THE BOOK IN BRITAIN

A Historical Introduction

DANIEL ALLINGTON · DAVID A. BREWER
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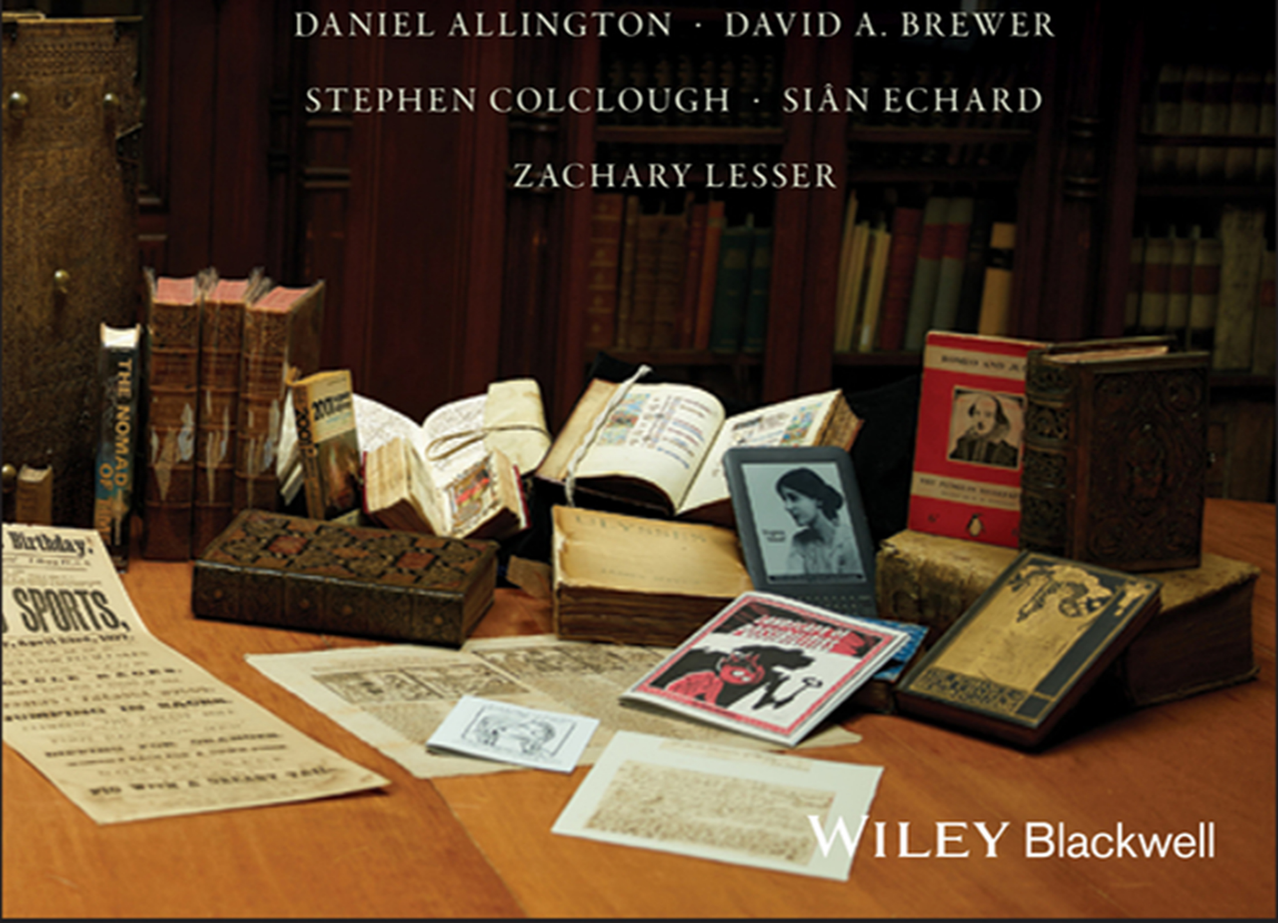
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The Book in Britain

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Zachary Lesser

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Editor’s Note

In planning this book, I hoped to do something different from other introductions to the field of book history. There were already several excellent anthologies of classic essays and collections of new topical essays. What there was not yet, it seemed to me, was a clear, up-to-date narrative of the long history of the book in Britain. It would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, for one scholar to tell that story in any real detail. The goal of *The Book in Britain: A Historical Introduction* was to combine the benefits of a multiply authored volume – the expertise in each historical period that no single author could have – with the coherence and readability of a monograph. Although we have not sought to eliminate the distinctiveness of each author’s approach, we have worked collaboratively throughout the planning, writing, and revising stages in order to create that narrative coherence. Our plan was for each of us to edit the entire manuscript and revise based on those suggestions.

Sadly, Stephen Colclough died suddenly in 2015. While he had already written his chapters, he was not able to revise as the other authors were. We therefore lightly edited his chapters to enhance their connections to the rest of the volume. These interventions were minor, with the exception of a few more substantial passages on the abolitionist use of print (which I wrote) and on lithography and hot-metal composing machines (which Daniel wrote). We have largely let Stephen’s excellent work stand as is, making only occasional revisions based on our reading of the entire manuscript, which Stephen was tragically unable to see.

