

## AN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLISH BOOK CLUB

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The English book club has long been recognised as an important cultural agent. James Lackington in his *Memoirs* (1794) praised book clubs, claiming them to be in 'every part of England'. A generation later, in 1821, the *Monthly Magazine* claimed there were more than six hundred book clubs throughout England.<sup>1</sup> Typically, the book club served a small group of about two dozen people, each of whom paid an annual subscription of 10s 6d and each of whom was also required to purchase books to the same amount. In return, each member was allowed to order books to a cost of two and a half guineas, though they had to be careful, because if the books could not be auctioned at the end of the year then the member was liable for their full cost.

The above account relies on the indirect evidence of the *Rules and Orders for the Regulation of a Reading Society or Book Club* (Shipston-on-Stour, 1828): for the eighteenth-century book club there is very little in the way of direct evidence such as account books, catalogues or borrowing records.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, in order to evaluate the social significance of the country book club, evidence of a more archaeo-bibliographical type has to be relied upon. In this respect there is a book in the National Library of Australia which is of special interest. The book under scrutiny is *The Siege of Calais. A Tragedy. From the French of Mr. de Belloy* (London, Printed by J. Lister, for J. Fletcher and Co., and T. Davies, 1765). On the verso of the title-page is a manuscript record of the book's circulation among members of a country book club.<sup>3</sup>

*Le Siège de Calais* was first performed at the Comédie-Française on the 13 February 1765, and was published at about the same time.<sup>4</sup> Judging from the brief descriptions in NUC, BMC and BN, Duchesne published about ten editions in 1765 alone. In the same year, French editions were also published in Amsterdam, Avignon, England and Haiti in French America.<sup>5</sup> We can assume

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1. For these references see Paul Kaufman, 'English Book-Clubs and their Social Impact', in his *Libraries and their Users* (London, 1969); and in the same book, 'Glimpses of Reading in some West Country Book Clubs'. See also Kaufman's 'A Bookseller's Record of Eighteenth-Century Book Clubs', *The Library*, 5th series, 15 (1960), 278-287.
  2. For Shipston-on-Stour see Thomas Kelly, *Books for the People* (London, 1977), 52-55. Kaufman in 'English Book-Clubs' surveys the extant evidence for the eighteenth-century English book club.
  3. National Library of Australia, RB MISC 2138. Kaufman in 'English Book-Clubs' states that he had seen only one similar record of circulation, in a copy of *Miscellaneous and Fugitive Pieces* (1773-1774) which had belonged to the Kibworth Book Society in Leicestershire.
  4. *The Approbation* is dated 15 March 1765, though the play was first registered on 31 August 1764.
  5. NUC = Library of Congress, *National Union Catalog, pre-1956 Imprints* (London/Chicago, 1968-1980); BMC = British Museum, *General Catalogue of Printed Books* (London, 1959-1966); and BN = *Catalogue Général des Livres Imprimés de la Bibliothèque Nationale: Auteurs*

then that *Le Siège de Calais* was very popular in its original French, and it is not surprising that English translations were soon published in 1765 in both London and Dublin.<sup>6</sup> The play was never performed in London, but it clearly found a ready English audience judging from the speed with which translations were made.<sup>7</sup> A reviewer in the *Gentleman's Magazine* cryptically remarked: 'It [the original story derived from Froissart] has received several alterations to fit it for the French stage, but, after all, an English reader will greatly wonder at its success'. This statement seems to wonder at the perverse attraction of a story in which Edward III, though he takes Calais, loses the moral battle with that city's burghers.<sup>8</sup> Paradoxically, a play originally intended to arouse French patriotism after the disaster of the Seven Years War was equally popular in an England glorying in its newly won imperial hegemony.<sup>9</sup>

A work's popularity is, of course, a very difficult thing to determine. Practitioners of *l'histoire du livre* have examined various criteria – national outputs, edition sizes, numbers of editions, private libraries – in order to evaluate popularity and the impact of literary culture, but in the main the shortcomings of aggregated data have allowed only very tentative conclusions.<sup>10</sup> While the evidential value of the case in hand is limited by the carelessness of the binder, it is able to provide some insights into a microcosmic world of reading not so easily re-created from statistical types of evidence. In manuscript on the verso of the title-page is the following record of a reading circle. As has already been noted, the binder has been very careless in trimming the left-hand margin. The following transcription may be compared with the photographic reproduction.

