

The British Book in North America, 1695-1770

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Throughout the colonial period, most books read in America were British, as was to be expected in a mercantilist colonial system; however, in the first half of the eighteenth century, the London book trade paid little attention to the colonies. In the second half of the century the book trade awoke to the potential of the American market, just as it was slipping away.

In his *Autobiography* Benjamin Franklin recalled that

At the time I establish'd myself in Pennsylvania [i.e. in the 1720s], there was not a good Bookseller's Shop in any of the Colonies to the Southward of Boston. In New-York and Philadelphia the Printers were indeed Stationers, they sold only Paper, etc., Almanacs, Ballads, and a few common School Books. Those who lov'd Reading were oblig'd to send for their Books from England.¹

This passage highlights all the important features of American book culture at the beginning of the eighteenth century. First, nearly all the books in the colonies were British, and apart from the staples -- Franklin could have added Bibles, Testaments, and Psalters to the list -- most books were either brought in by immigrants or ordered from London by their readers. Very few gentlemen dealt directly with London booksellers, however; instead they used agents with whom they had personal acquaintance and credit, and who often had to act through other agents to locate, pay for, and ship the desired

¹Franklin 1986, p., 63.

books. Colonials without an agent in London had to find someone better connected at home who willing to vouch for them.²

Another feature highlighted by Franklin was the uniformity of the staple reading material available in all the colonies in the early eighteenth century. In most places, the book trade was indeed a subsidiary of the stationery business. If books were not an absolute necessity for a civil society, paper, ink, and quills were. For many people the most important British book was a blank account book. Every town and even most villages had a store that stocked stationery along with a wide variety of other imported merchandise, and where stores were absent, peddlers plied the roads. Books, if they were to be found at all, were part of this stock and they came from the same source: schoolbooks and almanacs from the Stationers' Company English Stock, and Bibles, Testaments, and Psalters from the King's Printer. Throughout the eighteenth century these accounted for the bulk of all book imports.³

For the most part these staple books were imported by merchants who exchanged American produce -- furs, tobacco, or sugar, depending on the colony -- for a long list of manufactured goods, with books and stationery always at the bottom. These merchants were used to giving the kind of long credit required by planters, because of the seasonal nature of their livelihood and because of the length and circuitous nature of ocean voyages; whereas most stationers and booksellers offered only six months to wholesale customers. That was barely enough time for the American merchant to receive the goods, much less sell them and collect money, assuming he gave credit to his customers in turn. The only proper book stores outside Boston in Franklin's youth were those kept by

² For the use of agents see Wolf 1974 and Raven 2002. For books immigrants brought with them, see Wolf 1988

³ Amory & Hall 2000 p.27 ff.

printers William Bradford in New York and his son Andrew in Philadelphia, who as Franklin observed, knew little more than ordinary merchants about importing books.

What, then, were the “good Booksellers” of Boston like? From the anecdotes of John Dunton we know that the trade in imported books was so lively in the 1680s that it was worth his while to make a journey across the ocean to cultivate his bookseller customers.⁴ The Boston booksellers sold a wide assortment of imported books by wholesale and retail, but more and more often -- from the 1680s on -- they also published books at their own risk or in partnership with others of their trade. When they published books, they put up all the capital and employed printers and binders as mere manufacturers. With a populace as literate as any on earth, and several clergymen who wrote more voluminously than all but a handful of English divines, the Boston booksellers had plenty of books to publish and plenty of readers to sell them to. What made the Boston stores ‘good’ from Franklin’s point of view, then, must have been their similarity to those of London, with a mix of imported books with books written and published locally.⁵ That the booksellers of Boston attempted to emulate their colleagues in London is perhaps not remarkable, but in no other colony was the book culture so deep that bookselling on such a scale could even be contemplated.

The early Boston booksellers who were active publishers were not deeply involved in importing books, or so the scanty evidence suggests. Where we have information about their stock, their own publications outnumber imported books. This is due partly to the simple fact that the books they published remained on their hands for years, whereas the books they imported were mostly single copies -- or at the most a

⁴ Dunton, J. 1818 *Life and Errors* London (first published 1705), p. 90-137.