— *Zachary Lesser*

A Note on Money

Until February 15, 1971 (known as Decimal Day), English currency was based on a non-decimal system of pounds (£), shillings (s), and pence (d, from the Latin *denarius*). There were 12 pence in a shilling, and 20 shillings in a pound. A penny therefore equaled 1/240 of a pound, as opposed to 1/100 of a pound after decimalization. Whenever monetary figures are mentioned in the pre-decimal period, we have not converted their value into decimal currency. Over the centuries covered here, the value of money – what it could purchase – changed drastically. It is hard to compare these values across time, but one good way to do so is by reference to average wages. (The other main way is to compare the purchasing power of money over time, since core expenses like food, clothing, and shelter changed in price relative to earnings at different rates over time.) We need to bear in mind, however, that in earlier periods wages did not represent the full compensation a worker received, as employment could include meals and sometimes lodging, and not all people worked in the cash economy. The website MeasuringWorth.com offers reliable estimates of average annual earnings in the United Kingdom over the past several centuries, taking account of the various kinds of in-kind compensation some workers received. We use their data as a rough guide to the historical value of money.

Around 1600, a journeyman might earn between £3 and £8 per year, depending on his trade, plus food and drink. The average annual total compensation for workers of £8 15s equates to between 6d and 7d per day. While a ballad could be had for a penny, one of Shakespeare's plays printed in quarto was usually 6d, the equivalent of a day's wage, which would have made it a substantial purchase. Longer bound volumes sold for considerably more: the Shakespeare First Folio (1623) retailed for around £1, and Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1587) around £2 10s. Both were obviously well out of reach for the typical worker.

In 1700, the same journeyman might earn £12 annually, or about 9d per day. A chapbook containing a brief tale in one or one-and-a-half sheets of paper cost 2d, not something to be purchased unthinkingly but affordable if considered important. Meanwhile, the 1719 first edition of *Robinson Crusoe* cost 5s, or about a week's earnings: this publication was not aimed at most working people.

In 1800, a worker's annual earnings were now, on average, around £23 10s. Some cheap reprinted novels cost 6d, or about 5% of weekly compensation – certainly within reach, although not all of this compensation was in cash and hence available for use in buying a book. New novels of the time often appeared in three-volume sets at 3s or 4s per volume, a much more considerable expenditure of an entire week's earnings or more. The rise of lending libraries suggests that plenty of readers were not purchasers.

By 1900, the annual earnings for a typical worker had risen to £68. A new novel by Thomas Hardy might retail for 6s, or a bit less than a quarter of weekly earnings, but plenty of cheaper editions could be found, including reprints of classics for a penny.

Compare that to today. In 2016, the average annual earnings in the United Kingdom was £26 200. A new paperback bestseller can be had from Amazon or at W.H. Smith for £5 or £6, less than 2% of weekly pay (before taxes). Certainly books have gotten cheaper over time relative to average earnings. But these very long-term trends mask more local rises and falls in the standard of living of British men and women and in the relative prices of books, both new and old. They are intended simply to give readers a broad overview of the value of money at different moments in the history of the book in Britain.

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Introduction

Zachary Lesser

How does the material form of a text affect its meaning? What was the cultural impact of different technologies for producing texts, from the monastic scriptorium to moveable type and the printing press to the typewriter and the Xerox machine to the photo-offset lithographic printer and the desktop publishing application? Does it matter if a word is printed on paper, or written on parchment, or electronically rendered on a mobile device? Was the Renaissance philosopher Francis Bacon correct that the modern world had been ushered in by "the art of printing, gunpowder and the nautical compass," which "have changed the face and condition of things all over the globe … so that no empire or sect or star seems to have exercised a greater power and influence on human affairs than those mechanical things" (Bacon 2000, p. 100)? How do books – not merely the words they contain and the ideas those words express – shape political and religious movements? And how do people with different racial, gender, class, and socio-cultural identities interact with books and the book trade? Who has been included in and who excluded from the world of books, and why?

These are the kinds of big questions asked by the scholarly field usually known as "the history of the book." Most fundamentally, scholars interested in the history of the book seek to understand the influence of material texts and textual formats on the world in which we live. As a field, book history is both theoretically and historically oriented. The principles and concepts underlying it – such as *materiality* and *textuality*, *remediation*, *censorship* and *regulation*, *typography*, *mise-en-page*, *orality* and *literacy*, addressed throughout the pages that follow – are broad and applicable across historical periods and geographical areas. But these concepts are only fully realized in specific historical moments, which differ greatly in the particularities of printing technology, the social organization of the book trade and its customers, the relationship of the state to the press, and so on. We have structured *The Book in Britain* as a narrative history, while developing key theoretical concepts over the course of that narrative, as the best way to introduce readers to the dynamic relationship between the abstract/theoretical and the particular/historical that is a hallmark of the history of the book as a scholarly field.