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(Paris, 1897-1981). An example of the French-language edition printed in England is located in the National Library of Australia, RB MISC 3329. Despite having a Duchesne imprint, it was undoubtedly printed in England, as it has English-style quotation marks identified by Jim Mitchell in 'Quotation Marks, National Compositorial Habits and False Imprints', *The Library*, 6th series, 5 (1983), 359-384. Furthermore, there are press figures throughout, a practice now universally thought to be English. This 'piracy' should make us cautious: perhaps not all Duchesne editions were authorised.

6. The present paper discusses an example of the London English-language edition. The Dublin edition – of which the National Library of Australia has a copy at RB MISC 1786 – was printed in 1765 for J. Hoey senior and eleven others. For more about the Hoeyes and the activities of the Dublin trade see: M. Pollard, *Dublin's Trade in Books 1550-1800* (London, 1989); Richard Cargill Cole, *Irish Booksellers and English Writers 1740-1800* (London, 1986); and Robert Munter, *A Dictionary of the Print Trade in Ireland 1550-1775* (New York, 1988).
7. David Erskine Baker, *Biographia Dramatica* (Dublin, 1782), v.2, 341; also *The London Stage 1660-1800* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1960-1968). Thanks to the staff of the Rare Books Collection at Monash University Library for these references.
8. Vol. 35, 1765, 292.
9. Henry Lancaster, *French Tragedy in the Time of Louis XV and Voltaire 1715-1774* (Baltimore, 1950), 467-508.
10. For a discussion of the concerns of scholars of *l'histoire du livre* see Wallace Kirsop in 'Literary History and Book Trade History: the Lessons of *L'Apparition du Livre*', *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 16 (1979), 488-535.

rs Knapp rec'd Aug<sup>t</sup> 11<sup>th</sup> sent 16<sup>th</sup>  
 s rec'd August 16. Sent August 22.  
 receivd August 22 sent the 28  
 y receivd August 28<sup>th</sup> sent Sept 2<sup>d</sup>  
 kin /w/  
 on rec<sup>d</sup> 2<sup>d</sup> sent 9<sup>th</sup>  
 r rec<sup>d</sup> 9<sup>th</sup> sent 15<sup>th</sup>  
 er rec<sup>d</sup> 15 sent 20  
 ave Rec<sup>d</sup> Sep<sup>t</sup> 20 sent 27<sup>th</sup>  
 ne Rec<sup>d</sup> Sep<sup>t</sup> 27<sup>th</sup> sent September October 2<sup>d</sup>  
 nell Rec<sup>d</sup> Oct: 2<sup>d</sup> sent 8<sup>th</sup> Oct:  
 ts Recv<sup>d</sup> 8<sup>th</sup> sent 12<sup>th</sup>  
 kin /a/ rec 12<sup>th</sup> Oct sent away the same day  
 th a Rec<sup>d</sup> 12<sup>th</sup> Octo<sup>r</sup> sent away 18 D<sup>o</sup>.  
 is Rec<sup>d</sup> 19<sup>th</sup> sent away  
 ner  
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The record consists of 19 lines of manuscript. Each line originally recorded a surname, although most have been almost completely lost to the over-zealous bookbinder. Lines 1 to 14 also record a date of receipt and a date of despatch. Line 15 records a date of receipt but not of despatch. Lines 16 to 19 have no dates for receipt or despatch. The book apparently never got past the member recorded in line 15 as [Mr] '...is'. The first line and the names in lines 2 to 19 are in the same hand (Knapp's?). The receipt and despatch dates are in a variety of hands.

The first point to note is that the provincial distribution system was very efficient. *Le Siège de Calais* was first performed in Paris in February and first published in March 1765. By June, when it was noticed in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, the play had been translated into English and published in London. A Dublin reprint followed almost immediately. Only two months later the work was circulating within a small, provincial reading circle and by October had been through the hands of more than a dozen members. As a case study, this play illustrates the efficient and effective dissemination of French works in translation, thereby complementing recent work on French publishing in London.<sup>11</sup>

The second point to note is that the club was centred on a provincial bookseller – Knapp of Peterborough. A search of Plomer's *Dictionary* reveals that a

11. See, for example, Jim Mitchell, 'French Printing in Eighteenth-Century London', *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 23 (1986), 61-82 and Giles Barber 'Pendred Abroad: a View of the Late Eighteenth-Century Book Trade in Europe', in *Studies in the Book Trade in Honour of Graham Pollard* (Oxford, 1975), 231-277.

