

The Rise of Book Publishing in America, 1782 to 1830, by James N. Green, Library Company of Philadelphia¹

I. The Beginnings of the Reprint Trade, 1782-1801.

In the years following the Revolutionary War a vigorous American book publishing enterprise emerged, but paradoxically Great Britain supplied both the initial capital that got the trade off the ground and the texts Americans printed. The war had not changed the basic fact that London was the center of English-language book culture and America was on the periphery. The primary goal of the American book trade was to replace British imports with its own editions of the same texts. This turned out to be a difficult goal to achieve, and progress toward it was fitful.

During the war hardly any large books were printed with the notable exception of the Bible printed in 1782 by the Scot Robert Aitken in Philadelphia. This was the first English Bible with an American imprint. Aitken claimed he was nearly ruined by the venture, because he was paid in worthless paper money and because the advent of peace precipitated an avalanche of cheap imported Bibles. British merchants continued to dump books in America for the rest of the 1780s as the American economy slumped. Several booksellers sent agents with large stocks of books. Some of them returned home as soon as they sold their books for whatever they could get, but others stayed on.

In 1784 Thomas Dobson arrived in Philadelphia from Scotland with large stocks of books. He quickly became major bookseller, but as he sold his books, instead of investing their profit in more books, he embarked on publishing, using his stock as security for additional loans. His first large venture was appropriately the first American edition of Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* in 1788. To undersell imports the original London quarto

as well as the pirated Dublin octavo, he reprinted in duodecimo. In 1789 he began reprinting the new edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* (with American material added) as it arrived part by part from Edinburgh. When completed in 1798 it totaled 18 volumes with over 400 engraved plates, by far the largest book ever published in America and a very risky venture requiring large reserves of capital to sustain it through the ups and downs of a turbulent and immature economy. Dobson's success was a mystery until recently when Warren McDougall discovered that his original stock was provided by his erstwhile employer, the Edinburgh bookseller Charles Eliot. Eliot wanted his lavish backing to remain a secret so his protégé would be more easily accepted in America. Dobson sold the stock and put the returns into publishing, but he refused to pay Eliot back despite increasingly desperate appeals. His debt rose to tens of thousands of pounds. Eliot died in 1790 in considerable financial difficulty, in part due to Dobson's default. Thus Eliot indirectly supplied the capital for the largest American publishing venture of the Federal era.²

Another emigrant of 1784 was Mathew Carey of Dublin. He came over penniless, but with references from the likes of Franklin and Lafayette, and he soon became the publisher of the leading Federalist magazine. Between 1792 and 1794 he used his political connections to get the credit necessary to import huge shipments of books from several London booksellers, and from his Dublin associates.³ Much like Dobson, he used his imported books as capital for publishing reprints. In 1794 and 1795 he published a two-volume quarto reprint of William Guthrie's *New System of Modern Geography*, (with additions by American editors) with 45 engraved maps, priced at \$12, in an edition of 2500; and a four-volume octavo reprint of Oliver Goldsmith's *An History of the Earth and*

Animated Nature, illustrated with 55 plates, price at \$8, in an edition of 3,000. He was still paying off several British booksellers, and as his publishing expenses mounted, he found it expedient to suspend payments to London -- all the more so because he had split with the Federalists over Jay's Treaty and was now politically opposed to trade with England.

Like Robert Bell and the other reprinters of the Federal era, Carey advertised his editions in anti-British 'buy American' terms. To sell these huge editions he hired the Rev. Mason Locke Weems, who later became famous as the author of the *Life of Washington*, the book that perpetrated the myth of the cherry tree, and as the most successful traveling book salesman of the age. Weems managed to sell off both books in the South, but his traveling expenses and discounts to middlemen ate up all the profit. Weems's main accomplishment was to divert the Southern book trade from London to Carey and Philadelphia.

Isaiah Thomas took another path to publishing, not through bookselling but through printing. During the war he had moved inland from Boston to Worcester, Massachusetts, where his business was much like a colonial printer's. He was proud of his craft, and so in 1784 and 1785 he imported \$9,000 worth of new type from Caslon and others on the credit extended to him by Worcester merchants. He intended to use the type to print original books by American authors, but commissions did not materialize and so he resorted to publishing reprints. Since he had little capital besides his type, he chose the smallest books there were, the children's books published in London by John Newberry. These were fantastically profitable sheet for sheet, and he sold 119 editions in the 1780s, easily paying for the type. By 1789 he felt firm ground under his feet, and he switched from these trifles to the largest and most serious book of all, the Bible, no edition of which had appeared in America since Aitken's.

Many American printers felt that some protection analogous to the British Bible patent was needed. On January 10, 1789 Hugh Gaine and four other New York printers sent a circular letter⁴ to all the trade calling for a joint petition to Congress for protection or financial support for an American Bible printing company that would share the risk and reward of supplying the nation. This was the first proposal for national cooperation in the book trade, but it had precisely the opposite effect. The letter touched off a chain reaction of Bible proposals. Within days William Young and Mathew Carey, both of Philadelphia, and Isaac Collins of Trenton, New Jersey all announced Bibles, and a group of New Yorkers announced a folio and a quarto, and Gaine himself ordered type for a duodecimo already composed from England, which he proposed to keep standing. Shortly thereafter Thomas announced Bibles in all three formats. Where there had been none, now there were nine Bibles announced as in press.

In 1790 Congress passed a copyright act that protected only books written by American citizens and residents, a step that neatly evaded the Bible problem and set the stage for a non-monopolistic reprint trade. By the middle 1790s, most of the publishers had given up printing and were hiring others to manufacture books for them, a development that marked the end of the domination of the American book trade by printers. In 1810 some Philadelphia printers summed up the state of the book trade:

For many years after the peace of 1783, books could be imported into the United States and sold cheaper than they could be printed here and indeed until 1793 nothing like a competition with English Printers and Booksellers could be maintained. The war then raging in Europe and added duty on paper made some difference but it was not until the union of Ireland and England (in 1801) that a decided advantage was ascertained to exist.⁵

In the absence of customs data, it is difficult to confirm how decided this advantage was.