But of course the material forms that texts take cannot be limited to "the book," even though the field of "book history" has often focused on printed books, the printing press, and "print culture." Scholars of the medieval period have long addressed questions of textual production, transmission, and reception through the intensive study of manuscripts. Indeed, much of the current dynamism of the field has been generated by a push to break down the supposed dividing line of Gutenberg's "invention" of the printing press. (Precisely what, if anything, Gutenberg actually "invented" has also been the

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subject of increased debate; see Smith 2001; Agüera y Arcas 2003). Manuscripts do not simply stop being produced after the invention of moveable type in the West. Nor do people stop writing by hand once they can type on a keyboard, just as they do not stop reading novels as printed books once they can carry around hundreds of them electronically on a Kindle.

And not all books are printed as opposed to handwritten (or indeed entirely blank), if we understand the word *book* in one of its scholarly definitions, which has nothing to do with how the *text* in the book was produced: a series of pages sewn or glued together and bound between covers. It has been crucial in recent work in "book" history to stress the interaction at any given historical moment of multiple forms of material text – some of them "books" and many others not – and multiple ways of producing those texts. The term *print culture* itself, which once helped to cohere the field, has been heavily critiqued for its teleological focus on the supersession of manuscript by print and for the false uniformity it implies (Dane 2003; Ezell 2009). We continue to use the term in this volume – and the related term *manuscript culture*, even though the idea of *manuscript* ("written by hand") is a back-formation from print, as evidenced by the fact that the word itself dates only from the sixteenth century. But we use them with an awareness of and attention to the overlapping of different forms of textual production.

The term *book* in the title of this volume is therefore clearly problematic; we use it for the sake of convenience because "book history" has been the most common name for this broad-ranging scholarly field. But we discuss not only bound volumes but also unbound pamphlets, advertisements glued up on walls, office memos and stapled newsletters, texts inscribed and incised on metal, stone, and wood. "Book" may be a convenient shorthand, but we must be wary that its convenience does not make us forget the numerous other material forms in which we encounter texts in our daily lives and through which those texts transform us and our world.

Indeed, this multiplicity represents one of the major lines of continuity in our study. Since our narrative covers some 1500 years of the history of the book in Britain, it may be useful to draw attention in this introduction to some of the threads that weave their way through its entirety, and this is the first one:

1) Modes of textual production and reproduction never simply supersede each other. Whichever modes are available in a given historical moment interact and overlap in sometimes surprising ways.

The *meaning* of these forms may well change: manuscript signifies differently in a world in which it is distinguished from print; typewriting looks very different once laser printing becomes available. Newer forms of textual production often *remediate* older ones (see Bolter and Grusin 1999): early printing typefaces were based on different kinds of scribal handwriting; e-book readers often reproduce the illusion of turning pages, as do websites like the Internet Archive that provide digital scans of print books; the PDF file format has been so successful because it appears to mimic the supposed fixity of print documents as opposed to the perceived ephemerality of digital text (see Gitelman 2014, pp. 111–135). Contrary to the narrative we often tell ourselves in the moment, forms of textual production almost never disappear completely.

Equally worth unpacking is the other key word in our title: "Britain." In a history as rich and variegated as the one we are telling here, it is impossible to cover everything, of course. We have limited ourselves to the British Isles to enable the level of detail necessary to do justice to the history of writing, printing, publishing, and reading. Any attempt to tell a global history would produce either a multi-volume series or a narrative at such a level of abstraction and generality that it would obscure most of the subtleties that make this work so fascinating in the first place. At the same time, the very nature of material texts makes it impossible to tell their history strictly according to traditional geographic boundaries – and the geographic boundaries of "Britain" are, in any case, always shifting, no less so *now* than they were *then*. From the early monks who brought manuscripts back to Britain after trips to the Continent, to the sixteenth-century Jesuits smuggling Catholic books into England, to the puritans bringing books to New England on the Mayflower, to the Victorian authors navigating the complexities of copyright in an increasingly global book trade, to the multinational corporations that own many publishing houses today and stage global media events around the release of mega-bestsellers such as the Harry Potter books, the history of the book is marked by continual movement.

2) Books are mobile. They pass across boundaries, from one jurisdiction to another, posing problems for political, religious, and economic authorities that would seek to regulate the flow of texts.

While rooted in the British Isles, therefore, our narrative comes to encompass continental Europe, North America, South Asia, Australia, South Africa – everywhere that the economic, cultural, political, and ideological investments in "the book in Britain" take us.

I have stressed that we are interested not only in books but in material texts of all kinds, but it is also worth underlining that these material forms are not simply different vehicles for texts, different ways of moving a message from producer to consumer. Throughout the volume, we stress material texts as objects in the world as well as carriers of linguistic meaning, objects that can be put to a range of cultural uses quite apart from reading.

3) Books – and all material texts – are more than just vessels for words. They are symbolic objects that can support community formation, religious affiliation, cultural identification, or personal development.

