

Henri-Jean Martin 1924–2007

Henri-Jean Martin, the creator and inspirer of book history as a modern discipline, died on 13 January 2007, three days before his eighty-third birthday. As is reported in Roger Chartier's elegant and perceptive obituary in *Le Monde* of 22 January, Martin used his last months of serious illness to complete the manuscript of a book on the history of human communication from the appearance of *homo sapiens* to the invention of alphabetical writing systems. Visitors to Martin in his Paris apartment in recent years were well aware of the bold ambitions of this ultimate work. It is good to know that he was able to bring it to a stage ready for publication and to push on to the end of a remarkable intellectual quest that began more than half a century ago.

Our Society has not generally been in the habit of noticing the deaths of bibliographers and book historians who were not our own. However, there are very good reasons for making an exception for someone who had a strong and direct influence on an important part of our programme. What may seem an innovation in *Script & Print* is in fact a form of fidelity to our origins and traditions.

Two younger French specialists, Jean-Marc Chatelain and Christian Jacob, both of them notable contributors to the field, had the happy idea a few years ago to prepare and publish a volume of interviews with Henri-Jean Martin on his life's work. Better, perhaps, than any mere autobiography, *Les Métamorphoses du livre* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2004) brings into sharp relief the originality and the reach of Henri-Jean Martin's accomplishments. It also reveals that people living in Australia and New Zealand had long been part of Martin's networks across the world and, more important, that our two countries were not just recipients of European ideas but sources of new approaches and insights. Praise and admiration for the late Don McKenzie underline this point, but others too were part of the exchanges.

I first encountered Martin when, as a graduate student in Paris in 1956, I frequented the Réserve (the Rare Book Room) of what was still—long before Tolbiac and the Bibliothèque nationale de France—simply the BN. It was, as viewers of Alain Resnais's documentary *Toute la mémoire du monde* can verify, a quite different institution, not without carceral suggestions, but far removed from the Piranesi-like oppressiveness of the BNF. In particular one had easier contact with the professional staff of the Réserve, many of whom worked at desks in the same reading room. Martin was a source of helpful information, not least because he had been involved in 1954 in a notable BN exhibition on Antwerp at the time of Plantin and Rubens (*Anvers ville de Plantin et de Rubens*, Paris: Bibliothèque nationale, 1954) and therefore in touch with aspects of the career of the French Renaissance poet and alchemist who was the subject of my doctoral dissertation. Indeed, as has been recounted elsewhere (Joan & Wallace Kirsop, "On Biographical and Other Contexts," *Australian Journal of French Studies* 39 (2002): 325–35, esp. 330), Martin advised me bluntly to read Lucien Febvre rather than the Sorbonne supervisor of my thesis. The point of view

expressed was consistent with Martin's lifelong suspicion of the rhetorical bent of literary professors who did not understand technical questions and the material dimension of the texts that they analysed. I took notice of what I was told, with consequences that are still with me fifty years later.

It was entirely natural that on sabbaticals, the first in 1967, I should join the French and foreign audience at Henri-Jean Martin's classes at that remarkable institution the IV^e Section of the Ecole pratique des Hautes Etudes. For three decades, and through all the other facets of his career—City Librarian in Lyons, teacher at the French library school and Professor at the Ecole des Chartes—Martin was able to enliven in his free-wheeling style a place where researchers young and old could come and talk about their ongoing investigations as well as hearing the master develop some of his newest ideas. This came to be my Paris base for the rest of the century, and Martin was a continuing source of good counsel. As a gesture of allegiance I registered with him in the 1970s a *doctorat d'Etat* thesis topic on the nineteenth-century Australian book trade. Not being so effective a user of time or so driven as Martin himself, who completed his own massive thesis *Livre, pouvoirs et société à Paris au XVII^e siècle (1598–1701)* (Geneva: Droz, 1959, 2 volumes), abridged and translated into English as *Print, Power and People in 17th-Century France* (Metuchen, N.J. and London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1993), while teaching and running France's major provincial library, I did not meet the generous deadline. The research and partial publications continue as an unspoken tribute to Martin's influence.