The importation of Bibles by the book trade collapsed, for example, but general merchants

continued to do so. The Union of Ireland and England may have stopped the Irish reprint trade, but Patrick Byrne of Dublin emigrated in 1802 with a stock of books as large as any in America.⁶ Most of them were law books, which continued to be imported as long as American law continued to be shaped by English common law and precedent. Certain other types of books continued to be imported because the demand was too small to justify reprinting: novels by unknown writers, books in foreign languages, professional literature in medicine, theology, and the sciences, luxury books such as fine illustrated books, books in fine bindings, fancy pocket books, and albums. Most large libraries and many private gentlemen continued to order books from London. But almost every book that had a good sale or even a good review in England was reprinted in America.

II. Cooperation and Competition in the Early Nineteenth Century Book Trade

As a few printers and booksellers began to take control of the nation's book trade in the 1790s, the risk of competition from British imports began to fade, but the risk from competition with each other grew much greater. The best way to mitigate this risk was for publishers to work cooperatively to limit competition. The nationalist spirit that drove the effort to replace imports became the basis of cooperation in the book trade. Publishers tried various modes of cooperation and self-regulation on both a local and a national level. The simplest form was an agreement to join together in a publication on an ad hoc basis rather than producing two competing editions. More complex agreements to distribute each other's work soon followed. When publishers from different regions cooperated, each could promise to be the other's sole agent in a given region, and each would stay out of the other's territory. The most widespread kind of cooperation was the effort to keep prices up by

refusing to do business with those who discounted too freely. Whenever two publishers cooperated, however, they placed themselves in competition with others who were not cooperating with them. Despite a shared ethic of cooperation and widespread efforts to limit risk, the book trade that was emerging was far more open than that of Britain.⁷

The first formal cooperation among this emerging cohort of publishers on the national level took the form of a series of book fairs beginning in 1801. The instigator was Carey and the occasion was another flurry of Bible publishing. In the summer of 1800 Parson Weems talked him into undertaking an edition of the quarto family Bible, the first one in America since the three that had appeared in 1792. When Weems went to New York to gather subscribers, however, he found that “Your Bible proposition has knock’d up just such a dust here among the Printers as woud a stone if thrown smack into the centre of a Hornet’s nest. The whole swarm is out. You hear of nothing here now but printing the Bible. . . . Everything that can raise a type is going to work upon the Bible. You’d take New York to be the very town of Man-soul, and its printers the veriest saints on earth.”⁸ Carey grew fearful and delayed going to press. Since he was an ardent Jeffersonian and had narrowly escaped being prosecuted under the Alien and Sedition Acts, the outcome of the presidential election of 1800 was another important factor in this decision. When it turned out to be a tie between Jefferson and Burr, he decided to abandon the project, but when the balloting in Congress began, he took heart. On February 17, 1801 Jefferson was elected and on February 24 Carey finally he wrote to Weems, “I shall print the Bible.”⁹ Another reason the election was so important becomes apparent when we see Carey writing to every postmaster in the country in March, asking them to be his agents for the Bible, gathering subscriptions and forwarding payment. They knew their jobs were in danger and most of them agreed to

help. This was a far more efficient system than Weems had ever imagined, and a far more national one.

Then just as his Bible was coming off the press, he bought Hugh Gaine's old standing type for the duodecimo Bible for almost \$7,000, and he got Isaiah Thomas's firm to agree not to sell their duodecimo edition in Carey's territory.¹⁰ Thus he removed competitors in the two most popular Bible formats in both New York and New England. In due course Carey's Jeffersonian friends got him a seat on the board of the Bank of Pennsylvania, which gave him unlimited credit, and this combined with a near monopoly on the American Bible business made him a rich man.¹¹

In order to establish a more effective national book distribution system, Carey issued a call in that same eventful fall of 1801 for a national literary fair on the model of the ancient German trade fairs, which would bring wholesale booksellers and publishers together from all over the country to exchange or sell their books to each other in quantity. The fairs were based on the premise that the book trade was regional at best, and that the weakness of transportation, communication, and financial links between regions made it difficult for a Philadelphian to sell books in Boston, and even harder for them to reach each others' hinterlands. As Carey explained it, "between the booksellers of the western parts of Pennsylvania and those of the interior of Massachusetts, there is an almost impassible barrier. ... The printers in Carlisle, Lancaster, and Pittsburgh, are confined almost entirely to an intercourse with those of Philadelphia, to whose mercy they are but too much exposed."

¹² Carey wanted to break down these regional barriers; and he wanted everyone to help him sell his Bibles.

The fairs convened semi-annually from 1802 to 1806, alternating between Philadelphia and New York. They had the trappings of a typical trade fair, with dinners and toasts and medals for excellence in printing; but the real business of the fairs was publishers selling books to other publishers. At this time the publishers' normal discount to retailers was about 10% to 16% and about 20% to 30% to wholesalers, depending in each case on how many copies they bought, whether they paid cash, or the length of credit given. At the fairs books were routinely sold at discounts of 33% to 40% for quantities of over 100 unbound in sheets with six months credit. Those who bought a considerable fraction of an edition could get as much as 50% off and become a joint publisher.

