National Book Histories and the Legacy of History of the Book in Canada / Histoire du livre et de l'imprimé au Canada

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The opportunity to explore the legacy of the project, History of the Book in Canada / Histoire du livre et de l'imprimé au Canada (HBiC/HLIC), at the Fourth National Conference on the State of Canadian Bibliography honours an anniversary, since the first public consideration of a national book history was part of the annual meeting of the Bibliographical Society of Canada in Montreal in 1995. That year Eric Swanick invited Yvan Lamonde and me to chair a session where the project was launched.

To address today's question of HBiC/HLIC's legacy with three volumes published in English and French in 2004, 2005, and 2007,¹ the conference organizers suggested looking at where the Canadian bibliographical community stands and which gaps and shortcomings in the existing scholarship provide opportunities for future research and publication. An obvious beginning is the community assembled around our project, a team of 172 authors who are named in our final *Newsletter / Bulletin* (March 2007).² Although we attempted to draw on local knowledge, some regions remain under-represented: 11% of our authors were from the Atlantic provinces, 29% from Quebec, 37% from Ontario, 5% from the Prairies, and 12% from British Columbia; the 6% "from away" are expatriates or colleagues with ties to Canada. When they wrote, 12% of the authors were students, 54% were academics, and 26% librarians, archivists, museum

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1 Patricia Lockhart Fleming and Yvan Lamonde, eds., *History of the Book in Canada*, 3 vols. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004-7); *Histoire du livre et de l'imprimé au Canada*, 3 vols. (Montréal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2004-7).

2 *Newsletter of the History of the Book in Canada / Bulletin d'Histoire du livre et de l'imprimé au Canada*, 6 vols., 2001-7.

curators, and cultural workers. A handful of independent scholars filled out the team. Roughly one-third of the authors wrote in French and two-thirds in English. Volume 1 is the work of 58 authors, volume 2 of 71, and volume 3 of 104. Joint authorship rose from 7% in volume 1 to 10% in volume 2, to 24% in volume 3. Increased collaboration between authors in the final volume reflects major differences in the development of the French and English book trades in the twentieth century and the need to join parallel stories into a single narrative.

HBiC/HLIC's second community was made up of more than 70 graduate students and post-doctoral fellows recruited to work with us in Vancouver, Regina, Toronto, Montreal, Quebec, Sherbrooke, and Halifax. They wrote in all three volumes, presented conference papers, provided research assistance to authors and editors, and brought enthusiasm and a wealth of talent to every aspect of the project. Named in our fifth *Newsletter / Bulletin* (December 2005), they are part of our legacy.

Turning to the volumes to identify broad themes in national book history (while maintaining some distance from a project that has not yet cooled) has prompted comparison with a recent article by Michael Suarez in *Studies in Bibliography*, edited by David Vander Meulen.³ Suarez writes from his perspective as co-editor with Michael Turner of volume 5 (1695–1830) of *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, which is forthcoming. He appears to have been quite innocent of the Canadian project although he cites other national histories: Wales (completed in one volume),⁴ Scotland (volumes 3 and 4 just off the press),⁵ the Irish book (one of five volumes published),⁶ New Zealand (completed in one volume),⁷ Australia (volumes 2 and

3 Michael F. Suarez, "Historiographical Problems and Possibilities in Book History and National Histories of the Book," *Studies in Bibliography* 56 (2003–4): 141–70. Page references to subsequent quotations are provided in the text.

4 Philip Henry Jones and Eiluned Rees, eds., *A Nation and its Books: A History of the Book in Wales* (Aberystwyth, UK: National Library of Wales, 1998).

5 Bill Bell and Jonquil Bevan, eds., *The Edinburgh History of the Book in Scotland*, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, in progress).

6 Brian Walker and Robert Welch, eds., *A History of the Irish Book*, 5 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, in progress).

7 Penny Griffith, Ross Harvey, and Keith Maslen, eds. *Book & Print in New Zealand: A Guide to Print Culture in Aotearoa* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1997).

