

Radical Communities of Print in England? ***A theory with some examples from 1790 to 1850***

SOME HISTORIANS are always looking for patterns in history. They expect history to repeat itself, and they feel compelled to identify some kind of rhythm or ‘pulse’ in history. I am *not* that kind of historian. The ‘heartbeat of history’ is an attractive notion, but it implies a regularity that, in reality, is hardly ever there. I don’t expect the past to repeat itself, and I never assume that history is going to be anything other than intriguingly unpredictable and gloriously untidy. Nevertheless, from time to time historical research does seem to unearth *some* parallels: echoes from a former time, and perhaps from a different place. When that does happen, the historian needs to spend some time in reflection, questioning the evidence very carefully. If some kind of pattern really does emerge when we are not looking for it, then it might, just might, possess some historical significance. Historians should *not* constantly search for pattern or repetition, but they should be on a permanent quest for *significance*, and they must be open-minded enough to formulate hypotheses to test any perceived historical significance.

The hypothesis that I want to share with you today is that there are some similarities between the radical political print communities that emerged in England in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and the much earlier communities of humanist scholars that formed in the sixteenth century around some of the very first printers. Some aspects of what was happening in a sixteenth-century printing shop *may* possibly have parallels in England 200 years later. In case that sounds like a totally ‘off-the-wall’ suggestion, let me clarify that I believe there to be *some* similarities between these two kinds of print community, not that they are identical. But even a few similarities may be of significance, and that is what I want to explore. The underlying question I am posing is: if certain features of the early scholarly print communities can be identified as recurring in the radical print communities, does this have *significance*? Does it tell us something about the nature of the printer’s role, even though it had undoubtedly changed over two centuries? My research into the book trade in Leicester revealed a variety of *radical* communities of print. I find them of great interest and I’m going to outline a few examples for you. But my main purpose today is to compare those communities with the early scholar-printer communities, so I’m going to begin in the sixteenth century.

The scholar-printers are quite well-known, so I will just mention a few names very briefly: Johann Amerbach of Basel, succeeded by Johann Froben; Aldus Manutius in Venice; Sebastien Gryphe, the humanist bookseller and printer of Lyons (who was highly praised by Erasmus and other eminent scholars who had worked with him); Joost Bade, the Flemish printer sometimes known as Badius, who worked in Italy and then in France. Bade was succeeded by his son-in-law, the first of the Estienne dynasty, around whom formed an important scholarly community. The scholar-printers are described by Febvre and Martin as ‘Men of culture and refinement... enlightened publishers [who] ensured that they were surrounded with writers and intellectuals for the good of their business.’¹ They were known for their tolerance of a wide range of religious and political views and their hospitality towards foreigners, and they encouraged the visiting scholars, often using their services as editors or proof-readers, and sometimes becoming close friends

¹ L. Febvre and H-J. Martin, *The Coming of the Book*, 1990, p. 149.

with them. Elizabeth Eisenstein refers to these communities as polyglot households that ‘provided wandering scholars with a meeting place, message centre, sanctuary and cultural centre all in one’.² She also notes the continuity with the age before printing and suggests that the humanist print-shops ‘attracted wandering scholars much as monastic libraries and medieval colleges had’. Adrian Johns describes the early printing shops as a ‘strange hybrid of library, scriptorium, study, home and workshop’.³

The first generation of scholar-printers and their communities disappeared around 1600. They were very much a product of their particular place and time – Western Europe during the Renaissance and the Reformation – a unique set of circumstances that encouraged the technological innovation of printing to be employed in the service of the new ‘commonwealth of learning’, the success of which depended largely on the unprecedented possibility of producing and distributing large numbers of copies of books. During the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, printing changed from a scholarly activity into what we would now think of as a capitalist enterprise, being carried out less by scholar-printers and more by hard-nosed entrepreneurs. That is something of a generalisation, but then, of course, so is the assumption that all, or even most, of the early printers had been visionary humanists. Nevertheless, the fact that *some* of them were, and that they gathered around them scholarly print communities, is of great importance not only in the history of print culture but also in the wider arena of cultural and intellectual history.