It was a particular satisfaction, when I held a brief visiting appointment in the same IV^e Section under Martin's successor Frédéric Barbier in 1998, to have the former *directeur d'études* in the audience for some classes on explorations of the eighteenth-century British book world, with particular emphasis on the publications of Don McKenzie, who tends to be known in France only through *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts*, which for some of us sits at the margin of his multiple endeavours, and of Keith Maslen, whose pathbreaking and enduring contribution is too often overlooked on the other side of the Channel. Until the BN became the BNF Martin was constantly to be seen at the Richelieu site, resuming in retirement—and in preparation for *La Naissance du livre moderne: mise en page et mise en texte du livre français (XIV^e–XVII^e siècles)* (Paris: Editions du Cercle de la Librairie, 2000)—physical contact with the book as object. In 1977 he had completed and published *Livres et lecteurs à Grenoble: les registres du libraire Nicolas (1645–1668)* (Geneva: Droz, 2 volumes), an exemplary study, co-signed with Micheline Lecoq and aided by Hubert Carrier and Anne Sauvy, of an exceptional document detailing individual purchases and borrowings over more than two decades. Thereafter he regretted that the pressures of his busy life had removed him from direct library and archival research. Not that he could not profitably reflect in his study on the wider issues that were his passion, but he recognised that our discipline cannot cut itself adrift from its empirical base. Dialogue with specialists of all sorts was one of the ways in which he extended his range and tested his curiosity. It is not altogether surprising—but

entirely in accord with solid French traditions of hospitality—that he and his wife entertained at home, first in outer-suburban Cesson and later in central Paris, various local and visiting book historians and bibliographers. In this way, and despite his withdrawal from day-to-day involvement in the great new collective enterprise, the *Dictionnaire encyclopédique du livre*, which began appearing in 2002, he remained a presence. One has to learn when to “cut and run” from collaborative projects and to concentrate on the personal tasks and messages for which no substitutes can be found ...

In 1970 a planned visit by Henri-Jean Martin to Australia when our Bibliographical Society was just beginning its labours had to be cancelled because of the complications of his move from Lyons to the Ecole des Chartes. Thus those of us who could not make the pilgrimage to Paris had to rely on the printed word to keep in touch with his thinking. On one occasion, in a contribution to *The Culture of the Book*, he became one of our authors, but we had to be content with this welcome gesture.

Martin's relations with the Anglo-American world were complex. In the United Kingdom, through people like Giles Barber, Nicolas Barker and Ian Willison, there was quick recognition of what he meant. So much so that in due course he was elected to a Corresponding Fellowship of the British Academy and awarded the Gold Medal of The Bibliographical Society (London). In the United States of America, on the other hand, there seem to have been mixed reactions. In 1994 the University of Chicago Press published a translation *The History and Power of Writing of L'Histoire et pouvoirs de l'écrit* (Paris: Librairie Académique Perrin, 1988) in an already revised version. In 1993 Henri-Jean Martin had given the Schouler Lectures at Johns Hopkins University, and these were issued in a translation by Paul and Nadine Saenger as *The French Book: Religion, Absolutism, and Readership, 1585–1715* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996). Over time there had been close collaboration with and interest in the work of Paul Saenger. Needless to say, too, there were encounters—in conferences or even at the IV^e Section—with leading North American students of the French book like Robert Darnton, Raymond Birn, Natalie Zemon Davis and Elizabeth Eisenstein. At the same time the language barrier proved to be a real disincentive for discovery of a corpus that began to be translated with a considerable delay. The English version of *L'Apparition du livre* (which should now be read in the new 1999 edition with a substantial “Postface” by Frédéric Barbier) was not available as *The Coming of the Book* (London: New Left Books, 1976) till eighteen years after the original and at a time when Martin's views had progressed considerably. I have sometimes said that “book history speaks French” (and increasingly German, Italian and Spanish), a simple truth that needs to be brought home to the army of people now claiming affiliation to the movement. It is sadly symptomatic of much of the writing on these topics now being done in the United States of America that two substantial articles on methodology in the latest volume (56) of *Studies in Bibliography* barely mention Henri-Jean Martin's name and then only in connection with a somewhat caricatural

view of *L'Apparition du livre*. There is much to be discovered by the practitioners of Charlottesville and New York: not only the further reaches of Martin's thought and research, but also everything that has been brought to light by a "French school" in close touch with its neighbours on the European Continent and far more in tune with the preoccupations of physical bibliography than is sometimes supposed.

That *L'Apparition du livre* was not just a volume planned by Lucien Febvre and carried out by Henri-Jean Martin for a collection of historical syntheses was due to the latter's dynamism and to opportunities he knew how to seize and shape. A monograph became a programme of teaching and research that has endured for half a century and is in no sense near exhaustion. Throughout his career Martin was not afraid to learn from colleagues and to engage them and the growing battalion of his former pupils as collaborators. With the exception of his doctoral thesis the major books he signed—the doctrinal works—contained explicit contributions by others. His involvement in the 1980s with Roger Chartier and Jean-Pierre Vivet in the great *Histoire de l'édition française*, the unequalled prototype of the national histories of the book that have flourished in the two decades since then, was the inevitable consequence of the role he had assumed. More clearly than most of the many participants, he saw the four volumes as provisional and transitory, an invitation to further research on details as well as to hard thinking about remaining problems. There was not and could not be any standing still.