Perhaps even more important than these wholesale purchases were exchanges of books among publishers. In Europe books were exchanged sheet for sheet, but in the U.S. the exchanges were calculated at retail price equivalent: a hundred dollars worth of your books for a hundred dollars worth of mine. This worked better when exchanging books that were already bound ready for sale, though exchanges in sheets could be made by factoring in a discount for binding. By means of these exchanges, one could get books of other publishers at essentially the cost of production.¹³

Another important activity at the fairs was the circulation and endorsement of promissory notes. Notes and bills of exchange had become the most important way of raising publishing capital *within* the trade, and they were all the more important as the importation of books was declining, at least among the publishers, while access to bank capital was still problematic. Thus a publisher could buy paper with a note due in 6 months, which would give him enough time to print a book with it and begin to see a return. He might also sell his books to others for notes due in 90 days, which would help his sales but

delay payment of the cash he needed to pay the papermaker. In that case he might need to let his notes run on past the due date, and to do this he had to have another person endorse them, that is promise to pay the money due if the primary borrower could not. The collateral for these notes and endorsements was the bookseller's stock, usually his only capital. All the booksellers had to endorse each other's notes in order to do business. They were all each other's debtors and all each other's creditors, and because of the universal exchange of books promoted by the fairs, they all sold each others' books. Competition and cooperation were exquisitely balanced.¹⁴

The fairs represented a peak in the book trade that was not to be topped until about 1820. After 1806 the fairs ceased because (as Carey later wrote) small publishers began bringing "large editions of popular books with half-worn types on inferior paper, with which, by means of exchanges, they deluged the country."¹⁵ By opening up an unregulated national exchange of books, the fairs exacerbated the inherent tendency of exchange to cheapen books and encourage overproduction. The problem, in short, was a glut of books. Exchanges were not sales, but they created a dangerous illusion of sales. At the fairs whole editions could be seemingly disposed of by exchange in a few hours. Some country printers printed an edition solely in order to have something to exchange, and the larger the edition, the more they had to exchange, so the total number of books printed grew much faster than the number actually sold to readers.

Back in the early 1790s, Thomas had begun establishing partnerships with protégés in other cities; Ebenezer Andrews in Boston was his first partner, but the others were all in small towns around New England, such as Walpole New Hampshire. To Walpole he sent much of the book stock he could not sell in Boston or Worcester. But business was slow

there, so in 1807 he set up a new store in Windsor Vermont, where he sent the books that would not sell in Walpole, what the partner there called "the poorest and most useless part of our stock, which will neither sell nor exchange."¹⁶ At this point the rural book business consisted largely of moving worthless books further and further into the back country. By 1811 the book stock of the Walpole store was valued at \$18,000, while annual sales averaged only about \$900. The Walpole branch had been printing a great many heavy works of law, medicine, and theology for Thomas and Andrews, but the books they sold in their store consisted almost entirely of school books and chap books--the reading material of the back country. A quarter of the sales were not books at all but stationery, cigars, patent medicines, spectacles, watch chains, paint boxes. The stock lists and the imprints of the Walpole office foster the illusion of a vital local print culture, which is dispelled by the sales records.¹⁷

Like many publishers, Thomas and Andrews quite often had books printed by country printers because they worked for lower wages than their urban brothers. These presses would otherwise stand idle much of the time, since most of them produced little besides a weekly newspaper. This had the effect of pressing down the wages of the urban printers, but in the long run the country printers were more exploited. The Walpole printers for example were virtually forced to print books for Thomas and Andrews in order to make some money to pay off their debts to them. They worked at journeymen's wages, a great bargain for Thomas and Andrews since most master printers charged two or three times the cost of wages for a printing job. It was an even greater bargain because they often took payment for printing in books valued at retail price. This just saddled the printers with more books to sell. Several times the Walpole partners published large books at their own risk in

order to have a chance at making a real profit, but since they could not expect to sell many of them locally, and since they did not have access to a distribution network of their own, they ended up selling most of them through Thomas or Andrews. And again they were paid partly in books--more books. The capital that financed these publications came ultimately from Thomas or Andrews and the books returned to them for sale. All the country printers supplied was cheap labor. ¹⁸

Unable to sell their books, the country partners tried to exchange them for others more saleable, but failing that they bartered them for paper, bookbinding, or simply for food and fuel. These petty traders in turn offered them for sale, but they were not obliged to sell at full retail price. This is why one of the Walpole partners complained in 1812 that a local papermaker sold twice as many books as he did.¹⁹ There were so many books around that they became a kind of currency, and in the process of endless exchange, by a kind of Gresham's law, the worthless ones drove the valuable ones out of the market. Unfortunately the partners were indebted to Thomas for the book stock valued at the full retail price, and he would allow them to be discounted. Thus when the partners exchanged valuable books for worthless ones, Thomas was beside himself with fury because these exchanges insidiously effected the devaluation that he so strongly resisted.

Thomas's accounting preserved the illusion of the value of his stock, and it also fostered an illusion of profit. Each year he added up all his assets, mostly book stock but also printing equipment, real estate, securities, and accounts receivable, which he reckoned was his total worth. In 1804 it was about \$200,000, and Andrews was worth almost as much. He never calculated his annual expenditures and receipts to show a balance of profit or loss. Instead, each year he subtracted last year's net worth from this year's and termed the

difference, "the profits of the business." For years this annual increase was viewed as a cause for rejoicing, and as an incentive to print yet more books. The more uncollected debts and unsold books he had, the greater his profit. His partners kept their books the same way, and each year he reckoned his half of their so-called profits as assets, which further swelled his own grand total. The more everyone printed and the less everyone sold, the more everyone's profits appeared to be. In his annual accounting of assets, he did not begin depreciating book stock until 1813, and then only by 10%, by which time some of it was twenty years old.²⁰ In the end all his partnerships collapsed under the weight of unsalable books; in 1817 he closed accounts on all of them, sustaining a loss he estimated at \$90,000.

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This glut which affected all the large publishers in the period after about 1805 was compounded by the depression and waves of bankruptcy that afflicted the whole economy from the Embargo through the end of the War of 1812. Publishers were especially vulnerable because of the practice of endorsing each other's notes. If one failed, his endorsers were liable for his debts, which sometimes touched off other failures in a domino effect. The onset of the War of 1812 set off a wave of such bankruptcies. By 1815, only 13 of the 64 publishers who went to the book fair in 1803 were still active in business.