bookseller by the name of G. Knapp operated at Peterborough at this time. A search of the ESTC on CD-ROM yields a small crop of publications with which Knapp was involved. The earliest of these – Stephen Duck's *Poems on Several Occasions*, 4th ed. (1764) and Johann Krueger's *Essay on the Education of Children* (1765) – indicate that Knapp was still in London at this time, perhaps in partnership with Samuel Bladon. However, Charles Jenner's *Poems*, printed at Cambridge in 1766, was sold by G. Knapp at Peterborough. The last mention of Knapp is on the 1771 publication of *The Inundation of the Life of the Fen-man, a Poem*, printed at Lynn and sold by Knapp at Peterborough. It appears then that the Peterborough book club was a hybrid cross between the classic club described by Kaufman and the provincial circulating library which normally did business on an individual rather than a group basis.<sup>12</sup>

As there were four people in the circle whom the book did not reach, and as all the names are written in the same hand, the list was most probably written before the book was circulated. It is therefore probably a complete record of the circle. The club then was rather small, consisting of only eighteen members, excluding Knapp. Of these eighteen, fourteen received *The Siege of Calais*, clear evidence for the *multiplier* effect so often mentioned by historians of the book.<sup>13</sup>

Thirdly, it is worth noting that the amount of time for which each member had the book was very regular, being from four to seven days. This regularity is quite remarkable, and can only be explained by a well-established discipline within the club. Because the dates are written in a variety of hands, presumably corresponding with the members of the club, it can be assumed that the book was passed from member to member, rather than via Knapp's library. Unfortunately, the evidence tells us nothing about the reading of the book or its reception or influence.

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12. For the classic reading circle see note 1 above; for the eighteenth-century circulating library see Jan Fergus 'Eighteenth-Century Readers in Provincial England: the Customers of Samuel Clay's Circulating Library and Bookshop in Warwick, 1770-72', *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 78 (1984), 155-213 and Edward Jacobs, 'A Previously Unremarked Circulating Library: John Roson and the Role of Circulating-Library Proprietors as Publishers in Eighteenth-Century Britain', *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 89 (1995), 61-71; for the provincial trade in England, see John Feather, *The Provincial Book Trade in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1985).

13. For the use of edition sizes as evidence for the size of a readership, see, for example, Richard D. Altick, *The English Common Reader* (Chicago, 1957), 30-77, especially p.61.

Annapolis Aug. 11: sent 16<sup>th</sup>  
 received August 15. sent August 22  
 received August 22 sent the 28<sup>th</sup>  
 received August 28 sent Sept 2<sup>nd</sup>  
 sent 11<sup>th</sup>  
 on recd 2 sent 9<sup>th</sup>  
 2 recd 9 sent 15<sup>th</sup>  
 on recd 15 sent 20<sup>th</sup>  
 received Sept 20 sent 27<sup>th</sup>  
 no book Sept 27 so I sent one October 1<sup>st</sup>  
 not recd Oct 2<sup>nd</sup> sent 8<sup>th</sup> diff  
 as recd 16<sup>th</sup> sent 1<sup>st</sup>  
 similar recd 12<sup>th</sup> Oct sent away the same day  
 in a recd 12<sup>th</sup> Octo sent away 10<sup>th</sup> Dec  
 is recd 19<sup>th</sup> sent away  
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It is a great pity that the names on this list have been so truncated. If the members of the club could have been identified, the analysis might have been extended by identifying them and ascertaining their other community activities - intellectual, social, religious and professional. Residences could then have been plotted and socio-spatial relationships explored. Having partially reconstructed the social context, the effect and influence of the reading habit might have been better understood.<sup>14</sup> In this case of *The Siege of Calais* such an analysis cannot be done, but it might be attempted in the future if other similar circulation records are discovered.

Melbourne

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14. Wallace Kirsop's study of Walch's circulating library in Hobart is exemplary in this respect: for this study and other related colonial studies see his *Books for Colonial Readers: the Nineteenth-Century Australian Experience* (Melbourne: Bibliographical Society of Australia and New Zealand, 1995). See also Brian Hubber, 'Public Libraries and the Suburban Reading Public, 1850-1914' (MA Thesis, Monash University, 1986), 22-40 and 95-119.