Let me now turn to the radical communities of print that I identified during my research on the history of the book trade in just one English provincial town, Leicester. As I indicated, I want to concentrate on the last decade of the eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth. In this period of about sixty years, English radicalism found its voice, though it never became a continuous or cohesive political movement. In England in the late eighteenth century, the radicals watched with interest what was happening in France, while the same events were studied with some alarm by the ruling classes. Before long, English radicalism was being crushed by repressive legislation – though so many English radicals became disillusioned with the course of events in France after the Revolution that it might have faded away naturally, at least for a time. But radicalism was not destroyed by the Government’s actions – it went underground, and its survival was due in large measure to the printing and distribution of large quantities of ‘seditious’ books, pamphlets and newspapers. As the nineteenth century began, radical opinion began to focus on domestic matters and gave rise to the long and bitter campaign that led to the Reform Act of 1832 and the municipal and other reforms that followed in the next few years. Most radical activity up to this point had been inspired and organised by enlightened members of the rising middle class, but, very soon, working-class radicals found their own voice and the Chartist movement developed into the first truly nationwide working-class organization. All of these radical movements relied heavily on the printed word.

The earliest and most flamboyant of Leicester’s book-trade radicals was Richard Phillips, who arrived in Leicester in 1788 and within two years had established a successful printing and bookselling business. Phillips was imprisoned in 1793 for selling Thomas Paine’s *The Rights of Man*, though he managed to continue to edit his radical newspaper, the *Leicester Herald*, from his prison cell. Phillips was a charismatic figure who was at the centre of an informal radical print community. His printing shop and adjoining bookshop, ‘pamphlet room’ and circulating library were a well-known gathering place for young men of radical and republican views. He also founded in 1792

2 E. Eisenstein, *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe*, 1993, p. 101.

³ A. Johns, *The Nature of the Book*, 1998, pp. 74-75.

the Adelphi Society – a lively forum for philosophical and scientific debate. It was forced to close down the following year because the town corporation was worried not only by the society's very radical politics but also by their experiments with electricity!

Radicalism depended very much on different forms of community in which like-minded people could exchange ideas. Richard Phillips might be regarded as the focus of *three* overlapping radical communities: the Adelphi Society (a formally constituted community meeting face to face), the 'reading community' of those who read the *Leicester Herald*, and the unstructured community of young radicals who met informally in Phillips's shop. Like most of the leading radicals of the late eighteenth century, Richard Phillips was middle-class, though his outspoken political views and general eccentricity meant that he was perhaps always on the fringes of respectability during his time in Leicester. (Later he moved to London, became Sheriff and was knighted.)

Thomas Combe was a highly regarded printer and a leading radical. He was a very competent craftsman who printed books for a number of leading London booksellers. Combe moved in respectable circles and seems to have regarded Richard Phillips as a young upstart, so much so that he published and edited a rival radical newspaper, the *Leicester Chronicle*. However, Combe tried to keep his links with the paper secret and had it printed by someone else. In any case, it was soon forced to close down when it was threatened with prosecution. Although Combe was the informal leader of a community of radicals, he was firmly middle class – a highly respected citizen and businessman, who was active in charitable works and whose shop was for a time situated opposite the fashionable Assembly Rooms, a focal point not for radicals but for the gentry of the town and county.

Moving on in time – into the 1840s – and also moving from the middle class to the working class, we find the Chartist leader, Thomas Cooper. He was in Leicester for only a couple of years but he made a huge impact on the working people of the town through his energetic work in the cause of Chartism. He became secretary of one of Leicester's two rival Chartist groups; he was a noted speaker and writer and also ran reading classes for working men. Cooper was not a printer himself – in fact he experienced some difficulty in getting his radical papers printed – but he certainly *used* the printed word with considerable vigour. In his shop Cooper sold radical books, pamphlets and newspapers and his coffee room was a popular meeting place for working-class radicals. Again, this was an informal and unstructured community but it was very much based on the circulation and use of the printed word – quite possibly including reading aloud – because if the *printed* word was central to the Chartist cause, so was the *spoken* word. Poetry flourished in Chartist circles and was often read aloud at their meetings. Cooper was a respected poet and his correspondence with other working-class poets reveals him as a well-read and constructive critic – yet another kind of radical print community. Cooper also ran several short-lived Chartist newspapers, the most important being the *Midland Counties Illuminator*, a good quality newspaper that connects Cooper with an earlier phase of radicalism, because it was originally edited by George Bown, a veteran radical who is mentioned in E P Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* as an example of unusual continuity in radical activity. As a young man in the 1790s Bown had been a member of Phillips's Adelphi Society and was secretary of the Leicester Constitutional Society. In 1794 he was arrested for running seditious meetings in sympathy with the French Revolutionaries. George Bown held enlightened views on the education of women and in 1812 he was organizing classes for young ladies in literature, science and the art of intelligent conversation. He edited another radical newspaper, the second *Leicester Chronicle*. In his later years he was an active Chartist, editing the *Illuminator* and writing two pamphlets advocating the 'physical force' brand of Chartism. I mentioned poetry being read aloud, and that's an important dimension of the

history of print culture, as is the singing of radical songs. Another Leicester printer, John Pares, was arrested several times for offences relating to radical printing. He was accused of treason in 1798, he was imprisoned in 1802 for publishing a seditious song, and he narrowly escaped prosecution in 1816 when two political pamphlets that he had printed were read aloud at a meeting of the local Hampden Club which had been infiltrated by a paid spy.