⁵ For Boston bookshops generally, see Ford 1917; Littlefield 1900.

dozen of a popular title -- that sold quickly, even immediately if they were special ordered. The earliest surviving Boston bookstore stock list is the 1700 estate inventory of Michael Perry, who like most of the booksellers occupied a shop or stall measuring less than forty square feet under the Town House. His inventory consisted of some 191 titles, of which 28 are Boston imprints. If we count copies, however, local imprints outnumber imports seven to one, because he had hundreds of copies in sheets of titles in which he had a share.⁶ When Franklin left Boston in 1723 there were, judging from imprints in books they published, about ten booksellers in Boston. The most eminent of these was Daniel Henchman. His business papers survive, and they show that his printing and bookselling business was indeed very large, but he imported very little. When he wanted English books he bought them from other Boston booksellers, such as his son--in-law, Thomas Hancock.⁷

Hancock imported some of his books from the prominent bookseller Thomas Longman, that is until 1737, when another London bookseller, Thomas Cox, sent an agent to Boston with a consignment consisting of “eight trunks and a Box or too of Books.” This modest cargo was enough (if Hancock’s complaints to Longman are to be believed) to glut the largest book market in the colonies. But Hancock got only some of his books from Longman. He imported staple books along with stationery from a London paper merchant named Rowe. In 1736 he ordered from Rowe a thousand Bibles at 2/4 a copy “well bound in Calves Leather Claspt & with New England Psalms.” Even

⁶ Amory 1993, p. 31-60.

⁷ Amory and Hall 2000, p.319 ff.

in Boston, where there were plenty of booksellers, much of the book trade was in the hands of dry goods merchants.⁸

The records of book exports from England suggest that despite Boston's lively book publishing trade, the overwhelming majority of books owned by early eighteenth century New Englanders were imported. In the period 1701 to 1711, an annual average of about 7,500 pounds by weight of books was exported from London to New England.⁹ In that same decade on average seven bound books¹⁰ were published annually in Boston. If we assume editions of 750 copies and an average weight per book bound of half a pound (both surely on the high side), the annual average weight of locally produced books was about 2,600 pounds, about a third of imports. In the 1720s the average annual weight of imports more than doubled, but the number of bound books produced annually in Boston rose only by half. The proportion of imported books seems to have been increasing.¹¹

In other colonies the preponderance of imported books was still greater. Boston publications were seldom transported beyond Massachusetts Bay, and in Philadelphia and New York, the Bradfords only published a book every year or two. Yet the middle and southern colonies accounted for 44% of all North American book imports in the first

⁸ Baxter 1945, p. 41-42.

⁹ Barber 1976, p. 219.

¹⁰ By counting only books that were issued bound, I simply mean to exclude the pamphlets, broadsides, job printing, and newspapers that made up a large proportion of the output of the colonial press, but surely a very small part of the book exports noted in customs records. The count of imprints is based on the North American Imprints (NAIP) database, not counting imprint variants.

¹¹ Raven 1997, p.33 and Raven 2000, p. 183-187 demonstrate how problematic these figures are, but if anything they understate the total quantity of books exported. Amory in Amory and Hall 2000, p. 197-198 argues that because editions printed in the colonies were sold over many years and may not have sold at all, their numbers can not be directly compared with book imports. While this may be true, his complex calculations do not seem to change the general order of magnitude, which is what I am comparing here.

quarter of the eighteenth century.¹² Outside Boston, as Franklin observed, virtually all books were British.

