France, for example, as François Melançon points out in his solid piece on “The Book in New France,” the result was limited cultural communication, a complete dependence on French imports, little stimulation of colonial literary work, and tight control over colonial documentation by government authorities.

This was to change as printing offices were established in the wake of Halifax-based activity from 1751 onwards. Canada’s first printing office was an import from Boston, part of the cultural flow of colonial migration from the U.S. colonies that would turn into a flood at the conclusion of the War of Independence in the 1770s, when loyalists crossed the border to British-held territories. The U.S./Canadian border was porous and subject to frequent raids and incursions. Ontario regions often suffered from devastating raids by
U.S.-based forces, and printing offices were frequent targets. By the 1830s, however, there is evidence of a robust expansion of print-culture activity and development, moving initially from print regulated and utilised for government and religious purposes to more culturally diverse literary activity.

Literary culture forms a major section of this volume, and is well served by sections devoted to authors as well as publishing and literary cultures. They necessarily concentrate on the burst of activity that occurs in the 1830s, when educational improvements, literary salons, newly established Mechanics Institutes, lending libraries, and other culturally diverse activities created a readership and audience for an indigenously based colonial literature. Equal emphasis and space is given to the development of literacy in colonial settings, the structures supporting print and reading activity, and the manner in which print was put to use in daily life. Particularly innovative is the volume setting aside a major section dedicated to the “uses of print,” leaving space for studies on non-literary print-culture material. The pieces by Patricia Lockhart Fleming on “Public Print,” Patricia Kennedy on “Printing for Public and Private Business,” and pieces examining newspaper and magazine publication, for example, highlight particularly well the manner in which print functioned to support didactic, legalistic, religious, and social purposes in British and French Canadian culture and society. Also useful and interesting are the sections dedicated to diasporic- and minority-language printing: German and native-language material in particular. Disappointingly, the chapter on “Printing for New Communities in German and Gaelic” delivers a great deal on German publications but offers an extremely short and inconclusive paragraph on Gaelic publishing efforts, hardly worth the effort of including.

Such lacunae may be the result of the lack of primary material available to evaluate such issues with sufficient depth. It is a problem throughout the volume that comparative pieces are frequently uneven in research quality, with some outstanding, well researched, and critically informed chapters being followed by less expansive, generally descriptive sections. It is also unfortunate that the volume editors could not have separated the case study material from the more substantive survey chapters through some differentiation in layout. Boxing the case studies, for example, would have highlighted them more effectively. At the same time, though, the work is handsomely produced and very readable, a weighty and pleasing volume obviously aimed at capturing the interest of non-specialists with an interest in
the subject. Illustrations are well represented and well integrated. This is a solid work meant to last and sure to engage the interest of those who scan through its pages. We look forward to seeing its sister volumes emerge in the future, no doubt produced to the same high production values and standards, and with equally valuable content.

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The history of the book in Canadian Aboriginal communities is becoming a subject of concentrated interest as scholars such as Germaine Warkentin, Cornelius Jaenen, and Robert Bringhurst are exploring Aboriginal sign systems and oral forms of knowledge preservation. Paper Talk is an original and fine addition to this ongoing discussion.

Paper Talk surveys the history of libraries and print culture among Aboriginal peoples in Canada before 1960, and traces the motivations and effects of introducing book literacy into Aboriginal cultures. Edwards views libraries as intellectual, religious, and social institutions. He examines how Europeans and Euro-Canadians used them as colonizing instruments among Aboriginal people, while at the same time Aboriginal people used libraries and printed books to counter colonization and incorporated print culture into their methods of communication and knowledge and heritage preservation. The first chapter explores questions of Aboriginal literacy, the blurred boundaries between the written and the oral, and Aboriginal practices of inscribing symbols on material bases. Coverage of print materials in Aboriginal communities before 1800 is cursory, but Edwards hits his stride in the nineteenth century. He outlines how missionaries such as Thaddeus Osgood and James Evans introduced or reinforced the written word in the context of religious conversions, relying on translations of religious texts translated into invented writing systems for Aboriginal languages, and the efforts to teach Aboriginal people English or French, especially in residential schools. The thread is