Carey survived the crisis better than some others because of his Bible publishing. After reprinting his quarto Bible from freshly set type three or four times, he began leaving part of the type standing after each edition and buying new type for the next, until by 1807 he had the whole text standing.²² With both the quarto and the duodecimo standing, he never had to pay for composition or for proofreading--a big charge with the Bible where the reputation for an accurate text was essential. This saving allowed him to undersell not only

the importers but every other American publisher. Instead of competing with him, the whole trade bought from him. Another advantage of standing type was that he was able to print small editions as often as his sales required, so that he did not have his capital tied up in dead stock. Building on this ability to print short runs, he began to offer both the duodecimo and quarto Bibles on a variety of different paper grades, ranging from coarse to superfine, priced accordingly. He offered the quarto in a variety of bindings as well, from plain calf to red morocco gilt, and with a variety of contents, with and without plates, maps, Apocrypha, concordance, and so forth. These were offered in over 30 different combinations identified by number to make it easier for booksellers to order an assortment, and they ranged in retail price from \$3.50 to \$12.50. No Bible, in fact no book of any kind had ever been offered in such a variety of formats, and the innovation was extremely popular with consumers. His investment in standing type cost tens of thousands of dollars and filled his house, forcing him to buy another (grander) one; but it was the most productive capital investment he had ever made. It purchased him a virtual monopoly, a de facto copyright nearly as effective as the British Bible patent.²³

Books in which some investment had been made to give them a de facto copyright were called "valuable books" in the trade. An atlas was a valuable book because the cost of engraving the plates was so high that it was not economical for others to reprint it. Adding engraved plates to any book made it valuable, since plates could not be copied as easily as text. The publishers of valuable books kept up their value by making them a little scarce in the trade. They were never exchanged for ordinary books and often weren't exchanged at all, only sold for money, and sometimes not even on credit but for cash only. In a period of

glut, they were never a drug on the market, and so they were the best investment a publisher could make.

Copyright books were also valuable books by definition, since the investment a publisher made in copyright purchased an absolute legal monopoly. When Thomas and Andrews began buying copyrights in the 1790s, this was not understood, but after 1805 they gradually began to consider copyright books as equal to other valuable books. When one of Andrews's partners wrote to Carey in 1809 proposing an exchange of a copyright book he offered only a few copies "because we do not mean to have this work a glut in the market. The Copy Right cost us too dear, to make the work very common." ²⁴ As other parts of his business deteriorated in the early 19th century, Andrews confined himself more and more to selling valuable books and (since he owned so many) copyright books, three-fourths of his business he estimated in 1810.²⁵ For the preceding twenty years being a publisher in America had meant reprinting British books, exchanging, building up a large stock of assorted books of all publishers, and being a complete wholesale and retail bookseller. What Andrews did was a radical contraction in his business in response to a crisis; but almost accidentally he had discovered a new way of being a publisher, wholesaling only his own copyright books.

III. Copyright and American Writers

The first state copyright laws of the 1780s and the national law of 1790 that superseded them vested exclusive ownership of literary property in the author for a term of years, provided the author was a resident of the United States. The laws made no mention of publishers; ostensibly their function was to permit an author to have a work printed and

enjoy the revenue from it, without having to worry about another printer pirating it and stealing the profit. But almost immediately most American authors and publishers interpreted the laws in the same way that the English had done ever since the passage of their quite similar copyright act in 1709. They assumed that the point of having this property right was to be able to sell it or assign it to a publisher, who would take on all the expense and labor of putting it to press and marketing it. By this interpretation, copyright gave the author something to sell and the printer something to buy. It made the author's work a commodity, and gave it a value in the marketplace.

The first author to use the new laws in this way was the man who did the most to get them passed, Noah Webster. He published the first editions of his speller, grammar and reader at his own expense and then when they were successful he was able to sell the copyrights for subsequent editions. When he began doing this in the 1780s there were only state copyright laws, so he registered his books in every state he could and assigned rights to a printer in each state. When the federal copyright law was passed in 1790, several of his licenses still had years to run, so rather than impose the national monopoly the law envisaged, he continued to maintain a crazy-quilt of licenses to various printers for specified geographical areas, sometimes for only a year or two, or for a stated number of copies, sometimes for lump sums, later for a penny or so per copy printed. The licensees routinely poached on each other's territories and tried to undersell each other, just as if the book had not been copyright at all.²⁶ However, if he had tried to limit it to one printer, the speller would not have been so popular, because of the formidable obstacles to inter-regional book distribution. In its earliest days, national copyright legislation actually discouraged wide distribution.

Jedidiah Morse's geographies were the first American school books to be widely exchanged between regions in part because they were much more expensive and could bear the cost of transport. He sold his copyrights to just one publisher, Ebenezer Andrews, who kept all his books consistently in print and available in all parts of the Union, and in addition paid him to revise them periodically. Morse did not come close to Webster in the number of books sold, but he did in revenue. Webster and Morse were among the first writers to benefit from copyright in the early 1790s, and among the very few who made a living from what they thought of as their literary labor.²⁷

From such books publishers learned the value of copyright. They learned that it was not an unwelcome extra expense but a capital investment which could be depreciated over its 14-year term and which sometimes paid a gratifying dividend.²⁸ At the same time authors were learning how to use the sale of the copyright as an inducement to a publisher to take a risk on their works. Copyright established a legal and contractual basis for author-publisher relations; but if copyright gave a work a value, it did not settle the question of what that value was. Many copyrights had none, and authors still had to publish their own books; or they published the book themselves to establish its value and then offered the remainder of the edition to a publisher along with the copyright for future editions. Many authors published their own works not because their copyright was worthless, but because they thought it was too valuable. They assumed that they stood to make the most money when they shared profits the least. Most often, however, authors and publishers found some way of negotiating the value of a copyright that suited their differing interests and perceptions.