An important (if rather obvious) point needs to be made: radical activity never occurs in isolation. By no means *all* printers and booksellers – and certainly not *all* readers of books, pamphlets and newspapers – were radicals. That needs saying because of the way history tends to be studied and communicated. Radical activity of any kind interested contemporary observers for the same reason as it still interests historians: it was *different*. It stood out from the mainstream. It was often also invigorating or alarming, depending on one's point of view. Radical activity was in any case something to be talked about and written about, and that means that the evidence available to historians can sometimes be skewed in its favour. In book history terms that means that we need to keep in mind the activities of printers and booksellers on the other side of the political divide – and there were many of them – as well as those who took no active part in politics – there were many of them too.

I began by asserting that historians should not expect – and must certainly never impose – a pattern on history, but if one does appear to emerge, it merits close examination and reflection. What I have suggested is, for the moment, just a theory. I do not claim to have examined the evidence in great detail, but what I have seen leads me to offer the hypothesis that there were *some* significant similarities between communities of print in early modern Europe and radical communities of print in England from about 1790 to 1850. I am *not* suggesting that the later communities replicate the earlier ones. I am quite certain that they *don't*. There may be apparent similarities but there are undoubtedly considerable differences. For one thing, the scholar-printers were just that, both scholars and printers. People like Amerbach and Aldus Manutius were scholars first and printers second, but the English radicals were, for the most part, *not* scholars, though some of the middle-class radicals were quite well educated. At that time, 'working-class scholar' would have been a contradiction in terms, yet this was another area where print could render great service – some working-class radicals were self-educated, and that of course means *book*-educated. Thomas Cooper was a striking example of an autodidact. One has only to read what Cooper wrote – not least his autobiography and his poetry – as well as what his contemporaries wrote about him, to appreciate the breadth and depth of his learning. In different circumstances, Cooper might well have become a scholar of some standing. There are other similarities. Many of the scholar-printers and the radicals were charismatic individuals, people of vision who inspired those around them. Many of both groups were exceptionally energetic, working long and hard in the service of their particular cause. Many relied on the help of other people and gathered round them like-minded people possessing a whole range of skills that could be used to further the cause through the medium of print.

I suggested at the outset that, if we come across apparent similarities, we need to identify their *significance*, so I ought now to try to draw some conclusions. The most significant point that has struck me, having reflected on early modern and radical communities of print is that, in different times and in different places, the printer has the potential to become much more than a mere producer of books, pamphlets and newspapers. The bookseller likewise may be much more than a mere distributor. A printer or bookseller deeply committed to a cause – be it humanist scholarship or radical politics, or for that matter any one of a whole range of political and religious views – may sometimes rise above simply producing and distributing the material text.

They may influence what texts are produced and, by implication, which texts remain virtually invisible and inaccessible to the world at large. They may themselves *write* texts; they may *edit* or *translate* texts written by others. They may *inspire*, or even *commission* others to write particular texts, acting in effect as what we would now call a publisher.

Perhaps, throughout the history of print culture, there have been some book-trade people with this kind of vision and commitment. *Perhaps* there was a *type* of book-trade person recurring at different points in history: individuals possessing both technical craft skills and intellectual gifts. People who rose above the mundane, choosing to use their book-trade skills in the furtherance of a particular cause (though the cause will vary greatly in different times and places). They were probably, of course, always the *exception*, not the rule.

This hypothesis raises many issues that I haven't been able to address in this short paper. I am conscious of having ignored two crucial issues in print culture history: the vexed question of the assumed '*fixity*' of the printed text and the whole area of *piracy* – the unauthorised printing and distribution of texts – both very relevant to the concept of communities of print. I mentioned, in passing, *overlapping* print communities – that seems to me to be an important area ripe for further research. I haven't really even *defined* a print community and its key characteristics. Is it first and foremost a community concerned with the *production and distribution* of the material text, or is it sometimes a *reading* community – about *audiences*, about the *reception* of those same texts? The radical communities that I've mentioned appear to show features of both types. Further research might tease out the differences and the subtleties much more than I have yet been able to do. There is probably scope there for several more conference papers or dissertations, so I will leave that thought with you...

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