3 available),⁸ Britain (two of seven volumes published),⁹ and the United States (volumes 1 and 3 now published).¹⁰ Suarez opens his essay with this statement: "Book history is still a relatively new form of interdisciplinary inquiry that has yet to develop historiographical understandings adequate to the complexities of the questions it typically seeks to answer. The truth of this troubling and troublesome assessment is especially evident, I believe, in the highly ambitious national histories of the book currently in progress" (141). He has developed ten topics intended to "stimulate further reflection and discussion among – and indeed between – bibliographers and book historians" (141).

The first is "The Interdisciplinary Nature of Book History." According to Suarez, "In book history, as elsewhere, interdisciplinarity too often means doing more than one thing inadequately, the gesture of tacking on a few purloined paragraphs to satisfy a notional demand, a shallow obeisance to subjects the investigator does not genuinely know" (144). Our project was built by an interdisciplinary editorial team familiar with French and Anglo-American approaches to book history. We are librarians, a bibliographer, two historians, and two literary scholars. Our authors were drawn from these disciplines and from many others: communications, art, music, publishing, criminology, law, labour history, theology, education, women's studies, community health, Jewish and Yiddish studies, and physical education. We were diligent in grounding the work in the historical record and attentive to the interrelationship of books and society. We challenged many of our authors to write articles national in scope. And we were not guilty of what Suarez calls "Panglossian confidence," not "facing up to the stark realities of how little we know and how much we need to think deeply about what we are doing" (144). HBiC/HLIC was always aware that we were pushing our authors and ourselves into new territory or refashioning familiar material into the frame of book history.

His second question is "Periodization": "How do the time periods we routinely use to demarcate our book-historical investigations shape our understanding by opening up certain perspectives while

8 *A History of the Book in Australia*, 3 vols. (Queensland: University of Queensland Press, in progress).

9 *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, 7 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, in progress).

10 *A History of the Book in America*, 5 vols. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, in progress).

foreclosing others?" (144). To take it further: should the determinants be historical, technological, national, or international? For volume 1 we did not begin with the first press at Halifax in 1752 but with "Beginnings": exploration literature, native representational systems, and the absence of the press in New France. This set our work in an international context from the outset. It allowed us to broaden our definition of the book to include manuscripts and other forms and also to consider performance and oral publication as part of the story. The choice of 1840 as a concluding date for volume 1 fits with the mechanization of book production in Canada but, more importantly, takes us into the West, to the mission press established in 1840 by James Evans in Manitoba. The year 1918 as the hinge between volumes 2 and 3 recognizes the crucial role of the first war in Canadian national development but was not particularly relevant for the book trades. The closing date of 1980 for volume 3 is a gift to the next generation: the volume editors based this decision on the need for historical distance, limitations of space, and changes such as increasing globalization and developments in electronic communication that marked 1980 as a turning point in the book trades. The Americans will end at 1995, and the British, Irish, and Scottish at 2000. In their third volume the Australians have carried the story to 2005.

As a research team we speculated about our successors and the opportunities we have opened for further research and publication. Will there be a fourth volume of HBiC/HLIC? Roy MacSkimming's *The Perilous Trade* provides a framework for trade publishing in English Canada told from the inside.¹¹ Sources are already waiting in archives and libraries where our colleagues have gathered authors' and publishers' papers.

A third topic, "Boundaries," addresses the persistent question of national and international approaches. Speaking for the British history Suarez notes that volumes 6 and 7 (1830–2000) will be global in reach. He also questions boundaries within our discipline, especially the tilt to the literary which he claims is out of all proportion to its representation in the market. Among the genres of print neglected in book-historical studies he cites religion, government publications, and commercial print; I would add newspapers, magazines, textbooks, and publications in languages other than French and English. We

11 Roy MacSkimming, *The Perilous Trade: Book Publishing In Canada, 1946–2006* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2007).

have provided a foundation with survey articles and case studies but much remains to be done.

