

TOWARDS A HISTORY OF THE BOOK IN NEW ZEALAND

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ALL OF A SUDDEN, in our southern spring, little groups of people throughout the length of New Zealand have started discussing proposals for a new national literary project: 'A History of the Book in New Zealand'. They are speaking of it not only as desirable, but as something achievable, perhaps even by the year 2000. They recognise it as an idea whose time has come to be translated into action. The last brave attempt at even a narrowly conceived history of printing in New Zealand was only partially successful. This was the centennial volume *A History of Printing in New Zealand 1830-1940*, and much has happened since then. Those familiar with developments overseas may have wondered why we should have waited so long.

In Australia, firm proposals, much deliberated and admirably wide in scope (taking in 'all aspects of print culture'), but not yet blessed by financial support, aim for publication around the year 2001. (This marks the centenary of the Australian Federation. The comparable New Zealand occasion in 2007 seems too remote to be a useful target.) In the United States of America the American Antiquarian Society's Program in the History of the Book in American Culture was formally established in 1983. Major funding has come from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Sponsored activities – conferences and the like – are designed to lead to a multi-volume publication. Across the Atlantic, the British have also been active since the mid 1980s. Funding for basic research, granted by the Leverhulme Trust, is being administered by the British Academy. Publication of *A History of the Book in Britain*, in seven volumes, under the general editorship of D.F. McKenzie, David McKitterick and Ian Willison, has been agreed with the Cambridge University Press.

On the Continent of Europe similar projects are reported in Germany, Holland, Italy and Spain. The French, however, were first in the field. Their *Histoire de l'édition française*, in four massive volumes, was published between 1982 and 1986. The very term *histoire du livre* and its connotations are French in origin. As with other now indispensable words – 'civilisation' for instance – early uses of the term were little remarked. Lucien Febvre back in 1952 protested 'l'histoire du livre, terra incognita!' Even then there were plenty of excellent particular studies of books and printing and publishing, but these, as Febvre rightly complained, all too rarely flowed into the main stream of economic, intellectual, and social history. Such studies tended to remain the preserve of specialists. The master's own long-meditated work in this new kind, completed after his death by his disciple Henri-Jean Martin, came out in 1958 as *L'Apparition du livre*. Its English title of 1976, *The Coming of the Book: the Impact of Printing 1450-1800* better suggested its broad sweep of inquiry and the over-riding

concern with the socio-economic effects of printing long associated with the *Annales* school (or approach) to history. It was not until the late 1970s, as I remember, that the term *histoire du livre*, regularly translated as 'the history of the book', began to appear frequently in bibliographical journals in English. Especially worthy of mention is the long article by Wallace Kirsop in the *Australian Journal of French Studies*: 'Literary History and Book Trade History: the Lessons of *L'Apparition du livre*' (vol.16, parts 5-6, 1979, pp.488-535). Now, in the 1990s, the history of the book is confidently annexing academic terrain closer to the centres of scholarly action, where bibliography so called never quite attained.

In 1992 Professor D.F. McKenzie, a prime promoter of the British project and author of *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts* (the Panizzi Lectures 1985) (1986), rounded off the celebratory volume for the Bibliographical Society, *The Book Encompassed: Studies in Twentieth-Century Bibliography*, ed. Peter Davison, with an essay quite naturally entitled 'History of the book'. This emergence of an integrated discipline into open view is the subject of the leading article in the 14 July 1993 issue of the *American Chronicle of Higher Education*. It is entitled 'History of Books'. (One regrets the failure to render the abstraction implied by the definite article of *le livre*, admittedly more comfortably expressed in French. In the body of the article the somewhat preferable short-hand 'book history' is used.) The reporter lists a number of new American initiatives. The English Department at the University of South Carolina, for instance, 'has just started a new Ph.D. minor in book history'. Doubtless, the New Zealander Dr. Trevor Howard-Hill is involved. Pennsylvania State University has set up a new interdisciplinary Center for the History of the Book, and the Pennsylvania State University Press has started a series on the topic. Many of the projects mentioned were already familiar to me. The significant thing was to find them general news. I had read this article in Boston, where, intent on my current project ('Samuel Richardson, of London, printer'), I only wished that there could be more such activity back home in New Zealand.