In the Isaiah Thomas papers are numerous byzantine contracts where the publisher offered substantial payment for a copy, but in return the author shared in the risk and

expense of publishing. These contracts can be divided into four general classes. Most common was for the author to gather subscriptions in advance and use the list as an additional inducement to the publisher to buy the copyright. Second, the author could agree to take payment for his copyright in books; of course the author could sell his books in order to make a profit, but that involved him in the labor of sale. Third, the author could share part of the risk by agreeing to buy a certain number of books if after a year or so the sale of the edition had not covered the printer's expenses. In any of these cases, the author could sell the copyright for the full term or for just one edition, assuming that the book would be revised and a new copyright would be secured for any future edition. Yet another option, used when the value of the copyright was in doubt, was the shared profits system. In effect author and publisher formed a temporary partnership, sharing the expenses and the proceeds equally. This seemed fair but it was fraught with peril, for if the book did not sell well enough to cover expenses, the author usually had to pay.²⁹ A variation on this was the commission system, where the publisher took 20% or so of the proceeds after expenses were paid.³⁰

From the middle 1790s up to the Embargo of 1808, the value of copyrights to publishers began to rise slowly, and the terms successful authors were able to negotiate improved. For example, Jeremy Belknap paid outright for the printing of his *History of New Hampshire* in 1784; in 1791 he sold the copyright of *The Foresters* to Thomas and Andrews, but he had to guarantee to help pay the costs if the edition failed; and in 1793 he sold outright the copyright for one edition of his biographical dictionary.³¹ Hannah Adams got nothing for *An Alphabetical Compendium of the Religious Sects* in 1784, shared profits

on the second edition, and sold the copyright of the third in 1801 for \$500. In 1801 Morse received \$1500 for two of his geographies for 8 years.³²

In the middle 1790s publishers began to discover that they could copyright many kinds of books that were not entirely written by Americans, but that had some American content, annotations, a preface, or more subtle “Americanization” of the contents. Often the editor (or the translator if the original was in another language) received as much or even more than an American author would have commanded for a copyright. Thus American readers enjoyed progressively more American books, from books printed abroad, to American reprints of foreign books, to Americanized foreign books, to books written by Americans in imitation of foreign ones (as Webster’s spellers were identical to British ones except for his famous spelling changes) to wholly original American books.

IV. The Reconfiguration of the book trade in the 1820s

Most of the books American publishers reprinted were not protected by the copyright law, but by 1800 the trade had developed a self-regulating de facto copyright mechanism called “courtesy of the trade.” By this custom, the first printer to announce a book (usually by a newspaper advertisement) had the right to it and no other publisher could “print upon” him. This was an informal version of the English practice of registering titles at Stationers’ Hall; the actual practice seems to have originated in Dublin. In America, with its regional publishing centers and (since 1801 at least) with a fairly brisk trade between them, courtesy of the trade dictated that publishers wait after announcing a book to see if newspapers from other cities brought other announcements. If they did, one of the competitors would back down or they would join forces for a joint edition. This applied not

to new books but also to steady-sellers, though when books were in large and constant demand, they tended to be claimed by one printer in each major printing center.

After the War of 1812 the poems of Scott and Byron and later the Waverly novels were so popular in America that each new title was reprinted almost simultaneously in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, often within days of receipt of the first copy or even purloined advance sheets. At this hectic pace, no one could afford to wait and see if someone else had advertised the title, and courtesy of the trade went by the boards.³³ At this time the two largest reprinters were Carey & Lea in Philadelphia and the Harper Brothers in New York. The Harpers had got their start after the War of 1812 as book printers, but they were so entrepreneurial that they started to propose books to the trade instead of waiting for the booksellers to start the ball rolling. They would write to all the booksellers in and sometimes out of New York, saying ‘we propose to reprint such-and-such; how many copies will you take at the cost of paper and print?’ It was a short step from this to publishing. Because they united printing and publishing, which had been everywhere separated for a generation, they had an advantage in the race to reprint new books, sometimes printing and putting up in boards 1,000 copies of a new novel over a weekend. They also had an advantage because sailing time to New York was a day or two shorter than to Philadelphia, 50 miles up river, so they almost invariably got copies of the English editions first. Carey had to go to enormous lengths to be the first in these races, and to get his Philadelphia editions into the New York stores before the Harper editions appeared. Sometimes he resorted to buying all the seats on the overnight stage and filling them with books.³⁴

What was at stake in this race was no longer courtesy of the trade, though both pretended it was; more at stake was the prestige of the firm and the city. Whoever got a book out first would get all the first sales, both wholesale and retail, and so their imprint would be in stores all over the country in a matter of days. The runner-up would sell his edition but a bit more slowly, and he would get the leftovers, reorders or orders from more distant places that were slower to come in. Traditionally the Philadelphia trade had supplied the hinterland to the South and West, and Boston had supplied New England, while New York took what was in between. The Harpers destabilised this system every time they filled a bookseller's order from Worcester or Richmond.

The competition between New York and Philadelphia publishers was widely seen as so disrupting that a new mechanism of national trade cooperation and regulation was needed, some substitute for the book fairs of the previous generation. The book trade was changing in fundamental ways. Capital was now more often secured from banks, competition with imports was no longer a serious constraint, exchanges were no longer as common among publishers, and trade in general was more open and less protected. Whatever regulating mechanism arose, it would have to be compatible with these new terms.

