Foreword

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Everyone recognizes that the word “book” is commonly used to mean two different things: a physical object and an intangible verbal work (one text of which is physically present in the object). This distinction is fundamental to all discussions about “books,” but it is frequently not observed in practice. That such a basic and well-understood distinction can often be ignored is a reflection of how rarely most people pay any attention to the physical vehicle that transmits a verbal composition: to think of a “book” as a verbal work just comes naturally. One might expect, however, that the small class of readers consisting of textual and bibliographical scholars would not make this mistake. It is true that they pay more attention to books as physical objects, but they are not exempt from the fault of letting “book” slip from one meaning to the other within a single discussion (or even sentence). When they do so, their comments inevitably become incoherent. Moreover, it is not too much to say that the shifting meaning of “book” underlies most of the controversies that have existed in the fields of bibliography and scholarly editing.

These considerations must precede any attempt to think productively about the study now generally called “history of the book” or “book history.” In recent decades the question, “What is the history of the book?” has been repeatedly asked by those struggling to define an emerging discipline. But the question, “What does ‘book’ mean in ‘the history of the book?’” has been examined less often. To answer that it means both the physical object and the intangible work would to some degree be appropriate; but by implying that it can mean both at once, this reply would do nothing to eliminate the confusion that comes from conflating the concepts. Book history

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can certainly deal with both by showing how the production and distribution of tangible texts affect the content and influence of verbal works. If, however, the latter subject (the content and influence of verbal works) is not grounded in the former (the production and distribution of tangible texts), the result is not book history. It is all too easy, for example, to talk about the works that are being distributed (and readers' responses to them) without paying attention to the specific texts of those works that are present in the books (or manuscripts, or other physical objects) under investigation. But the distinctive contribution that book history can make – separating it from intellectual, cultural, and literary history as usually practised – comes only when such connections between the physical and the intellectual are kept in focus. Although one sometimes hears discussions of what place bibliography has in book history, the question is tautological because book history is simply part of the field of bibliography.

The question that book historians must now face is how the development of the “electronic book” fits into this line of thought. In the term “electronic book,” the word “book” must refer to an intangible verbal work, for the physical form in which the text appears is not a book – or at least not unless “book” is being used metaphorically to stand for any physical object displaying a verbal text. “Book” has generally not been used in this way in connection with non-codex forms. One may say that the Alexandrian library contained books only if one is using “book” to mean “verbal work,” for the objects in that library were scrolls or rolls, not books. Similarly, an electronic text may be called a book if one is referring to the verbal work of which one exemplar is physically present on the screen of a given electronic reading device. If one is speaking of the physical object (the device, with its screen and pixels), however, “book” seems no more apt than it does for a scroll.

Although “book history” is therefore a somewhat uncomfortable name to apply to the endeavour that studies the production and dissemination of electronic texts, it is in fact no more so than its current use to encompass other non-codex materials. In any case, the topics that book history regularly focuses on are just as relevant to the world of the electronic word as to that of the printed and handwritten word. Many of the details of production, distribution, and reception will be different, of course, but those details varied from one period to another in the eras of scrolls and codexes also. The most challenging difference posed by the electronic period (indeed, the only significant

one) is the technical knowledge required to understand computer hardware and software and the operation of the Internet. Analytical bibliographers have made themselves expert in the technology of printing as it existed at one or more past moments; but the time it takes to become proficient in that technology is far less – or so most people seem to believe – than the time needed to obtain the same level of competence in electronic technology. Nevertheless, scholars who wish to pursue the “book history” of electronic texts must undertake to acquire this knowledge if their work is to have the grounding in physical production that a book-history approach entails.

If book history in the past has sometimes slighted physical production, there is another aspect of physical text-carriers that it has sometimes overvalued: the role of the presentation of texts (that is, layout and design, however created) in readers’ responses. Undoubtedly readers are, in varying degrees, affected by the visual characteristics of physical texts; but one can easily exaggerate this effect, for readers are generally interested in finding the meanings intended by authors, and they know that visual features are not usually part of those meanings. There are times, of course, when authors do choose to employ visual effects, but for the most part they do not. Some textual theorists have felt that verbal works must be equated with their physical forms and are not to be defined by authorial intention; but book historians must be open to all kinds of intention if they wish to show how the production process alters the intended content of verbal works and if they are concerned with the behaviour of readers. Electronic texts raise exactly the same questions.

The Bibliographical Society of Canada is to be commended for devoting an issue of its journal to the prospects for book history in an electronic context. Despite the etymology of the word “bibliography,” bibliographical societies ought to be expected to play a crucial role in this extension of the history of the book, given their long experience with the physical foundations of textual transmission. The issues I have outlined here, reflecting that tradition, should be in readers’ minds as they ponder the essays that are given printed form on the following pages.