Books have been buried with saints and carried aloft into battle (see Section 1.7); the particular typeface chosen for a prayer book provoked riots and ultimately war between Scotland and England (see Section 3.9); radicals placed polemical pamphlets in their hatbands as a sign of their politics (see Section 4.1); annual "gift books" have been important tokens of friendship and familial bonds, even if unread (see Section 8.1); the aesthetics of papermaking, margin-setting, and type-design could function to distinguish an early twentieth-century modernist "artist" from a "commercial" writer appealing to the masses (see Section 9.1); e-readers like the Kindle become the focus of panicked declarations about the decline of literacy and reading – and in turn inspire nostalgically designed "retro-books" (see Section 12.16). In none of these cases is actually reading the text in question of central importance.

The signifying power of material texts – their ability to function both as symbolic objects in the world and as carriers of textual messages – distinguishes them from most other commodities and makes them especially suspicious to those in power. Particularly since the printing press made the multiplication of copies of a text vastly easier, the book trade has been heavily regulated by the government, and this is the fourth thread that runs through our narrative:

4) Political, religious, and economic authorities have always attempted to control the spread of material texts, although in Britain that control has also always been tenuous. Press regulation emerges out of both ideological and commercial motives.

The mobility of books makes them difficult to control, and factionalism within governing authorities has meant that enforcement was varied, often ad hoc and capricious. Licensing and regulation of books in Britain depended on a mutually beneficial relationship between the Crown and the guild of the book trade, the Stationers' Company (see Section 3.2). The Stationers' Company received a monopoly on printing, publishing, and bookselling and a guarantee that their intellectual property (later known as "copyright") would be protected. The Crown gained the help of those in the trade in enforcing pre-publication censorship and controlling the spread of "undesirable" texts. This relationship was continually under strain, however, and ultimately collapsed (see Chapters 4 and 5), leading to new forms of post-publication prosecution for libel and obscenity. Repeatedly we see attempts to crack down and repeatedly we see agitation against censorship, with juries refusing to convict publishers and authors, whether the texts in question were partisan newspapers in the eighteenth century (see Section 4.7) or D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in the twentieth (see Section 11.9).

The relationship between the economic interests of the book trade and the ideological interests of political and religious authorities relates to the fifth thread:

5) Books – and material texts of all kinds – are produced out of a combination of motives, not simply profit-driven commercial interests.

In this sense as well, books tend to distinguish themselves from other commodities, since their textual content opens up a host of rationales for publication. Religious proselytizing and political propagandizing are two obvious examples. Think only of the huge numbers of religious leaflets handed out on the street in any major city today. In earlier centuries as well, the printing of some religious texts, along with official government documents like royal proclamations, was done with little or no expectation of turning a profit. Even here, however, various motives are intertwined: "jobbing" work such as the printing of proclamations or legal notices was a crucial source of income for printers, even if they were not produced in the normal way for the retail trade (Stallybrass 2007). In the period before printing in Britain, many manuscripts were produced in scriptoria (see Section 1.4) as part of the daily religious practice of monks and nuns, with no eye on the "market" for books. But neither should we presume that the medieval period was some completely pre-capitalist world of devotion, free of the profit motive: in major urban and university centers such as London, Oxford, and Paris, the *pecia* system of piecemeal manuscript production developed to ensure the more rapid production of texts for purchase by students (see Sections 2.5 and 3.9). Economic and non-economic interests are likewise intertwined at the end of our history of the book in Britain, as major twentieth-century publishers often produced "loss leaders" such as modernist poetry, in essence subsidized by the sale of the bestselling fiction in their lists, which could not, however, provide the cultural prestige that top publishing firms wanted. This arrangement was crucial to the justification of the Net Book Agreement (see Sections 9.4 and 11.8), a restrictive arrangement among publishers and booksellers to prevent the lowering of retail prices. In some aspects similar to the monopolistic cartel of the Stationers' Company in earlier periods, the Net Book Agreement too eventually fell as late-capitalist ideas of "free trade" superseded long-held beliefs about the public interest in having a wide range of books available on the shelves, even if some of them were not earning their keep in the marketplace.

Just as twentieth-century publishers attempted to balance "prestige" literary works with more commercially viable fiction, so too throughout much of the history of the book in Britain, we see a need to minimize risk by balancing the publication of new works against the reprinting of older, proven texts:

6) Book publication is a risky business, and "steady sellers" have always been crucial to the trade, even if these older, frequently reprinted texts have often been ignored by literary critics and historians focused on what was new in any given historical moment.