A venue for such trade regulation emerged almost by accident in 1825 in the first of the so-called trade sales. Public auction sales of books were common, as many as ten a week in Philadelphia, and this in itself was a cause for concern because auctions tended to drive prices down and made it difficult to maintain standard retail prices. To establish a clear distinction between wholesale and retail price levels, and to preserve the very real benefits of auction sales to booksellers (providing a way to move excess stock, get books

into distant markets, and raise cash quickly) Henry Charles Carey had the idea of holding a sale open only to the trade, selling only multiple copies of books in sheets. His first trade sale was held in August 1824. He was the only consignor, but at a second sale in September 1825 ten other Philadelphia firms consigned, as well one each from Boston and New York. In the meantime New York had held its first trade sale in June, and by the late 1820s the pattern was set, semiannual fairs in Philadelphia and New York and annual fairs in Boston.

Trade sales were better than the book fairs with their endless exchanges and endorsements, for several reasons. They were actual sales for money, whereas exchanges just left the seller with more books to sell. Furthermore, exchanges were based solely on the retail price set perhaps arbitrarily by the publisher, whereas trade sales established a wholesale price that reflected a book's real value. It was also possible, indeed common for booksellers to buy at the sales without having consigned anything, whereas to exchange you needed to publish. This helped keep a balance between production and distribution, and over time it created a niche for a new type of bookseller who specialized in distributing to retail bookstores more efficiently than the large publishing houses.³⁵

Trade sales also reflected the changing geography of the books trade. As distribution to the interior improved, publishing capital was increasingly concentrated in the three main Eastern cities. The inland publishing houses that flourished became increasingly specialized: for example, Hartford, Conn. and Exeter, N.H. for high-quality bindings, Brattleboro, Vt. for cheap Bibles, Andover, Mass. for theological books. Country printers continued to print for city publishers, but now seldom published books of their own. The three main cities continued to control most of the trade in their respective regions, but after the Erie Canal reached Buffalo in 1825, the shape of those regions changed, New York

began to capture business from the Susquehanna and Ohio Valleys that previously had come to Philadelphia. Cut off from the interior, Boston stagnated as a publishing center. At least until the 1830s Philadelphia and New York battled it out, more or less evenly sharing the honors.

V. Technology and the cost of books

The reconfiguration of the book trade in the 1820s was mostly a matter of trade organization, but technological changes also played a role. New technology sometimes involved machinery but more often it consisted simply of changes in the division of labor and the materials used. In the 1820s and 1830s the most important technological innovations were in the realms of plate making, papermaking, binding, and printing.

The greatest concern of publishers was always to sell an edition quickly and get back the money they invested; but the lower price per copy afforded by large editions tempted publishers to over-produce, and so in reality it often took years for an edition to sell out. Even if the publisher did not lose money, his annual capital return would fall below the rate of interest he paid to the bank. During the worst of the book glut in 1813, Mathew Carey was among the first to see that the solution to this problem was small editions, which would ensure smaller initial investment in paper and print and a more rapid turnover, even if it increased the price per copy. In an *Address to the Booksellers* he wrote, "If a shoemaker or a hatter were to manufacture shoes or hats enough to answer the demand for three or four or five years hence, merely because each hat or pair of shoes would now cost a quarter or half a dollar less, than the time when they were likely to be sold, he would be regarded as insane."³⁶

Carey practiced what he preached by printing small editions of the Bible from standing type. In the 1820s the new technology of stereotype replaced standing type and allowed publishers to have it both ways, to print small editions and keep the price per copy down. Stereotypes were thin metal plates cast from regular type. Like standing type it allowed a publisher to print small editions, because once the type was cast into plates, reprints could be struck off with no further expense for composition or proofreading. For subsequent editions the production cost was lower and the cost per copy was the same no matter how many were printed.³⁷ However standing type required a massive investment in type, whereas stereotype plates were cheap to cast and used little metal. Stereotype still added to the cost of producing the first edition, but publishers soon got around that problem by the simple expedient of writing off the cost of stereotyping as a capital investment that would pay off in subsequent editions. Copyright was also viewed as a capital cost that could be depreciated over the life of the copyright. Thus when Carey & Lea calculated the costs of publishing Cooper's *The Prairie*, they added a note "Copyright & plates free of cost." Thus the first edition of a copyright, stereotype book sold for about the same price as if it had been a reprint printed the regular way; but the subsequent editions printed from the plates cost less to produce (and nothing for copyright). Later in the century, publishers would make these subsequent editions fantastically cheap, but at this stage, they sold for the same price as the first edition, and the extra profit was applied to the initial capital cost of copyright and plate making. Thus stereotype did not lower book prices but it reduced the size of the publisher's initial investment and it dramatically increased the profits on steady sellers.

The most expensive item in book production was paper, and here again the effect of technology on prices is hard to assess. The cylinder papermaking machine was introduced in America in 1817, but only in the 1830s did papermaking machinery become common enough to drive down the price of paper.³⁸ Even then hand mills could remain competitive by lowering wages and by using cheaper grades of rags whitened by bleaching, then a relatively new process. Paper was available in different grades and prices, ranging from \$3.00 to \$6.50 per ream in the 1820s. As John Bidwell has shown, as the price of paper began to fall in the 1830s, Carey & Lea kept their retail prices steady and simply began to use better paper.

Binding was next most expensive element in book production costs, and it was by far the most problematic part of the manufacturing process. In this period books were almost always retailed bound, but before the 1820s it was rare for an entire edition to be bound by the publisher at the time of publication. Instead the publisher would have just as many copies bound as were needed for immediate sales, often by a number of different binders, and the rest were warehoused in sheets or shipped that way to wholesale purchasers, who employed their own binders. This way the publisher avoided tying up capital in binding unnecessarily, and thus an edition could have many different types of binding and many different binders. Unfortunately every one of these binding transactions was another opportunity for problems to arise: plates or even whole sheets omitted or transposed, mismatched binding on sets, shortages of leather, endless misunderstandings and delays just at the critical moment before publication when the printed sheets were being made into books. Publishers might have preferred to have whole editions bound uniformly under their control at the time of publication, but the per copy cost of binding was about the

same for an edition of 5,000 as for 500. As long as there were no economies of scale, the publisher had to choose between the obvious economic advantages of binding only as sales were made, and the quality control advantage of having the whole edition bound under close supervision.

