will be controversial (chapter 2). He intends to correct what he sees as the anachronistic projection of intellectual property by William St. Clair and others back onto previous ages, but could not the practice of piracy have substantially existed before this word was used to describe it? These and other such questions indicate the gravity of Johns’s achievement and the seriousness with which it will be received.

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This book begins well enough. The editorial introduction is as neat a summary as we could hope to find of what happened in book publication in the long nineteenth century, from Russia, through Europe, to Britain, and across to North America, with a nod in the direction of overseas colonies. It discusses publishing practices and machinery, the distribution of books, circulating libraries, readers, and reading. It is a clear explanation of the revolution, indeed revolutions, that took place in nineteenth-century publishing. As background to an undergraduate course in Victorian literature, this 15-page introduction would work well, and its list of references would help an inexperienced student on his or her way.

The volume is divided into five sections. “National Publishing Structures” has four essays on the United States, France, and Russia, including classic essays by Michael Winship and Frédéric Barbier. “International Trade” includes essays on copyright, the Chace Act, and the International Scientific Series. “Publishing Practices,” rightly the longest section, has essays on printing, authorship, book pricing, and the ever-useful 1994 Simon Eliot essay on patterns and trends in British publishing from 1800 to 1919, unfortunately very poorly reproduced here in pale, minuscule format. “Distribution” includes one of my long-time favourite book history essays, on railways and newspapers, what in Britain would popularly be called “anorak” stuff – nothing to do with windproof jackets, and everything to do with a narrow, and even obsessive focus. The term was often originally applied to trainspotters, but is now in much wider circulation. The
chapter’s subtitle begins, “Railways and Newspapers. Newspapers and Railways” – fine distinctions. The final section, “Reading,” includes David Vincent’s “The Pursuit of Books” from his study of nineteenth-century working class autobiography. To choose only one section from that excellent book must have presented difficult editorial decisions. The volume’s index is name-only, limiting its usefulness. This is already a book that is hard to navigate, and a comprehensive index would have been really useful. But at least the name index includes all the contributors, as well as the men and women they write about.

So far, so good. Or is it? Going back to the start, I question, for example, even the opening sentence of the series preface, that “Book history focuses on empirical research into the production and dissemination of the printed word, characterised by studies in the materiality of the book.” This generalisation sweeps aside the wide range of texts that are not “the printed word.” Maps, music, film, television, radio, and e-texts come immediately to mind. Similarly, while materiality is one part of one segment of book history, it is a very narrow interpretation that gives it this prominence. At a time when librarians, archivists, bibliographers, editors, and other scholars and researchers are grappling with issues such as copyright and the Internet, blogging, electronic publication, and digital readership, the narrowness of this book’s focus feels stale. Nor is the wider interpretation of “texts” something new: we all remember the challenges D.F. McKenzie made to established thinking as long ago as his Panizzi lectures in 1985. In the past seven or eight years university graduate bibliography courses, which we might take as the starting point for the next generation of literary scholars, have been transformed by the revolutions taking place, not just decade by decade, but year by year and month by month. The idea of producing a printed volume of republished essays like this feels like something from another era.

This is a very expensive book, but it is not a beautiful book. The print quality is very varied. The individual chapters are image-reproductions from the original publications. The typeface is often very poor and it changes in size from chapter to chapter because of the original formatting. Anthony Smith’s “La Presse est Libre” is a good example of this, its illustrations indistinct, the newspaper sheets reproduced hard on the eye. I challenge anyone to read the detail of the front page of the first edition (1847) of Il Risorgimento, the caption to the 1868 page of L’Éclipse, or the detail of three or four other newspaper page illustrations.
I took no pleasure in this book, neither from its form nor from its content. Apart from the editorial introduction, there is nothing new here, and nothing that cannot fairly easily be located elsewhere. With a few of exceptions, the essays are from at least ten years ago, and in some cases from twenty or thirty years ago. The history of the book is a rapidly changing field and while this volume includes what we might identify as some classic studies from the 1970s and 1980s, new modes of production, new media, and new research methods have led to rapid changes both in what is studied and in the way that study is done.

The national history of the book projects that characterized work in the field in the 1990s and at the start of this century are models of original scholarship, illuminating case studies of what can be done in book history. Who would want to buy this collection of previously-published essays at over $200 – over $1000 for the five-volume set – is therefore not clear, particularly at a time of frozen or reduced institutional budgets. This volume is in no sense a substitute for, or even a supplement to, those earlier projects.

Of course it is good to reread Scott Bennett on John Murray’s Family Library, Peter Shillingsburg on Thackeray’s Vanity Fair, and Bill Bell on the Scottish emigrant reader, but we can read these three alone on the University of Virginia’s Studies in Bibliography website, and via the McGill digital archive of our own Papers of the Bibliographical Society of Canada, all with free public access and not, as the editors say in the introduction, by subscription. How could an acquisitions librarian justify the expense of this volume, and why would any information studies or bibliography teacher send their students to the reference shelves when so many of the materials are available online? And if they are not available online, is the reason for that not, in some cases at least, that they are no longer at the cutting edge of the field? Again, if a scholar were interested in a subject such as working-class readership, would they not need to read more than a single chapter extracted from a full book-length study?

In the end I am saddened at the time and effort of duplicated scholarship this series represents.

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