Summarizing his arguments on the fourth topic, "The Sociology of Texts" and the fifth, "The Role of Bibliography in Book History," Suarez sensibly concludes that "The rigorous and creative application of bibliographical knowledge to book-historical research is, in my view, the single most important desideratum for book history today. It is difficult to imagine how a sociology of texts that does not integrate the contributions of bibliography could make an important and lasting contribution to book history" (156). At the same time he admits that many scholars have an inadequate grounding in bibliography – a familiar theme in our discipline.

It has always seemed to me that the tensions between bibliographers and book historians rehearsed in the literature are irrelevant in Canada because of Marie Tremain. She grounded bibliographical analysis in the history of the book (might one even say the sociology of texts) with detailed notes based on publishers' accounts, newspapers, private papers, and government sources.¹² In my view we are free to get on with it since bibliography and book history are complementary in our scholarly tradition.

Suarez's sixth point, the curiously titled "Understanding What the Gaps in Our Knowledge Might Mean," deals with humility. All of the teams have faced the same doubts about whether the state of knowledge was sufficiently advanced for a national project to succeed. The New Zealand and the Wales projects, which both published a single volume, have explained that much research has not yet been undertaken. Of his own volume, Suarez notes that while some chapters "reflect outstanding scholarly achievement, others – often of no less merit – indicate that many more specialist studies are needed" (157). Calling their title, *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, presumptuous, he puts on record the preference of the general and volume editors for "A," although the publisher insisted on "The."

His seventh topic, "The De Facto Culture of Intellectual Property," reminds us that "intellectual property remains an inadequately understood aspect of book history across most periods and in most places" (160). Examples from eighteenth-century England underlying Suarez's question would be relevant for Canadian researchers: what

12 Marie Tremain, *A Bibliography of Canadian Imprints, 1751–1800* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1952; repr. 1999).

do we know about borrowings in textbooks, almanacs, magazines, songbooks, or cookbooks? This is another subject worth exploring.

"Some Problems Involved in Reading as a Subject of Book History," the eighth point, introduces an area of research with an impressive body of literature to which our HBiC/HLIC colleagues Yvan Lamonde and Sophie Montreuil added *Lire au Québec au XIX^e siècle*, a collection of essays with an extensive bibliography.¹³ Across the three volumes we have demonstrated various approaches and mined the sources used to try to understand reading: we struggled with measures of literacy, analyzed diaries, searched for marginalia, studied paintings and photographs, accumulated data from catalogues, summarized surveys, and cited reviews and book promotion. Sociable forms of reading were another theme, as was the role of libraries in the experience of readers. I trust that we have provided responsible models for others who wish to undertake similar studies.

Suarez's ninth section, titled "Numbers," opens "'Follow the money' is an excellent adage for book historians" (164), reminding us of the commercial and economic factors that drive the production, distribution, and consumption of texts. "Books are business," but, in Suarez's opinion, "Most scholars in the humanities, including many book historians, are virtually innumerate" (165). How much do we know about costs, credit practices, tariffs, currencies, rates of exchange, and accounting practices? Do we have any idea how business actually worked? According to Suarez, "Much book-historical work manifests a statistical innocence that impoverishes otherwise valuable research" (165). He cites as an example appendix 1, "A Note on Statistics," in volume 1 of the American project, which presents simple percentages and evidence that has not been statistically tested for reliability.

Another aspect of what he identifies as our discomfort with numbers is the use by book historians of enumerative bibliographies without sufficient attention to the criteria for inclusion or to rates of survival. His calculations for eighteenth-century British books and jobbing printing are comparable to our research, which suggests that only 11% of the proclamations and handbills recorded in the printing accounts of Brown and Gilmore at Quebec between 1764 and 1800 have survived in public collections. The rate of loss for printed forms and blanks from that shop exceeds 90%.

