

THE STATE OF THE ISSUE¹

THE SCOPE FOR PUFFING in the world of books is limited only by the imagination of the puffer and the willingness of the customer to be persuaded by the puffer's claims. In general usage 'puffery' (or 'puffing') may be defined as a form of advertising in which inflated or fanciful claims are made for the object being offered for sale. In the world of books it refers specifically to the various devices employed by booksellers to promote their wares — other than, or in addition to, the provision of information. One such device, illustrated by Dr J. McL. Emmerson in these pages,² may be reduced to the following syllogism: since a particular publication is not to be found in a particular bibliography or catalogue ('Not in Wing/STC/Gaskell . . .') or is not held by a particular library ('Not in Bodleian/BN/Mitchell . . .') it is therefore rare and consequently desirable to the extent that it warrants an enhanced asking price. Dr Emmerson's example was *The Lady's New-Years Gift: or, Advice to a Daughter*, by George Savile, Marquis of Halifax, first published in 1688 but here offered in the ninth edition (1716) at US\$1250. What made this in the bookseller's eyes 'the rare ninth edition' was the fact that no exemplar was to be found in the British Library, but — as Dr Emmerson pointed out — many reasons could be adduced why this particular edition of the *Advice to a Daughter* (or, for that matter, any other publication) is not in the British Library's collections, and its absence there has no necessary bearing on its rarity. Many imponderables are involved in establishing the rarity of the various editions of *Advice to a Daughter*, but on the basis of Wing (for pre-1701 editions: the sixth was published in 1699) and the *National Union Catalog* (NUC) it does seem that after the first three editions (all dated 1688) subsequent editions are indeed uncommon. Nonetheless (*pace* the bookseller's claims) one could just as readily argue that the ninth edition — far from being 'the rare' — is the most common of eighteenth-century editions, for NUC reports two exemplars of it, as opposed to none of the seventh, eighth, twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth and only one of the tenth (1724), eleventh (1734) and fifteenth (1765). Which is just to show what can be done by the selective use of evidence.

If true, the claim 'not in' is in itself objective and unobjectionable; what is objectionable is the possible equation of that rarity (real or supposed) with desirability and monetary value. But, it might fairly be countered, the claim is there for discerning readers to assess the merits of for themselves in the light of the bibliography, catalogue or library in which the item in question is not to be found.

My own concern, however, is with what I regard as a more insidious form of puffery, which — in that it employs the terminology and argument of analytical and descriptive bibliography — is much less likely to be capable of assessment, even by discerning readers. The specific device that concerns me may be reduced to the following syllogism: if certain exemplars from within an edition exhibit a characteristic which proves them to have been printed earlier than the remaining exemplars those earlier exemplars are the more desirable. This device appeals to what John Carter refers to as 'the chronological obsession': '. . . many collectors and booksellers and bibliographers have allowed their zealous preoccupation with the minutiae of priority to become an obsession.'³ Such an attachment to the first among firsts (for it is generally applied to first editions) is understandable where the circumstances of production provide warrant for the assignment of priority, but where no warrant exists the attachment — if

informed — is merely sentimental. On the other hand the attachment may be uninformed: it may depend on an ignorance of the mechanics of production at specific periods in the history of the book. One form of puffery is calculated to appeal to, or to take advantage of, that ignorance.

What has prompted this disquisition is the appearance in Pickering & Chatto's List 85, 'Samuel Johnson: his circle and his age' (October 1987) of four exemplars (items 146-149) of the first edition of Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson* (2 vols, 1791), two described as 'FIRST EDITION, FIRST ISSUE', two as 'FIRST EDITION, *second issue*' — a nice typographical distinction, incidentally. The categorization rests on the couplet quoted on S4^r (p.135) of vol.I, which in the 'first issue' reads:

"Short, O short then be thy reign,
"And gve us to the world again!"

In the 'second issue' 'gve' is corrected to 'give'. That the former is indeed the earlier reading has been known since at least 1929, when F.A. Pottle reported that

There can be little doubt that 'gve' is the earlier state. The proof shows the word correctly spelled, but the lines are punctuated as follows:

'Short, O short! then be thy reign,
And give us to the world again.'