On 24 August, at Paekakariki, my thinking changed. There beside the sea, in full view of Te Rauparaha's stronghold on Kapiti Island, Don McKenzie challenged four fellow New Zealanders, Brian Opie and John Thomson of Victoria University of Wellington, John Ross of Massey University of Manawatu, and myself, to embark on a history of the book for New Zealand – in company with others, I hasten to add. Don reminded us that ours too is a print culture. Early missionaries brought the New Testament to the Maori, who accepted it with fervour and went on to use the printing press for other ends. Settlers from Europe brought their libraries and founded others. Newspapers with their flow of information gave life-blood to the new communities. The list of topics for consideration and exploration seemed unending. I thought for instance of the early Athenaeums, which had served both as public libraries and as newspaper reading rooms throughout Otago, the further study of which I had

long postponed; also of my still rudimentary index of Otago printers. I thought also of the particular completed studies that would contribute to the larger picture contemplated by Don, and also of their authors. There was Kathleen Coleridge on printing in the Wellington region, Ross Harvey on New Zealand newspapers, D.F. McKenzie himself on Robert Coupland Harding, friend and disciple of William Colenso, and I recalled my own *Victorian Typefaces in Dunedin, New Zealand*. Obviously one of the first tasks would be to compile comprehensive subject bibliographies, helpfully annotated, of work already done.

Fortunately, thanks to Graham Bagnall and others, we had the six-volume retrospective *New Zealand National Bibliography to the year 1960*, immensely valuable, although in its present printed form lacking a chronology or a gazetteer of imprints. Don also noted that the two volumes so far published of the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* included many biographies of printers and publishers and others concerned in the production, dissemination and reception of all kinds of texts. The writers of these biographies, a large and diverse group of people scattered throughout the country, constituted a reservoir of knowledge and talent that could be drawn on for the unifying project he, and consequently we, had in mind. The successful organisation of the *Dictionary* offered an instructive model for a project not dissimilar in kind.

Since August the talk has continued up and down the country, as I began by remarking. Don McKenzie had previously spoken in Auckland to members of the Book Arts Society there. On 3 September I spoke at a Research Seminar of the University of Otago English Department. Reactions were immediate and promising, although two persons independently joked that we had a tiger by the tail! Another began by saying that of course he was otherwise fully engaged; nevertheless he had been prompted to think afresh about the printing of French, and even Serbo-Croat, in New Zealand. In Wellington institutional interest has been aroused. For the moment I shall simply note that Dr. Opie is President of the New Zealand Academy for the Humanities and Dr. Thomson the Director of the Stout Research Centre. The Alexander Turnbull Library is of course also located in Wellington. Initially, however, the following contact address might be used: Dr. Brian Opie, English Department, Victoria University of Wellington, P.O. Box 600, Wellington.

It would be premature at this point to foresee future developments. The scope and shape of the project and the methods to be adopted all have yet to be discussed and decided. There is the question of funding. One can only say in this regard that now more than ever collaborative projects stand the best chance of securing financial support. Still, the first move has been made, or it might be better to say that the first steps are being taken. Their purpose is to publicise the idea so that those who might contribute in any way are prompted to start thinking and to come forward. Professor McKenzie deserves thanks for initiating this process, but his heavy commitments in Great Britain mean that his role in future must chiefly be advisory. The next stage should no doubt take the form

of a series of more public meetings. Brian Opie has suggested that there should be a meeting in Wellington in 1994 with the aim of exploring the parameters of the project and identifying potential contributors. This might be followed, perhaps the following year, by a conference at which would be presented a series of publishable papers more closely focusing on the substance of the work to be done. Similar meetings in other centres would surely be advantageous. Alan Loney, English Department, University of Auckland, and President of the Book Arts Society of New Zealand, informs me that opinion in Auckland supports the idea of a national project and favours holding a conference in Auckland. Details may be expected in a later issue of the *Bulletin*.

Dunedin

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