The importance of the Bible (and related texts such as prayer books and psalters) to the history of the book in Britain cannot be overstated. While these were sometimes produced evangelistically without regard for profit – from those created by early monastic communities to the huge output of the nineteenth-century Bible Societies (see Section 8.1) – plenty of Bibles were sold to book buyers in the usual way as well. Other steady sellers included school texts such as primers and ABCs, perennially useful books like almanacs, and, in later periods, the works of canonical literary authors. The durable value of the plays of Shakespeare, for example, remains important to contemporary publishers like Bloomsbury, who are also always seeking the next blockbuster bestseller like *Harry Potter* (see Section 12.4), a quest that inevitably results in more failures than successes. Likewise, James Thomson's steady-selling poem *The Seasons* was important enough to the eighteenth-century book trade – valuable enough as an intellectual property, and appealing enough to so-called book pirates – that it became the central text in a landmark court case concerning copyright (see Section 6.3), which brings us to another thread in our narrative history:

7) The formation of a canon of English Literature – and of the very idea of "English Literature" as a discrete category of text – was intimately linked to the book trade, and especially to the development of the notion of copyright.

Book-history scholars have argued, for instance, that while Shakespeare may have written his plays first and foremost for performance, his status as the most canonical British author had at least as much to do with the printing, publishing, and reading of his plays as books – both individually and in collection in the First Folio of 1623 (see Kastan 2001; Farmer and Lesser 2006; Smith 2015; Hooks 2016). The copyright to Shakespeare's works was jealously guarded throughout the eighteenth century. But when the court decision surrounding *The Seasons* finally abolished the Stationers' Company's perpetual copyright, creating the modern idea of the "public domain," a host of older literature became available for reprinting and repackaging in series of "great British authors." The literary canon emerged in many ways alongside the public domain, a question of economics as much as aesthetics (see Section 9.2; St. Clair 2004). Major Victorian authors like Charles Dickens and Walter Scott carefully managed their authorial "brand" in print and in turn were carefully managed by their various publishers (see Sections 8.1 and 8.2). Between the world wars, the book trade was likewise integral to the emergence of modernist literature, which located itself in a coterie environment that crucially included small presses and low-circulation magazines (see Section 10.6). Modernist authors like Oscar Wilde, James Joyce, and T.S. Eliot (himself a working member of the book trade at Faber & Faber) were keen analysts and manipulators of copyright law as they tried to forge a "new" literary aesthetic (Saint-Amour 2003).

This focus in our study may make it seem as if literature were the key driver of the book trade, but in fact it has usually been a decidedly secondary if not tertiary part of the world of print:

8) The landmark texts that are most important to literary critics and historians play a smaller role in the full history of the book than we might expect. More mundane and often overlooked material texts can have a huge influence.

Newspapers, truly "quotidian" in the root sense of the word ("daily"), have been amply discussed by historians of the book for their role in nation-building, the creation of a public sphere, and even the reorganization of our experience of time (Frank 1961; B. Anderson 1991; Sommerville 1996). The development of periodical newspapers and newsbooks plays a key role throughout our narrative history, and these texts were always among the most subject to government censorship and regulation. But our history also explores the effects on people's daily experience of papal indulgences, which were in fact the earliest texts printed both by Gutenberg and by William Caxton, the first printer in England (Section 2.8); of weekly "Bills of Mortality" listing the causes and numbers of deaths in London (Section 4.5); of abolitionist slogans on teacups and other household objects (Section 7.3); of advertisements posted up in railway stations (Section 8.3); of Xeroxed punk rock 'zines and parish newsletters (Section 12.12) – among a host of other material texts that are often overlooked by scholars, and indeed by everyone, so familiar and ubiquitous are they.

This is not to say that literature is unimportant – and cultural importance, in any case, cannot be equated simplistically with economic metrics like "market share." Rather, it is to emphasize that the history of "the book in Britain" encompasses a very wide range of written, printed, lithographed, Xeroxed, digitally rendered, and otherwise produced material texts, which had far-reaching and often unexpected effects on the cultures and societies of the British Isles, from the earliest years of that history to today. Our aim in *The Book in Britain: A Historical Introduction* is to provide readers with a compelling narrative, one that takes in both large, ongoing trends like those outlined here and the smaller stories that reveal the false starts, dead ends, and forgotten byways that enliven and illuminate those broader histories.

While we have written this book collaboratively to create that single narrative, as five scholars who specialize in different historical periods with different methodological emphases we inevitably approach our subject with particular interests, and we each pursue different paths through this history. We consider this methodological diversity to be a virtue, for the field of book history historically has been shaped by scholars from a range of traditional academic disciplines. Foundational work was done by intellectual and cultural historians like Marshall McLuhan (*The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 1962) and Elizabeth Eisenstein (*The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, 1979), who sought to trace the large-scale impact of the printing press on the course of history and the development of the human mind. They saw its effects in the emergence of Protestantism, modern scientific rationality, capitalism, and democracy. Like most scholars working today, we are more skeptical of such grand narratives and the "technological determinism" they seem to imply. But the relationship between technology and the history of ideas – now understood as a more flexible and less predictable one – remains a key focus of our work and of work in the field more broadly (see Darnton 1979, 1982, 1996; Johns 1998).