13 Yvan Lamonde et Sophie Montreuil, eds., *Lire au Québec au XIX^e siècle* (Montreal: Fides, 2003).

In his concluding section, "Producing a Printed History and Considering Its Use and Readership," Suarez outlines a set of questions that we asked for a decade: How can we fit it all into one volume, or three? Do we try for depth or breadth? Is it a work of reference or a narrative to be read through? Who are the readers? Will it engage a broad public? Some questions were crucial for us because of our funding. The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada's commitment to serving a broad public called for a readable style in both languages, not dumbed down but not obscure, and not reading like a translation. That vexed and costly process served us well, however, since nothing points up the flaws in a text more effectively than putting it into another language. Imprecisions that we let pass in a first edit would come back from translation either misunderstood or so much improved that we were shamed into revising the original. We also had a catch phrase of unknown origin that we used when a fact or assumption needed clarification for readers outside Canada. A researcher who tackles our papers at Library and Archives Canada in a couple of decades may well be puzzled by our notes to each other suggesting explanations for the Belgians.¹⁴

Certain editorial decisions taken for the British volumes are similar to those made in Canada since both projects share a common origin in the first national history, *Histoire de l'édition française*.¹⁵ These include case studies (which offer an in-depth treatment of a narrow topic or introduce an important archive), tables and charts to summarize data, and thorough indexing. With the support of generous publishers HBiC/HLIC prepared a detailed apparatus: index, chronology, endnotes (some indexed), and an extensive bibliography (the absence of which I regard as a weakness of the American project, despite its inclusion of bibliographical essays). We drew on the collections of more than ninety institutions to illustrate the three volumes.

A final point about use and readership is the cost of the books. Suarez and Turner's volume will be £110, and volumes 3 and 4 of that set are priced at £95. Volume 1 of the *History of the Book in America* was \$160. As Suarez says, "in Britain and America we have produced national histories of the book that most book historians cannot afford to own" (169). Published at \$75 for volume 1 and \$85 for volumes 2

¹⁴ HBiC/HLIC archives from seven sites were deposited at Library and Archives Canada in 2006 and 2007.

¹⁵ Henri-Jean Martin, Roger Chartier, and Jean-Pierre Vivet, eds., *Histoire de l'édition française*, 4 vols. (Paris: Promodis, 1982–86).

and 3, and now available for \$200 or £130 per set, Canada's history is a bargain.

In a summary Michael Suarez admits that he has outlined a daunting model for book historians, one that few of us could achieve. His conclusion that "Book history is an interdisciplinary endeavour that scholars may creatively undertake *together*" (170) is mine as well. HBIC/HLIC was an extraordinary national collaboration among editors, authors, research assistants, translators, text editors, indexers, cartographers, designers, publishers, librarians, archivists, curators, federal and provincial funding agencies, and six universities. Our legacy is now in the hands of our readers.

SOMMAIRE

Le projet *History of the Book in Canada / Histoire du livre et de l'imprimé au Canada* a beaucoup contribué à faire avancer la bibliographie canadienne et sa réussite peut être envisagée sous deux aspects. Elle a premièrement mobilisé l'ensemble des historiens du livre canadiens. Ont en effet collaboré à cette entreprise 172 auteurs venant de partout au Canada et leur participation s'est accrue au fur et à mesure que se développait le projet. On a initié en outre 70 étudiants de troisième cycle ou titulaires d'une bourse de recherche postdoctorale, et cette formation a permis d'assurer l'avenir de la discipline. En second lieu la réussite du projet canadien répond tout à fait aux attentes formulées récemment par Michael F. Suarez. Ce travail fut véritablement marqué par son caractère interdisciplinaire. La périodisation proposée – à savoir en trois époques se terminant chacune en 1840, 1918 et 1980 – ne fut pas arbitraire, mais au contraire correspondait largement aux grandes périodes de l'histoire sociale canadienne. Les sujets à l'étude traitaient de toutes les catégories d'imprimés et pas uniquement de littérature. On eut recours aux diverses méthodes bibliographiques et les responsables du projet reconnurent d'emblée que la matière était loin d'être épuisée. On s'est également évertué à vaincre les difficultés qui touchent à l'histoire de la lecture. Enfin les trois volumes imprimés qu'a résultés ce projet sont à un prix abordable et facilement accessibles dans les deux langues officielles du Canada.