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America’s “Cumbrous Democracy” in Print: Histories of Reading and Writing in Early America


Book history, as Robert Darnton reminds us in The Kiss of Lamourette, is a complex field of historical inquiry. Covering a wide array of subjects—bookbinding and papermaking, publishing and copyright, foreign letters and types, authors and readers—“it might even be called the social and cultural history of communication by print, if that were not such a mouthful” (107). A branch of the social sciences in which “books” are treated as artifacts, Darnton explains, the history of the book investigates not only “how ideas were transmitted through print” but also “how exposure to the printed word” has affected society “during the last five hundred years” (107). In both Robert A. Gross and Mary Kelly’s An Extensive Republic and Konstantin Dierks’s In My Power, the richness, depth, and complexity of this steadily expanding field are on full display.

An Extensive Republic is the second of five volumes in the American Antiquarian Society’s History of the Book in America series. Masterfully edited, this collection of essays written by key scholars in the field reveals compelling stories of early America as a nation of readers who feverishly consumed books, newspapers, leaflets, and broadsides. In covering the expansion of public schools in America (Moran, Vinovskis, Monaghan, Grodzins, Jackson, and Kelly); the development of copyright and the American author (McGill and Shields); and the reading practices of rural, urban, German immigrant, African American, and Native Americans (Nipps, Larkins, Peltzer, Roeber, Gundaker, O’Connell, and Gross), this useful book reveals portraits of America between 1790 and 1840 as a cumbrous democracy in which Americans from many different walks of life consumed print and used it in multiple ways. In this narrative, mostly about books and readers, printers and publishers in the United States assumed a central role in the development of the new Republic.

Indeed, central to those fresh starts were books, books that were meant to define the new nation as free and democratic. Shortly after the dust began to settle from the American Revolution, books and newspapers offered many Americans opportunities to begin anew. And as Scott E. Casper explains in his essay, “Case Study: Harper & Brothers,” there was little time to waste. In the wake of independence, America needed literary “works of a [distinctly] American character” (129). For that reason, James and John Harper started a publishing company and took on the daunting task of writing the new nation into existence. Adopting British models, and initially British authors, the Harper brothers began issuing a multivolume series celebrating America’s unique charm. By publishing such books as Thatcher’s Indian Biography, Pauling’s A Life of Washington, Byrant’s Selections
from the American Poets, the Harper brothers were perhaps some of the earliest bookmen to engage in this business of nation building (128–36).

Although useful in its account of how these two printers-turned-publishers helped to create through books an exclusively American character, Casper's essay is far too abbreviated. For instance, he does not fully explicate the strategies the Harpers' firm used to reach the public at large. Nor does he make much of the hundreds of agents, from clergymen to students on vacation, whom the brothers employed. An otherwise interesting story, Casper's essay also does not further explicate the various book-binding and advertising schemes the brothers used to get the word out. As a result, what emerges is a narrative in which the Harper & Brothers' multivolume series are circulated among only a select group—those who could buy books—thus overlooking an equally telling story of how their "Library" series found its way into the hands of less well-to-do Americans.

David Paul Nord's essay "Benevolent Books: Printing, Religion, and Reform," an examination of how the printing press encouraged on a wider scale the Second Great Awakening, is another gem in the collection. For Jedidiah Morse and other New Lights, he explains, the mass production and circulation of Bibles and religious literature inspired the formation of such devout coteries of readers and reformers as the Society for Propagating the Gospel among the Indians and Others in North America, the Massachusetts Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, the American Bible Society, the American Tract Society, and many others. In an era quickly changing due in no small part to new technology, men like Morse, Daniel Fanshaw, and Noah Worcester found what they believed were signs from Providence. Through the steam-powered press, the newly minted stereotyping process, and new papermaking machines, God sent them the same message—"Spread the Word"—which they did passionately, and at no expense to the new converts caught up in the religious fervor of the day. In this age of white male suffrage and certain social and political upheaval, the Bible Society of Philadelphia and other New Light societies distributed Bibles and religious tracts for free to any American with an open hand and a receptive heart. What ensued was an era of religious and progressive reform, during which the American landscape changed rapidly (221–46).

Interestingly, as with Casper's essay, what's missing from this insightful account is a fuller explanation of how these religious societies reached the masses. Instead, the focus of Nord's narrative is primarily on new technologies and how New Lights capitalized on them to achieve a wider sphere of agency for themselves. While Nord does a good job of demonstrating how religious zeal developed into efforts for such social reforms as temperance and abolition, he does not address the various strategies these religious communities employed to widen their reach. Although new technology certainly played a role, it is but part of the story. Another part clearly lies in the ways these groups used illustrations to make their point. Indeed, though Nord includes in his essay a number of the illustrations these religious societies employed in their literature, he does not ponder the impact they might have had upon the wider public.