Large-scale narrative of a somewhat different kind was a specialty of the Annales school of French social historians. In *L'Apparition du Livre*, first published in 1958 and later translated as *The Coming of the Book*, Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin (1976) used an early form of what we would now call "big data" to study the social and economic effects of the spread of printing throughout Europe. Their influence continues to be seen in important work that amasses quantitative data to understand trends in the history of publishing and reading, or to trace cultural patterns that cannot be perceived by studying only the traditional "canon" of texts (see St. Clair 2004; Moretti 2005; Suarez 2009b; Piper and Portelance 2016). While *The Book in Britain* is not dominated by statistical analyses, nonetheless data of this kind is crucial in drawing our attention to neglected areas of book history and in contextualizing key moments within it, and we draw on this strand of scholarship throughout our volume.

By contrast with these wide-angle views, many book historians working today are literary critics by training and instinct, used to "close-reading" highly valued literary texts. They have been interested in the traditional literary question of how form affects meaning, but in this case form is not only or primarily the structure of a poem or a novel but also the way it is printed, packaged, and understood as a book or as pages in a periodical. Other strands of the field have emerged from disciplines traditionally associated with the study of literature: bibliography (mainly dealing with printed books) and codicology (dealing with manuscripts), the study of texts as physical objects that offer clues to how they were made; and textual editing, the attempt to establish the definitive text of a work that exists in various different versions.

While this brief overview may seem to compartmentalize the field, however, most book historians have moved across scholarly disciplines. The cultural historian Roger Chartier, initially associated with the Annales school, has sometimes sounded more like a literary critic in books such as *Forms and Meanings* (1995) and *The Author's Hand and the Printer's Mind* (2013). Meanwhile, especially with the rise of "digital humanities," some literary critics who are focused on, or moving toward a focus on, book history have compiled masses of data and made their arguments in the form of graphs and charts, rather like the early Annales historians (see Moretti 2005; Farmer and Lesser 2005a, 2005b, 2013; Piper and Portelance 2016). And indeed in writing *The Book in Britain*, the five of us, who were all trained principally in the study of literature, have been made ever more aware that any study of the relationship between material texts and human culture cannot be delimited by traditional disciplinary boundaries.

The Book in Britain therefore brings together all of these methodological strands that have been crucial to the development of book history as a scholarly field. Throughout, we provide clear explanations of the technicalities of printing and publishing, and of the formal elements of books and manuscripts, which are necessary to understand that history. And we explore the impact of changing textual technologies on texts themselves. But our focus, always, is less on technology than on culture: our world has been shaped and continues to be shaped by the material texts that surround us.

Part I

The Middle Ages and the Renaissance

Siân Echard

1

Early Beginnings to the Norman Conquest of 1066

1.1 Prequel I: Medieval Remediation

Sometime around 731, the venerable Bede, an Anglo-Saxon monk and scholar, finished his *Historia ecclesiastica gentis anglorum* [*Ecclesiastical History of the English People*]. The book is an account of the early history of England with special attention to the spread of Christianity. While the work would eventually be translated into Old English, Bede wrote it originally in Latin, as was the custom for learned men of his day. In the fourth book of his history, Bede recounts the story of an Anglo-Saxon cowherd named Caedmon who, in a dream, saw a figure who told him to sing of the creation of all things. The illiterate man protested that he could not sing, but at the figure's urging, found that he could. The song he produced is recorded by Bede in Latin translation as part of the story. Figure 1.1 is an early eleventh-century Latin copy of Bede's text. The text frames Caedmon's song – now commonly called *Caedmon's Hymn* – by saying, "This is the sense, but not the exact arrangement, of the words that he sang." Bede's Latin translation of the song precedes this remark, and explanation and translation are presented continuously in the text block. But in this particular copy, the Latin text has been bracketed in the right margin, and in the bottom margin a somewhat later hand has written the song in Old English, with points marking the breaks between the lines of the verse.

This page dramatizes several crucial aspects of the early history of "books" in Britain. First, while today *Caedmon's Hymn* often appears as one of the first entries in anthologies of English literature – in big books that suggest an orderly sequence of literary history – its first bookish appearance is very much post hoc, according to Bede's account. Bede's remarks about conveying the "sense" of the song reflect that he is writing down something which was not originally written at all, nor ever intended for a book. For many medieval works this gap between a non-written creation and an eventual bookish transmission is an important fact.

Second, Bede is not the only mediator between this work and its audience. This manuscript page materializes a textual history – the fact that someone added an Old English version at some later date – and dramatizes a linguistic fact. Bede translated the song from oral to written, and from Old English to Latin. The manuscript page arranges those facts in a particular way, effecting another kind of translation, a material and visual one that has the potential to affect meaning.