Boswell passed this in the proof, but in the revise (both proof and revise are in the possession of Mr. Adam) he directed the printer to remove the exclamation point in the first line and substitute it for the period at the end of the second, which is in fact the punctuation of the printed text. When the changes were made the 'i' dropped out, and the printer, not noticing what had happened, filled up the line by inserting a space between 'gve' and 'us'. After a considerable part of the edition had been printed, the error was discovered and corrected in the press.⁴

What the Pickering & Chatto cataloguer has done is to transfer the priority of reading on vol.I, S4^r to the publication as a whole and to designate it 'first issue'. His next step is to introduce collateral evidence and bibliographical reasoning to confirm that designation.

Item 146 — the first exemplar of the 'first issue' — bears the ownership stamp of the British Museum, along with the stamp indicating that it was disposed of in 1818 as part of the sale of duplicates. The cataloguer begins with the slightly guarded note that 'This seems to be the original British Museum copyright deposit copy', a conclusion which, on the evidence of the colour of the ownership stamp — blue, 'usually, though not invariably, employed for copyright accessions' — appears not unreasonable, even though one might wonder whether this was the practice in the early 1790s and — given the attitude of booksellers/publishers to their responsibilities before the Copyright Act of 1842 — whether Boswell's *Life* was in fact deposited. But he then concludes that

The bibliographical implications of the rediscovery of this copy are most interesting, since, being the copyright copy, and therefore very likely the earlier of the two known published issues of the

books, it confirms what Pottle and other bibliographers have always assumed: that the issue with 'gve' for 'give' in line 10 of volume I, p.135, is the first.

For the record, Pottle did *not* refer to 'issues' of Boswell's *Life*; nor did he *assume* that the 'gve' reading was the earlier — he *showed* it to be so. Perhaps the cataloguer should have heeded Pottle's observation that 'The booksellers have given this rather uninteresting 'point' more attention than it deserves.'⁵ Certainly the implications inherent in the misprint are minimal: any reader or editor faced with 'gve' would not hesitate to restore the 'i', even if ignorant of the existence of the corrected reading in other exemplars. Not to put too fine a point on it, the argument embodied in the catalogue entry is a load of old cobblers.

I have suggested that this example of puffing misuses the terminology and argument of analytical and descriptive bibliography and — consciously or unconsciously — takes advantage of an ignorance of the mechanics of book production. In books printed by hand on a flat-bed press (i.e. all books printed before the early nineteenth century) the number of pages which can be printed at any one time is limited to those making up one side of a sheet (i.e. a 'forme'), since only one side of a sheet can be printed in any one operation. In other words the actual printing of a book requires as many operations as there are formes (or twice as many operations as there are sheets). Certainly this is a simplification, but it holds true of the vast majority of books, including Boswell's *Life*, which is a straightforward quarto gathered in fours, comprising (if the seven leaves cancelled are ignored) 141½ sheets or 283 formes, each printed as a separate operation and producing four pages. To allow the 'gve'/'give' variation to be seen in its proper light we might consider the consequences of more extensive variation. During any of the 283 operations a variation (or set of variations) could have been created, by design or chance; if variations occurred in every forme the number of possible combinations of formes in bound-up sets of sheets would be an effectively incalculable 2^{283} . Even if variations occurred in only 11 formes the number of possible combinations would still be 2^{11} , or 2048, a number which exceeds the edition total of 1750. Of course the computation is made much more complex by the unknowable ratio of earlier to later stages of variations within individual formes, but the example at least illustrates the scale of the potential problem. In the course of printing it would be a matter of chance if formes with earlier readings were backed with formes also containing earlier readings; in the course of putting together sets of sheets ready for binding it would be a matter of chance if — assuming that such combinations existed — any particular collection of sheets contained them all with earlier readings in both formes. In other words, in a book in which variations have been introduced in the course of printing, the bound-up volumes contain a chance assemblage of sheets; in practice such volumes are normally found to contain random combinations of variant formes. That the copyright deposit exemplar of Boswell's *Life* contains the earlier reading of the inner form of sheet S in vol.I is a matter of chance and has no bearing whatsoever on the earliness of the volume as a whole, even where there is, as here, only one *reported* variation in the whole text (Pottle drew attention to places where other variants might be expected to be found).⁶ For, to repeat, Boswell's *Life* was printed not as one unit but as 283.