Up to the mid-1820s this dilemma was sometimes solved by having the whole edition bound not in leather but in a cheap temporary binding of paper-covered boards. This protected the books as they made their way through the trade from wholesaler to retailer, and it gave publishers more control over the timing of publication and the final appearance of the book. However, boards were flimsy and unattractive. Then in the mid-1820s colored muslin cloth began to be used in place of paper or leather over boards.³⁹ To make it more attractive, the cloth was soon available in a variety of colors, with dozens of different machine applied grains, and with free-form decorative designs in stamped blind or gilt. The variety and permutation of design elements suddenly was almost infinite.

Cloth bindings still had to be constructed one at a time by hand, however. Another technological innovation of the 1820s introduced economies of scale into bookbinding for the first time. Traditionally the book block was sewn onto cords, the cords were attached to the boards, and then the covering material was pasted over the whole. The "new technology" involved gluing the boards and spine piece onto the covering material and then pasting this so-called case onto the book block. The difference was simply that the cases could be pre-fabricated in assembly line fashion, while folding and sewing were done by another team, and the actual assembly by another. This division of labor allowed the employment of lower-waged workers in some operations. No new machinery was used, just a new organization of the work flow.

These two innovations, case binding and cloth, were introduced at about the same time and together they utterly transformed the outward appearance of books, and also the way they were sold, read, and preserved. All previous trade bindings had been drab and cheap looking. Now suddenly books were appearing in stores in every conceivable color with decorations stamped by machine in gold and blind. In the past book stores had looked much like libraries, with books arranged on the shelves in drab rows in whatever order suited the owner, who stood behind his counter and fetched what the customer asked for. These new bindings lent themselves to seductive, eye-catching display on counters and in the new bow-front shop windows that were appearing in fashionable shopping streets. It was the greatest innovation in book marketing since the colonial period. Cloth bindings did everything except make books cheaper. It was actually about the same price as boarding, around 12 cents a volume for Carey and Lea in the 1820s; though it was cheaper than most other permanent bindings.⁴⁰

Steam-powered printing presses were introduced in America as early as 1821, but they were mainly used for newspaper printing and seldom for quality book work. Carey and Lea had just three books printed on power presses before 1838. Changes in plate making, binding, and papermaking technologies transformed books and the book trade before power presses had a chance to make any impact.

It is generally assumed that technology made books cheaper, but that does not seem to have been the case before 1840. Considering the fact that consumer prices were halved between 1814 and 1840 while book prices remained relatively stable, the real cost of books may have actually gone up.⁴¹ Michael Winship's study of Trade Sales may

show that actual wholesale prices fluctuated widely, but at the retail level, before 1830, publishers managed to achieve their primary goal of keeping prices high.

¹ This paper is adapted from a chapter in the second volume of *A History of the Book in America*, to be published by North Carolina in 2007, for use in the seminar on the economic history of book publishing in America, Spring 2006.

² Warren McDougall, 'Charles Elliot's book adventure in Philadelphia, and the trouble with Thomas Dobson,' in *Light on the book trade: essays to Peter Isaac*, ed. Barry McKay et al., New Castle: Oak Knoll, 2003, 197-212. McDougall notes that on the same boat with Dobson was Samuel Campbell, who became an important bookseller in New York using the same business methods. His brother Robert Campbell followed him and settled in Philadelphia. Dobson finally settled his debt with Eliot's estate in 1805.

³ Vincent Kinane, "'Literary Food' for the American Market: Patrick Byrne's Exports to Mathew Carey," *Proc. AAS* 104 (1994), 321

⁴ The unique copy of this broadside is in the Library Company.

⁵ *The Evening Star*, Philadelphia, 30 October 1810, quoted in Charles L. Nichols, 'The literary fair in the United States,' *Bibliographical Essays: a tribute to Wilberforce Eames*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1924, p.84.

⁶ Byrne's 1802 *Catalogue of the Quire Stock of Books* lists books worth by a conservative estimate \$50,000 at retail. Some of the law books from Byrne's stock were still being sold by his successors in the 1830s.

⁷ Remer, *Printers and Men of Capital*, 55-65

⁸ Skeel, *Mason Locke Weems. 2:139-140*

⁹ Carey to Weems, October 18, 1800 ("I confess I am still undecided"); December 11, 1800 ("Had the project succeeded..."); February 4, 1801 ("I am again deliberating about printing the Bible"); February 24, 1801, Lea and Febiger Collection, HSP.

¹⁰ Andrews to Carey, June 27, 1802, describing their agreement to divide the sales of duodecimo Bibles, "Philadelphia to Mr. Carey, eastward of New York to Thomas & Andrews, New York, Baltimore, and southward of Baltimore, to be neutral ground, to be supplied by both parties." Lea and Febiger Papers, HSP.

¹¹ Hugh Gaine to Mathew Carey, September 7, 1801; Ebenezer T. Andrews to Carey, November 28 and December 12, 1802. Lea and Febiger Collection, HSP. Mathew Carey, *Autobiography*, 48

¹² Mathew Carey, *Address to the Printers and Booksellers throughout the United States* [Philadelphia, 1801].

¹³ Charles L. Nichols. "The Literary Fair in the United States, in *Bibliographic Essays, A Tribute to Wilberforce Eames*, ed. George Parker Winship and Lawrence C. Wroth (Cambridge, Mass., 1924).

¹⁴ Remer, *Printers and Men of Capital*, 115-124.

¹⁵ Carey, *Autobiography*, 50.