Benjamin Franklin's move from Boston to Philadelphia in the 1720s was the first in a chain of events that led to a new organization of the book trades in all the colonies. He not only transformed Philadelphia from a scene of monopoly to one of intense competition, he also exported his entrepreneurial ideas to other colonies. Precisely because he understood too much competition was worse than too little, he encouraged his journeymen to move to other towns when it came time for them to set up business on their own. To prevent his protégés from becoming his competitors, he made them his partners, setting them up in business in half a dozen towns from New Haven to Antigua, wherever there was an opportunity to establish up a similar jack-of-all-the-book-trades business. Thus, by 1750 most of the printers in the middle and southern colonies were either protégés of Franklin's or emulators of his way of doing business.¹³ Meanwhile the generation of Boston booksellers that flourished during the Puritan ascendancy was dying off, along with many of the prolific divines who had kept them so well employed. By 1750 almost all the book publishing and importing was in the hands of printers, and the London-style bookseller who employed printers as mere manufacturers was a thing of the past.¹⁴

The early Boston booksellers very seldom expended their capital in printing their own editions of books they could get at less risk, in smaller quantities and in greater variety from London. The new generation of printer-booksellers was somewhat less reluctant to attempt to compete with imports. This trend may have been accelerated by

¹² Barber 1945, p.41-42

¹³ Green, 'Age of Franklin,' p. 270 ff.

¹⁴Thomas 1970, p.213.

the lapse of licensing in England and the passage of the copyright act of 1709, which established the author's right to literary property but also set limits to it. The copyright act was never enforced abroad, but nevertheless most American printers appear to have observed its spirit if not its letter. The reprinting of English properties at first happened only sporadically and often in circumstances where copyright status was in doubt. For example, the first American edition of the Brady and Tate Psalms was printed in New York by William Bradford in 1706 as part of a Book of Common Prayer commissioned by Trinity Church, with Queen Ann's license facing the title page. It was reissued in 1710, just after the copyright act was passed, and thereafter the metrical Psalms were reprinted freely in America.¹⁵ However, the English Bible and its parts were not reprinted openly, presumably because the patent that reserved it to the King's Printer was more respected than the statutory law of copyright. Simple economics must also have played a role, however; if Bibles could be imported from London for 2/4 per copy well bound with clasps, it is difficult to see how an American printer could beat that price. It is also doubtful that colonial buyers would have chosen an American edition of unproved accuracy over an authorized printing supposedly free of errors and unorthodox interpolations. Despite all these inhibitions to printing the Bible in the colonies, several editions appear to have been printed, though no copies have been located. They presumably had false London imprints that headed off the threat of prosecution and any suspicion of textual unreliability.¹⁶

It is sometimes difficult to know why some British properties were reprinted in the colonies and others were not. Some seventeenth century staples, such as Baxter's

¹⁵ McAnear 1949, p. 101-110.

¹⁶ For Franklin's ca. 1745 New Testament see Miller 1974, no.368. Thomas 1970 claimed a Bible and a New Testament were printed in Boston in about 1750, p.103.

Call to the Unconverted and Bunyan's *Saint's Everlasting Rest* may have been presumed in the public domain.¹⁷ Books first published shortly before the copyright law was enacted seem to have been considered fair game as well, such as Jabez Earle's *Sacramental Exercises*,¹⁸ and Robert Russel's *Seven Sermons*.¹⁹ American publishers may have felt that copyright died with an author. Popular devotional works by Matthew Henry and Elizabeth Rowe began to be reprinted a year or two after their deaths in 1714 and 1737 respectively. Pope's *Essay on Man* was first printed in America in 1747, three years after his death. In other cases the publisher's disregard for the law was flagrant, as with Franklin's edition of Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (2 volumes, 1742-1743).

At the mid-point of the eighteenth century, most colonial printers were native to America, and had no direct knowledge of or family ties to the book trade in London. Bookselling was only a sideline for them, but an expanding one, and their lack of personal contacts in the London trade was an increasing handicap. By the same token the London booksellers paid little attention to the colonial trade, much of which was in the hands of merchants anyway. They offered the same discounts and credit terms as they gave their provincial customers, and those terms made the business unattractive to colonial printers. Without knowing the printers, or even the men who endorsed their bills of exchange, the London booksellers saw no reason to take an extra risk. The difficulty of dealing with London booksellers affected the calculus of risk and reward that led some printers to reprint their own editions of popular English books. This state of affairs began to change after 1750, and once again Franklin played an important role.