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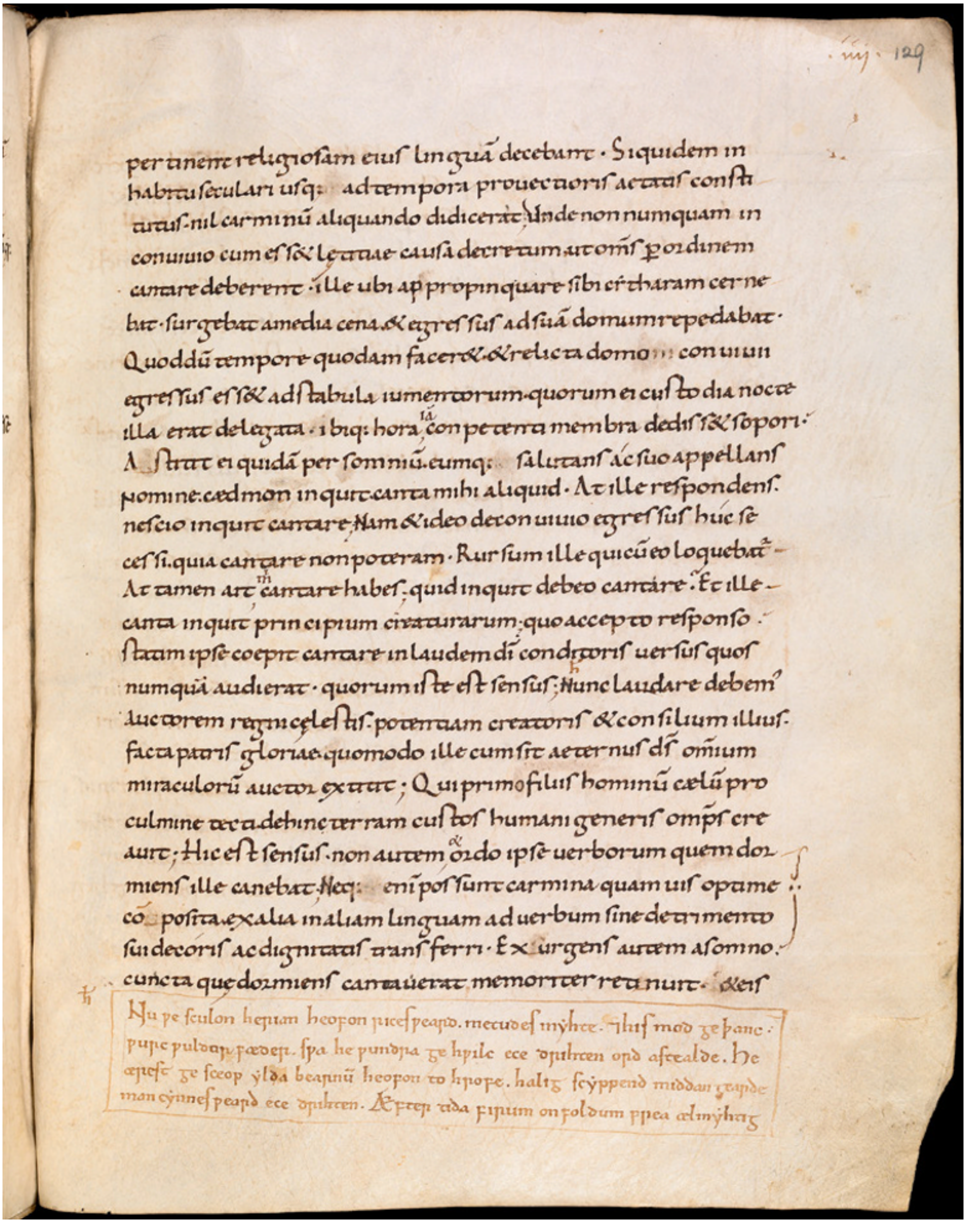

Figure 1.1 An eleventh-century copy of Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis anglorum*, in Latin, with *Caedmon's Hymn* added in Old English in the bottom margin. *Source:* Reproduced by permission of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, Bodleian Hatton MS 43, folio 129r.

Third, this particular presentation of *Caedmon's Hymn* is only one of several different arrangements, each likely to affect a reader differently. Not all Latin copies mark out the *Hymn* as the copy in Figure 1.1 does. What is more, the *Historia ecclesiastica* was translated from Latin into Old English, and in the manuscripts of that translation, the Old

English poem is simply written as part of the Old English text. The importance of the poem to Bede's text – whether it is understood to be marginal or integral, both linguistically and spatially – would appear very different depending on which manuscript a reader saw.

Fourth and finally, the manuscript in Figure 1.1 dates from the early eleventh century; that is, it is removed from Bede's original writing by several centuries of transmission. There are eighth-century copies of Bede's work, and the normal scholarly editorial practice is to seek to establish a best text based on the earliest and most reliable witnesses. If we are thinking about how a medieval reader might have experienced Bede, however, then the variety of manuscripts (and there are many Latin manuscripts of Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, as well as the handful of Old English ones) is at least as important as the reconstruction of an original text. We do not know where the manuscript featured in Figure 1.1 was produced, but we do know that manuscripts of the *Ecclesiastical History* could be found across Britain. We also know that most reading situations would be local; that is, a typical reader would be likely to encounter very few copies of any given text. This kind of local, limited access means that the presentation of a text in a particular material manifestation is integral to how it might have been understood. At the same time, we also know that individual books (and scribes) traveled, and so a particular presentation could in some cases have an influence outside its original production context. Variety and singularity exist in a productive tension in medieval manuscript culture, determining the practices of both producers and readers alike.

