

McKitterick, David, ed. *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain. Volume VI: 1830-1914. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009 (pp 826). ISBN 9780521866248.*

It is impossible to do this splendid and rich volume justice in a review article. Twenty essays cover an immense range of topics, suggest links between one another, provide scrupulous detail and larger frameworks. Twenty-four contributors explore the nineteenth-century revolution in printing, publishing and book-selling, in chapters covering aspects as diverse as “The illustration revolution,” “The serial revolution,” “Copyright,” “Distribution,” “Reading,” “mass-markets.” Discussing some of these essays will give an idea of the volume’s breadth and depth.

The volume’s scope is immense and ambitious. Even a volume as large as this cannot, of course, be comprehensive. Boundaries have to be drawn somewhere, and at times lead to constraints. For example, in an increasingly global market in the nineteenth century, in which for instance many books first published in the UK were almost immediately also published in Europe, the US, and elsewhere, and, in the absence of copyright, were often read by more readers abroad than at home, national boundaries may not always be the most useful category within which to assess print cultures. McKitterick and many other contributors are acutely aware of the interdependence of national histories, and frequently bring in international aspects of the history of the book (for a particularly successful example, see Catherine Seville’s article on copyright), so that in this respect, as in many others, the volume actually does even more than its title promises.

McKitterick’s seventy-four-page tremendously informative introduction is almost a book in itself: it addresses a wealth of issues, such as politics, technology, periodicals, prices, literacy, population, gender, the new mass readership, and sets the scene for the chapters that follow in highly imaginative ways. For example, he discusses the implications of population growth and the complex and fluid nature of socio-economic boundaries for the history of the book, how technological innovations often took a long time to become widespread, or how the “public appetite was whetted for different price structures” following Cadell’s edition of the Waverley novels at 5 shillings a volume, so that publishers began to bring out books at more and more reduced prices over the course of the century. Technology allowed for large print runs which meant books could become even cheaper, since bulk rather than price could then be relied on for profits.

The ensuing chapters are more specialized, but equally forceful. For example, in his highly informative chapter on “The illustration revolution,” Michael Twyman shows the nineteenth century as the age of the rise of the illustration,

with illustrated publications increasingly coming within the reach of the less than affluent from the 1830s onwards. He discusses a wealth of fascinating issues, such as the dominance of wood-engraving throughout the period: because wood engraved images stood in relief, they allowed for text and pictures to be fully integrated with one another. Intaglio processes, by contrast, such as aquatint, etching, and line engraving, usually meant that illustration plates were printed separately from the text. It is only towards the end of the period that wood engraving began to be replaced by photo-mechanically produced relief blocks. In their inclusive and captivating chapter on “The serial revolution,” Graham Law and Robert Patten address both “periodicals with miscellaneous content” and “the issuing of unified texts at intervals,” emphasizing their importance in building a mass readership. Again, technological innovations are of primary significance here. For example, stereotyping, and later electrotyping, “substantially reduced the costs of reprinting and made possible issuing from the same plates both serial and later bound editions.” Indeed, “speed and economy” were the main factors which influenced the immense success and popularity of serial publications, in all its diversity, including the numerous publications of non-fiction in parts. As the framework for many of the developments these chapters discuss, Catherine Seville’s discussion of “Copyright,” both in Britain and internationally, is invaluable. The long and difficult journey towards an international copyright, that in the case of America, took until the very end of the period to get established, rightly occupies the largest part of the chapter. In the absence of international copyright, British authors could be reprinted in America and elsewhere for a fraction of the price of the British editions and without any profit to the author. The final chapter in the volume is William St Clair’s provocative and intriguing “Following up *The reading nation*,” in which he reflects on the need to move on from “parade-of-great-author literary histories” to conceiving of “texts, books, reading and consequences [...] as a complex literary system” that considers the various steps that take ideas “from author to reader and back.”

There are many more remarkable and stimulating contributions to this volume which this short review cannot discuss in detail. All of them make up an eloquent, informative, and inspirational volume.

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