¹⁷ First published London, 1707, reprinted Boston, 1715, 1725, 1729, and 1756.

¹⁸ First published London, 1708, reprinted in Boston, 1715, 1725, and 1729.

¹⁹ First published in London in the 1690s, but after 1709 published in London by T. Norris; Boston 1705, 1706, 1715, 1718.

The first sustained and profitable relationship between a London bookseller and an American printer-bookseller was William Strahan's with Franklin. Part of the reason it worked was that they were both printers -- Strahan was the only London printer who was also a major bookseller and copyright owner -- and both held lofty views of their profession and its power to make a better world. Even though they did not meet for years, they developed a warm epistolary friendship. The human link between the two men was David Hall, a journeyman of Strahan's whom he loved as a brother. Hall came over in 1744 to be Franklin's foreman, and the two men got on so well that when Franklin retired in 1748 he made Hall his partner. According to the terms of their partnership agreement, Hall was to share the profits on printing, but whatever he made by bookselling was his alone. When Hall took over Franklin's book stock, it was valued at only £681, but from then until his death in 1772, he imported over £30,000 worth of books and stationery from Strahan, plus some 20,000 Bibles and 3 tons of books from Strahan's Edinburgh friends Hamilton and Balfour. Whereas Franklin had occasionally reprinted English properties, including *Pamela* and a number of Psalters, Hall never did. He was lukewarm in his opposition to the Stamp Act, which all the other printers strongly opposed, and when the non-importation movement began in the late 1760s, he was the only Philadelphia printer who was not a supporter. Though he carried on Franklin's printing office, both his talent and his financial interest kept him focused on bookselling. He was by far the largest book importer of the colonial period.²⁰

Not long after David Hall took over his bookshop, Franklin wrote to Strahan that Thomas Osborne was 'endeavoring to open a Correspondence in the Plantations for the Sale of his Books'. Osborne had sent parcels to Franklin's protégés in Philadelphia, New

²⁰ Green 2000, p.276-279; Harlan 1966, p.1-14; Harlan 1976, p.355-70.

York, and Williamsburg, and having seen two of the invoices, Franklin thought the books ‘very high charg’d’.²¹ This marks the beginning of an ever-increasing interest on the part of the London trade in the American market. At issue was not only the invoiced prices of the books, but also the discount and the time allowed for payment. Some exporters invoiced the books at the full London retail price; others allowed a small discount, perhaps 6%, which barely covered the cost of transport and insurance. In the middle colonies it was normal for the importer to set his retail price in local currency at twice the sterling invoice price. Since local currency was worth about two-thirds sterling, this rule of thumb allowed for a small profit to the importer, and left room for a discount on copies sold wholesale.²² Thus, the Americans were eager to do business with anyone who offered lower invoice prices.

In 1755 David Hall learned that the Williamsburg bookseller William Hunter was buying books from the London bookseller James Rivington at a discount of 16% off the London retail prices, plus a year's credit and the privilege of returning unsold books. The discount alone brought the price below what Strahan himself paid at wholesale. Strahan explained to Hall how Rivington was able to offer these unheard-of terms. First, he hired low-paid printers in the provinces and in Scotland to pirate all the most popular literary properties, using inferior paper in smaller formats. Second, he marked down a few of the most popular books as loss leaders; on less popular books his prices were actually higher than usual. Third, he sent without order many old, unsalable books, which Strahan called ‘books of no price’ or ‘waste paper books,’ which he got for little or nothing. Strahan believed Rivington was exporting more than all the other London booksellers together. He

²¹ Benjamin Franklin to William Strahan, 19 October 1748, *Papers of Benjamin Franklin* 3, p. 322.