If the argument is — to put it most charitably — misinformed, the terminology employed ('issue') is wilfully misleading. John Carter had a word for booksellers (*et al.*) of this ilk: 'issue-mongers'. And a trenchant description:

The issue-monger is one of the worst pests of the collecting world, and the more dangerous because many humble and well-intentioned collectors think him a hero to whom they should be grateful. He may be a bibliographer (usually the self-styled type), or a bookseller, or a collector, and his power for harm may be rated in that order. He is an honours graduate of what Lathrop Harper called 'the fly-spot school of bibliography'. He is the man who, if he cannot construct a bogus POINT out of some minute variation he himself has discovered between two copies of a book, will pervert the observations of others to the same purpose. Show him a MISPRINT or a DROPPED NUMERAL, and he will whip you up an 'issue-point' in no time . . .

His natural and unlamented prey are the POINT-MANIACS. But unfortunately his more numerous victims are those collectors credulous enough to accept anything they see in print or hear declaimed with sufficient assurance.⁷

In the classification of hand-printed books there is general acceptance that an 'edition' comprises all exemplars printed, at whatever time, from the same setting of type. Within an edition variations of one kind or another may occur, and these variations are variously categorized as 'issues' or 'states'. In an older school of bibliography represented by John Carter the distinction is solely temporal:

When alterations, corrections, additions or excisions are effected in a book during the process of manufacture, so that copies exhibiting variations go on sale on publication day indiscriminately, these variant copies are conveniently classified as belonging to different *states* of the edition . . .

When similar variations can be clearly shown to have originated in some action taken after the book was published, two (or more) *issues* are distinguishable. ('Issues and States')

Carter goes on to admit that 'It is, of course, perfectly possible for different issues and different states to co-exist within an edition.' But, as the discussion of the random binding up of variant formes has shown, it is logically impossible to apply the term 'state' to the edition as a whole; the fact that in Boswell's *Life* only one forme is variant does not alter the situation. In any case, it might be difficult to assign priority to the variants: without the evidence of the revise the spacing in Boswell's *Life* might suggest that 'gve' was the later reading.

The 'modern' school of bibliography — represented by Bowers — takes account of the nature of the variations, as well as their temporal relationships, and employs 'issue' and 'state' hierarchically. Thus an issue comprises all exemplars of the edition put on sale at any time as a consciously-planned unit; generally issues take the form of *re-issues*, where the original title leaves have been replaced by new ones (a) reflecting changes in the distribution arrangements (in the main a new bookseller); (b) rejuvenating the publication by changing the imprint date; or (c) even changing the title itself. Bowers is unduly restrictive in refusing to admit simultaneous issues except

in very special instances, and there are certainly ambiguous instances; nonetheless, it is accepted by adherents to this school that 'issue' can apply only to the publication as a whole. Clearly the 'gve' reading cannot create an issue since it does not identify a consciously-planned unit within the edition. Variations of the 'gve'/'give' kind — whether created intentionally (a correction) or unintentionally (an accident) — are to be regarded as states, of the word itself or of the line, page or forme in which they appear, but not of any larger element (sheet or volume), since the 'forme' is the unit of printing. Our 'gve' is no more than an accident, corrected at press; had the correction been made after printing off (by cancelling the leaf or by pasting a revised slip over the offending passage) the effect would still be the same: not an issue but a state, the correction being merely a belated attempt to create an 'ideal copy'.

In nobody's language — except the present cataloguer's — would 'gve'/'give' constitute issues. Even Carter would not allow that 'variations of state . . . ha[ve] any bearing on the question of priority of issue.' What cannot be determined is whether the cataloguer's puffing has had any impact on potential customers — whether, for instance, any collector/librarian has been persuaded to acquire the 'first issue' on the strength of already owning only a mere 'second issue'. It would be nice to think not, to believe that no collector/librarian could be taken in by such patent nonsense; but such a faith, I suggest, would be misplaced. Booksellers' idiosyncratic usages cannot simply be dismissed, as Bowers would do:

We may, I think, quite remove from our minds the terminology used in some booksellers' catalogues, where commercial considerations often lead to puffing up any variant . . . by the magic word "issue."⁸

Nor, I think, can we seriously consider accepting the 'traditional' distinctions espoused by cataloguers and supported by Dunkin in one of his defences of the cataloguer against the 'intricate philosophical distinctions' of the bibliographer:

To the cataloguer the differences between books are simply differences; they are not changes made by any particular person for any particular reason at any particular time in the history of the book's production and sale. He finds in books two kinds of differences: (1) differences which set apart a group of books from other groups of books, and (2) differences which set apart a particular book from all other books in the group to which it belongs. A setting of type is a difference of the first kind; it sets apart one "edition" from another. Within the major group called an "edition" there may be smaller groups marked by title-page differences and/or additions and/or cancellations in any part of the book. What he calls these sub-groups does not matter to him greatly, but he generally calls them "issues." Press corrections are differences of the second type. The cataloguer normally ignores them, but when he calls the book they set apart anything it is usually "state" or "variant."⁹

To be sure, 'anr. issue' may be a convenient shorthand in catalogues to indicate that the entry differs in some way or other from the preceding (most often in having a variant imprint), but in extended discussion, forty years on, the hierarchical system is to be recommended as the *lingua franca* for collectors, booksellers, librarians and

bibliographers alike: it is logical and precise and is based on the technology of book production. If such a view is accepted it follows, I think, that a knowledge of physical bibliography should be a basic element in the armamentarium of all four groups. Sadly, perhaps, bibliographers are often seen not as colleagues but as enemies speaking an argot at odds with accepted usage, their proselytizing therefore to be resisted.

What then should intending purchasers have done in the present instance, when the asking prices were US\$12500, \$4500, \$4500 and \$950 respectively? The fourth figure – in relation to the third – is accounted for by the condition of the set, which is described as a ‘working copy’. The third – in relation to the second – is probably accounted for by condition and provenance, though the statement of pagination implies that gatherings [#]A and [#]B in vol.I are missing; the description is confusing because the cataloguer appears not to understand the principle of ‘ideal copy’. The first – in relation to the second – is to be accounted for by the British Museum provenance, which earns a premium of 177%. Prospective buyers who already own one of the two issues need not have worried about acquiring the other, since all four exemplars are from the sole issue of the first edition. Anyone determined to acquire an exemplar of Boswell’s *Life* from List 85 might well have been advised to opt for the third.¹⁰

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NOTES

1. With apologies to the late P.S. Dunkin, whose article with the same title appeared in *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 42 (1948), 239-55; much of the content of the article is repeated in *Bibliography: Tiger or Fat Cat?* (London: Bingley, 1975), especially pp.14-18. The 1948 article was written in response to Fredson Bowers, ‘Criteria for classifying hand-printed books as issues and variant states’, *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* 41 (1947), 271-92; in turn, the distinctions set out in the article are elaborated on in *Principles of Bibliographical Description* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 1949), chapter 2, ‘Hand-printed books: edition, issue, and state; ideal copy’ (pp.37-123).
2. J. McL. Emmerson, ‘The rare ninth edition’, *Bibliographical Society of Australia and New Zealand Bulletin* 8 (1984), 215-18.
3. John Carter, *ABC for Book Collectors*, 6th ed., with corrections and additions by Nicolas Barker (London: Granada, 1980), s.v. ‘The Chronological Obsession’.
4. Frederick Albert Pottle, *The Literary Career of James Boswell, Esq., Being the Bibliographical Materials for a Life of Boswell* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1929), p.151.
5. The same conclusion was reached – apparently independently – by George H. Sargent in ‘Firsts, issues and points’, *The Colophon* Part 1 (1930), p.[5]: ‘At any rate, the point is not now considered important by collectors.’ (Sargent concludes that ‘the “gve” copies may have been second issues, the “i” having dropped out in the printing.’)
6. Sets in the Monash and Melbourne University Libraries both agree completely in containing all the errors listed by Pottle and in having none of the errata corrected.
7. Carter, *ABC*, s.v. ‘Issue-Mongers’.
8. Bowers, ‘Criteria’, p.272, fn.1.
9. Dunkin, ‘The state of the issue’, p.254.
10. If Pottle is correct – ‘After a *considerable part* of the edition had been printed, the error was discovered and corrected in the press.’ [my italics] – the ‘second issue’ may in fact be the rarer. Certainly the Monash and Melbourne University sets are both from the ‘first issue’, though (again according to Pottle) ‘Of the four copies in the British Museum, two have one reading and two the other.’

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