¹⁶ Anson Whipple to Isaiah Thomas, Thomas Papers, AAS, March 19, 1813

¹⁷ Account of sales, Walpole, July 25 to November 17, 1809, Thomas papers, Vol. IX, AAS.

¹⁸ Jack Larkin, "The Merriams of Brookfield: Printing in the economy and culture of rural Massachusetts in the early nineteenth century," *PAAS* 96:1 (April 1986): 39-74.

¹⁹ Anson Whipple to Isaiah Thomas, n.d. but with letters of 1812 Thomas Papers, AAS.

²⁰ Ebenezer T. Andrews to Isaiah Thomas, May 6, 1804; "Summary account of book stock and other property of Isaiah Thomas taken August 20th 1813:" which has a note reading "as the deductions have always been uniform in their account of stock ... they do not reduce the articles altogether to the standard of present wholesale prices," so a further 10% reduction is made. Volume IX, Isaiah Thomas Papers, AAS.

²¹ Ebenezer T. Andrews to Isaiah Thomas, January 22, 1802; May 10, 1802; January 1, 1806; May 31, 1810, Thomas Papers, AAS; Shipton, *Isaiah Thomas, 73-73*.

²² This was ascertained by collating half a dozen editions page by page and side by side.

²³ Carey, *Plans and Terms; To the Booksellers throughout the United States. Bible Warehouse* (Philadelphia: June 8, 1814). Some sources say Carey spent \$15,000 on type for the quarto Bible, e.g., *Biographies of successful merchants* (Philadelphia, 1864), 17.

²⁴ Thomas & Whipple, Newburyport to Carey, November 23, 1809, Lea and Febiger Collection, HSP.

²⁵ Andrews to Isaiah Thomas, May 3, 1810, Thomas Papers, AAS.

26. E. Jennifer Monaghan, *A Common Heritage: Webster's blue-back speller* (Hamden: Archon, 1983)

²⁷ Morse was unusually attentive to the financial aspects of his literary work. As his publisher Ebenezer Andrews wrote, Mr. Morse has the face to ask or do almost anything where money is concerned," Andrews to Isaiah Thomas, May 9, 1793, Thomas Papers, AAS.

28. In his first surviving stock list of 1794, Isaiah Thomas was already reckoning his copyrights as assets and not as expenses.

29. Robert Proud's 1797 *History of Pennsylvania* was published this way by Zachariah Poulson, a newspaper printer. Their

contract was politely and naively vague on who would be responsible if not enough copies were sold to cover the printer's costs. With 450 subscribers pledged to buy in advance, they felt secure. But before publication, he loaned the printer almost \$1,000 to pay for paper and wages, and once the book was published, the Friends objected to his portrayal of William Penn, and because of their disapproval, less than half the edition sold. The printer barely covered his costs and Proud never got his \$1,000 back. Robert Proud to Joseph Smith, February, 1797, and Proud's final account with Zachariah Poulson, 15 February 180, both in Proud papers, HSP.

30. John Bidwell, "The Publication of Joel Barlow's 'Columbiad,'" PAAS, 93:2 (1983): 337-380.

31. Massachusetts Historical Society, *Collections*, 5th series, vol. 3 (1877): 135-6, 278; Contracts between Thomas and Andrews and Jeremy Belknap, March 14, 1792 and December 20, 1793, Belknap papers, Massachusetts Historical Society.

32. Hannah Adams, *A Memoir of Miss Hannah Adams* (Boston, 1832), 15-21; Rollo Silver, "Three Eighteenth Century American Book Contracts," PBSA, vol. 47 (1953): 381-383; Silver, *American Printer*, 104 ff.

³³ Emily B. Todd, "Transatlantic Context: Walter Scott and Nineteenth-Century American Literary History," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1999; Peter X. Accardo, "Byron in America to 1830," *Harvard Library Bulletin*, NS 9:2 (1998); David Kaser *Messrs. Carey & Lea of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1957), chapter 6.

³⁴ Eugene Exman, *The Brothers Harper* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), chapter I.

³⁵ For example the Philadelphia booksellers Grigg, Elliott & Co. was said to have been the largest book wholesaling or jobbing business in the country in 1849, specialized in supplying booksellers in the South and West. Edwin T. Freedley, *Leading Pursuits and Leading Men* (Philadelphia, 1856), 77; and *The Manufactories and manufacturers of Pennsylvania in the nineteenth century* (Philadelphia, 1875), 258.

³⁶ Mathew Carey, *Address to the Booksellers of the United States, from the Booksellers' Company of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1813), 10.

³⁷ George A. Kubler, *A New History of Stereotyping* (New York: J. Little and Ives Co., 1941); Michael Winship, "Printing with Plates in the Nineteenth century," *Printing History* 5 (1983): 15-27; for an account of the difficulties encountered by early users of stereotype plates, see Rosalind Remer, "Capturing the Bard: an episode in the American publication of Shakespeare's plays, 1822-1851, PBSA 91:3 (1997): 327-338.

38. John Bidwell, "The Brandywine Paper Mill and the Anglo-American Book Trade, 1787-1837," D.Phil. diss., Oxford University, 1992, 309.

39. Exman claims the first American cloth was on a Harpers book of 1827, but the Library Company of Philadelphia has a copy in brown muslin of Thomas Moore's *Memoirs of the Life of... Sheridan* (Philadelphia: Carey & Lea, 1825) with an inscription on the front free endpaper (that is on a sheet connected to the binding, not the text block) dated December 1825.

40. In 1825 Carey & Lea typically paid 12 cents for "doing up in cloth" and 11 cents for boarding.

41. John J. McCusker, *How much is that in real money* (Worcester: American Anitquarian Society, 1992), 127. His composite consumer price index doubled from 1788 to 1814 and fell back to the 1788 level in 1840.