²² Green 2000 pp. 265, 282, note 37 on p.575-6.

reported that ‘the Booksellers are about contriving some Plan, by which they will make a difference in the Price of those Books that are sold to go abroad, and those for Home Consumption, in order to save the Trade to America from falling into the Hands of a Man who will stick at nothing to accomplish his Designs’. By his unorthodox methods, Rivington drove the London trade for the first time to adjust its export terms to make the business worthwhile to American booksellers.²³

Then in 1760 Rivington emigrated to America, opening shops in New York, Philadelphia, and Boston. He proclaimed in advertisements that he was “the only London book-seller in America,” and indeed publishers were sending him books as soon as they were published, without waiting for specific orders. While David Hall never listed more than a dozen novels in his catalogues, Rivington's 1762 catalog listed 782 “Books of Entertainment, &c.,” and the entry for Rousseau's *Nouvelle Heloise* included an 11-page extract from the preface that was in effect a primer on how to read a novel. Best of all, his prices were low, almost as low as in London. He announced that he was better acquainted with the prices and characters of books than any American bookseller, that the booksellers of America did not know how to deal with the London trade, and that their customers were being robbed as a result. The high point of his American career was his 1768 edition of the poems of Charles Churchill, sold by subscription. He secured 2,200 subscribers from all over the colonies, though primarily from Virginia, Maryland, and the West Indies. He had intended to reprint the book in America, and had he done so it would have been the first time a new and valuable property had been pirated there. (Churchill's copyrights were rumored to be worth £3,000.) In the end, he imported an entire authorized edition (the

²³. Cochrane, *Dr. Johnson's Printer*, 80-87; Stiverson 1983, p.154-58.

third) in sheets and bound them in blue boards, with a list of the American subscribers and a title page with the imprint “Printed in the Year 1768.”²⁴ This was yet another example of Rivington doing business in America as if he were in London. At least since Michael Perry’s time, the general practice of American booksellers was to import their books already bound, usually in plain trade bindings of calf or sheep.²⁵ At about the same time, Robert Bell, a Scot recently arrived in Philadelphia, began pirating valuable London properties in earnest. By means of a continental subscription campaign he published Robertson’s *History of the Reign of Charles V* in three volumes octavo (1770) and Blackstone’s *Commentaries on the Laws of England* in four volumes octavo (1771-1772). American and English literary culture had never been so close.²⁶

Historians have argued that the closer the colonies came to breaking with England, the closer they came culturally; and the expansion of the book trade with America in the second half of the century bears this out.²⁷ Until 1748 (the year Hall took over Franklin’s book shop) the growth in book imports roughly kept pace with the increase in population of the colonies. Over the next twenty years, however, annual imports rose fourfold, from about 35,000 pounds in 1748 to almost 140,000 pounds in 1768, while the population increased by only 80%. In the final seven years of trade before the Revolution, imports averaged 165,000 pounds with a high of over 230,000 pounds in each of the years 1771 and

²⁴ Hewlett 1966 p. 165-93; Botein 1983, p.73-81.

²⁵ Many American booksellers imported books ready bound, including Michael Perry (Amory 1993), William Hunter (Stiverson 1983, p.145), and David Hall (Harlan 1966, p.6). Reilly 1983, p.88 and 105, claimed Jeremy Condy imported books in sheets, but all the binding accounts in his account book at the American Antiquarian Society are for his own publications. Bennett 2004 argues that in the eighteenth century most books were retailed already bound in England.

²⁶ Green 2000, p. 282-291.

²⁷ Greene 1988, chapter 8 sums up this argument

1772.²⁸ By then more books were exported from England to the American colonies than to Europe and all the rest of the world combined, with exports to America accounting for 5% of the total English annual book production.²⁹ In 1772, 39 bound books were published in the colonies. Allowing an average of a pound weight per volume (these include several folio law books) and estimating the average edition at 750, the total would have weighed 29,250 pounds, an eighth of the weight of imports that year. Though rough, these figures suggest that even as American book production increased over the course of the colonial period, the quantity of books imported grew faster and was never at any point exceeded by native production.³⁰ Books in colonial America were overwhelmingly British.

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²⁸Imports from Scotland added at least another 10,000 pounds a year from 1743-1757. See McDougall 1988, p.16-17, and McDougall 1990.

²⁹ Barber 1976, p.223-4. Raven 2000, p.183-4.

³⁰ Imprint statistics from the North American Imprints (NAIP) database.

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