On this account, Nord is not alone. Throughout this otherwise impressive collection of essays, illustrations are used principally in an ancillary manner; in short, they are included simply to restate the text. While some book historians and scholars have and are beginning to explore the importance of illustrations, therein still lies an enormous potential for future study for American book historians examining the early national period.
While networks of readers and publishers are the focus of Gross and Kelly’s *An Extensive Republic*, the politics of letter writing and identity are the focus of Dierks’s *In My Power*, which draws upon an impressive body of primary (e.g., belle-lettres, post office records, family papers, writing manuals) and secondary sources. As early as the 1730s, this professor of history at Indiana University explains, increasing numbers of “ordinary” colonials—artisans, farmers, women, and freed slaves—began crossing what he calls the “epistolary divide,” an imagined community or communities of letter writers who unwittingly forged what would later become a Republic of Letters (xvi–xvii). Contrary to the argument that reading functioned as a public sphere that established the primordial base on which the United States rests, Dierks makes a compelling case that writing played a pivotal role in the development and expansion of America. Early Americans wrote themselves into being, as the acts of writing and exchanging letters engendered among those who mastered the art of penmanship a new sense of identity in colonial America.

At the center of Dierks’s narrative is a series of writing manuals that played an important part in a burgeoning consumer revolution which started in Great Britain in the mid- to late seventeenth century. As the empire grew in wealth and in reputation, so did its overseas colonies. By the middle of the eighteenth century, Daniel Defoe’s *The Complete English Tradesman in Familiar Letters*, John Hill’s *The Young Secretary’s Guide*, George Fisher’s *The American Instructor*, and several other penmanship manuals afforded ambitious young men the opportunity to transcend the boundaries of deference and class and entertain their social betters in the polite discourse of letter writing. In early America, these manuals produced a leveling effect, albeit an imagined one, wherein artisans and men of the middling sort thought themselves the near equal of their social betters (52–99). It certainly had appeared that way in print. Through the widespread circulation of these writing manuals, stationery, and other forms of print, Dierks suggests, the first Americans were born.

By the early 1740s, with the publication of Samuel Richardson’s steady sellers *Pamela; or Virtue Rewarded* and *Letters Written To and For Particular Friends*, women in colonial America were encouraged to join the ranks of this motley, cumbersome crew. Thanks to the popularity of Richardson’s epistolary novel, in which a servant girl marries her well-to-do master, semiliterate women of modest backgrounds found inspiration and began turning to their quills. Moreover, aside from stirring young women’s passions and imaginations with Pamela’s unlikely story, Richardson also sold them the means through which they, too, could aspire to become heroines of a romance of their own design—a writing manual. Indeed, as *Pamela’s* fame spread, so did demand for other writing manuals and stationery supplies (141–88). In the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, for example, the number of advertisements for writing materials grew significantly, as Dierks explains: “there were 33 such ads in the 1730s, 114 in the 1740s, 348 in the 1750s, and 370 in the 1760s” (178). With the inclusion of women in their already swelling ranks, it was but a matter of time before colonial Americans envisioned themselves as different from their British counterparts far removed from their shores.

But not all were free to cross the “epistolary divide.” In the wake of the American Revolution, the once assorted group of colonials who achieved a shared identity by writing themselves into history denied Americans of African descent similar access to print. Labeled as outcasts, enslaved African Americans and their free black counterparts were relegated to the far periphery of the literary divide. Where letter writing had once reflected a bias with regard to class, by the begin-
ning of the new Republic penmanship had changed to reflect deep-seated racial prejudices (233–79).

Curiously, in its explication of race and the epistolary divide lies In My Power’s biggest shortcoming. Comparatively, this part of the narrative feels hurried and forced. While the chapter does have potential, it does not engage with the work of Carter G. Woodson, E. Jennifer Mongahan, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Thad Tate, and numerous others who have written extensively about early African Americans, slave and free, achieving literacy. As a result, it falls a bit flat, which is unfortunate because in several ways Dierks’s stimulating analysis of letter writing in early America as a type of imagined community resembles Gates’s trope of the “talking book” in the African American belles-lettres tradition.

From America’s earliest beginnings to the creation of its unique Republic, the United States has been, and continues to be, a cumbersome democracy in print. Because democracy is an inherently ambiguous endeavor, the history of early America seems never a work in progress. As both An Extensive Republic and In My Power show, reading and writing played critical roles in the development of the United States. But while both texts have delved into perhaps the most complicated aspect of book history, revealing new and fresh insights, both of these thought-provoking books also demonstrate that there is still a long road ahead as historians continue to struggle with the many nuances of the past.