In "A Letter from France" commissioned by former editors of the *BSANZ Bulletin* (22 (1998): 42–50) I reported on what I saw in Paris and elsewhere in the late 1990s. Unavoidably Martin's retirement and the parcelling out of his inheritance as teacher and director of collections were subjects that had to be treated. The grand ceremony at the Sorbonne in May 1997 when Martin was presented with his Festschrift *Le Livre et l'historien* (Geneva: Droz, 1997) was, of course, evoked. It was quite literally an international event on a scale Australians and New Zealanders can hardly imagine. The volume itself offers the usual biographical notes and bibliography—extensive but not exhaustive—in addition to a large collection of articles of high quality. Nothing less would have done for a recipient with exacting standards.

Those who cannot venture beyond the illusory comfort of English alone are still cut off from much of Henri-Jean Martin's œuvre (not to mention much else besides in the various European languages that serious scholars still use). In the case of the sumptuous volumes produced by the Editions du Cercle de la Librairie and unlikely to cross the linguistic divide in so dazzling a form, such readers can look at the pictures. The suggestion is neither cynical nor frivolous: Martin chose his illustrations with extreme care. These are not books, in the Victorian phrase I encountered recently in a Melbourne catalogue of 1856, "for the drawing-room table." However, it is a pity to be deprived of effective access to *Les Métamorphoses du livre* and to what the interviews tell us about Martin as a person and as a scholar.

The preface by Chatelain and Jacob explains how the oral record was brought into print in a process of consolidation and tidying up. Despite this editorial screening Martin's voice rings out clearly from the page, as anyone familiar with

him will recognise. The focus is on the evolution of his thought and research, on the move from social and economic approaches to an exploration in depth of matters more properly belonging to Febvre's interest in *l'histoire des mentalités* and of difficult interdisciplinary problems. Reading and writing lead naturally into consideration of human communication from the very earliest discoverable evidence on to historical periods nearer to us. There is a certain amount of tightrope walking in all this, especially since Martin does not want to let go of the physical record enshrined in manuscripts and in printed texts. Behind and alongside this intellectual audacity there are facts and reminiscences about a highly diverse career. The personality, disconcerting for people used to the smoothness of more conventional French professors, is not hidden. Having a low threshold of tolerance of foolishness and a gift for vigorous language Martin was capable of irritating others, especially some of his superiors at the BN in his early career. On the other hand he was aware of his tendency to be tactless and quite lucidly self-critical. A professed man of the Right in a country where political labels have great weight, Henri-Jean Martin remained an anti-conformist and a mocker of certain pomposities. It is characteristic that the honours and recognition he did receive in France were not ones that required a measure of abasement. This alone explains how one of the most significant and inventive French scholars of the second half of the twentieth century was not elected to one of the national academies. Yet natural authority and his various key positions made him a *mandarin*, one for the anti-*mandarins*, I like to think.

From personal experience I know that he had good political and diplomatic sense. In the public sphere this was demonstrated in particular in his exploit in creating the new Lyons City Library at La Part-Dieu. Who now could achieve a building with enough spare storage capacity to accommodate 500,000 volumes from the Jesuit house at Chantilly two decades later? The observations on administrative matters and styles that run through *Les Métamorphoses du livre* are shrewd and perceptive. Without engaging in a diatribe against the rampant managerialism that has not spared France, Martin succeeds in suggesting that fashionable rhetoric, ignorance of specialist technical requirements, remoteness of directors from the staff who ensure that libraries function effectively for their diverse audiences, inability to rein in the follies of architects and compliant acceptance of political interference are all recipes for failure in modern institutions. A sense of humour, reflected in a number of sallies against literary historians, and some discreet self-deprecation helped to make these criticisms both credible and persuasive. In any case Martin was anything but a denier of the world we live in at the beginning of the new millennium. Sensitive pages on the import of the e-revolution show his capacity for reflection on the significant innovations of our time.

Bluntness of expression and summary condemnations in conversation were not incompatible with openness and generosity in intellectual and personal matters. The help of collaborators, of colleagues and of pupils was clearly acknowledged. It was normal for the IV^e Section classes to adjourn to a Latin Quarter café after the formal sessions. In this ambience of collegiality there was a tacit assumption that all were

participants and that the work did not depend on any one individual alone. Henri-Jean Martin's achievement was huge—the books, the teaching, the shaping of the Lyons City Library and of the first version of the printing historical museum in that city—but its ultimate power resides in the impetus it has given to a discipline across the globe. To set up a school of sterile repetition inhabited by epigones is nothing. To encourage and provoke challenges and change is the final test of a career. In that respect Martin's legacy and reputation are secure.

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