Remediation – "the representation of one medium in another" (Bolter and Grusin 1999, p. 45) – is a term originally coined by new media theorists to explore how digital technologies related to earlier technologies. It is also, however, an important element in the early history of the book in Britain. The period covered in this section of our study – from the early Middle Ages to 1640 – sees several major technological shifts, as works move from oral to written form, and then from manuscript to print. Each shift involves a two-way and often messy process of social and cultural transformation and adaptation. Linguistic change, again as highlighted in the treatment of *Caedmon's Hymn*, also enacts a kind of remediation, as both forms and expectations from one linguistic context adapt to (or cause adaptation in) new contexts. In the past, histories of the book have sometimes suggested a clean, teleological narrative of ever-increasing technological and cultural sophistication, telling a supersessionist story in which a new technology wipes out its predecessor. Our book, by contrast, will often tack between technologies, crossing and recrossing various kinds of boundaries, as we attempt to show some of the complexity of the webs in which texts can be embedded. It will also move back and forth between individual objects, like the manuscript in Figure 1.1, and object-traditions, like the various forms in which a text like *Caedmon's Hymn* appears. Much book history is rooted in the careful examination of individual physical objects, whose materiality seems to offer a reassuring certainty: we may not know how everyone in the Middle Ages understood *Caedmon's Hymn*, but we can perhaps know how the readers of the manuscript in Figure 1.1 might have received it. At the same time, book history may also concern itself with multiple objects – aggregates that offer useful information about broader cultural, social, and historical trends. Some critics have been suspicious of the generalizations and elisions that can result from such overviews (Dane 2003, 2013), but we believe that the combination of individual realizations with larger traditions will allow readers to see both forest and trees.

1.2 Prequel II: Orality, Aurality, and Aureates

Caedmon's Hymn highlights the importance of the oral transmission of many medieval British works. Bede's history is bookish from the start – written in Latin, and imagined as categorically different from the oral hymn that Bede relates by "sense" but not "exact arrangement." Bede represents one kind of literacy, organized around the ability to read and write in Latin, the language of the Church: this is what *litteratus* meant to Bede and his contemporaries. This form of literacy was associated in Britain with the spread of Christianity, particularly the Roman form of Christianity, especially after Pope Gregory I sent missionaries to Britain in 597 to convert the Anglo-Saxons (the story Bede tells in his *Ecclesiastical History*). As we will see, both the Roman and Celtic strands of Christianity had a central place for books, and thus for those who could read and write those books in Latin. Both monks and nuns, in the monasteries of Anglo-Saxon England, might be charged with writing books, reading them, or both. Not everyone who could read could write, and people who could write did not always do so: many people of means or importance made use of secretaries to do their writing for them. Further down the social scale, too, people might have important relationships to the written word without necessarily being able to produce or read it themselves. As Michael T. Clanchy points out in his seminal study of literacy in medieval Britain, being "prejudiced in favour of literacy" (Clanchy 2013, p. 7) can over-determine how we interact with the surviving evidence of medieval people's relationship to the written word. Throughout the Middle Ages, "textual communities" (Stock 1983, p. 88) could organize themselves around the centrality of a book like the Bible, and even though the vast majority of people in those communities could not read, whether in Latin or in the vernacular, their lives could be profoundly influenced by books. While it is generally true that in the early Middle Ages in Britain literacy as we understand it was more likely to be found in the Church than among secular people, and in men rather than in women, this broad statement risks eliding these other important relationships to books.

The reforms instituted in the ninth century by Alfred, King of Wessex (849–899; later Alfred the Great), emphasized the translation of Latin works into Old English, suggesting the growing importance accorded to vernacular, as well as Latin, literacy. In the later Middle Ages, we see vernacular literacy, including the ability to write as well as to read, appearing in the men and sometimes women of the merchant class, as represented for example by the Paston letters, the correspondence exchanged between male and female members of a gentry family between 1422 and 1509. But there were other forms of early written language that were not organized around Latin and the Church (see, for example, the discussion of runes and ogham in Section 1.6), and there were also other ways of experiencing texts, apart from reading them.

Beowulf is one of the most famous examples of a poem that began its life in the oral world. This account of the monster-killing exploits of Beowulf, hero and later king of the Geats, begins with an appeal for attention, "Hwaet," variously translated as *So*, *Listen*, *Lo*, among other possibilities. It also includes many instances of oral story-telling as part of its own fabric, as for example in the references to the songs of the *scop* (oral poet) and in the hero's own retelling of his exploits to the poem's several internal audiences (see Niles 2016). Any number of medieval British works bear similar markers of oral origins and transmission. Even after the rise in literacy in Britain after the Norman Conquest of 1066 – something Clanchy attributes to the spread of documentary