

Pamphlets and Pamphleteering: A Review Essay

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Joad Raymond: *Pamphlets and Pamphleteering in Early Modern Britain*. Cambridge Studies in Early Modern British History. Cambridge University Press, 2006. xviii + 403 pp. ISBN 978 0 521 02877 6 (First Paperback Version). £29.99, US\$55.00.

Alexandra Halasz: *The Marketplace of Print: Pamphlets and the Public Sphere in Early Modern England*. Cambridge Studies in Renaissance Literature and Culture 17. Cambridge University Press, 2006. xi + 240 pp. ISBN 978 0 521 03470 8 (First Paperback Version). £26.99, US\$50.00.

Pamphlets in early modern Britain were a distinct form of literary production. They were regarded as disreputable and potentially dangerous in the mid-sixteenth century, but from the 1580s onwards they became an increasingly common medium for conveying news and in due course the most effective way of manipulating public opinion. During the 1640s they became the most dominant form of publication. However, they have proved difficult to study, partly because there are so many of them and partly because they are so diverse in character.

The two books under review are both concerned with pamphlets in early modern Britain or, in the case of Alexandra Halasz's, early modern England. The two authors have, however, chosen very different ways of organising their subject matter. Joad Raymond approaches the task impressionistically or, as he puts it, by providing a range of different narratives. When these narratives are read together they form a complex but coherent account of the pamphlet as an object and concept in early modern Britain.

The word "pamphlet" is used by Raymond (at least in relation to the start of the period that he covers) as meaning a "short, vernacular work, generally printed in quarto format, costing no more than a few pennies, of topical interest or engaged with social, political or ecclesiastical issues."

Raymond extracts four general theses from the range of narratives in his book. The first is that the pamphlet is "a form that requires a complex and historically relative definition (it is much more than a short book of a certain historical period), a definition that attends to generic and rhetorical elements, to its political and polemical uses, to material form and to the circuits of production and consumption." All these and their inter-relationships are dealt with in his book. The second thesis is that pamphlets are literary texts, often depending for their full meaning on a knowledge of the immediate social and political context and the traditions and conventions of pamphleteering. The third thesis is that "in the period 1500–1700 a transformation occurred in the role of printing and its relationship to the public, a metamorphosis in the nature and idea of print, which was partly effected through

pamphlets.” This role was a developing one. In the early sixteenth century printed texts played only a marginal role in politics, but by the end of the seventeenth century they were essential in political life. The fourth thesis is that the historical significance of pamphlets lies in the social influence they exerted.

The first example chosen by Raymond for close study is the group of polemical tracts published under the name “Martin Marprelate” towards the end of the sixteenth century. The subject matter of these tracts is mainly concerned with church government. This may be thought to be of little interest in the modern world, but the importance of these tracts lies not so much in their subject matter as in their style and in the circumstances of their publication. They were cheap, widely distributed and pungently and colloquially expressed. Raymond notes that Martin’s “unpretentious and flexible style” influenced the temperament of many pamphlets over the next century, in a tradition stretching from Marprelate through John Milton and Andrew Marvell to Daniel Defoe and Jonathan Swift.

Raymond does not assume that his readers have any prior knowledge of the book trade in early modern Britain. He gives a brief account of the skills needed for book production and distribution. Where generalisation about the function of a particular group of tradesmen becomes difficult he draws assistance from contemporary character sketches or stereotypes in trying to catch the essence of the types of people concerned and of the functions they performed.

The various attempts to control what was printed, and in particular the use of commercial monopolies in order to do so, are explained. Raymond argues that licensing was never intended to silence all discussion or controversy; instead it was intended to serve as a means of encouraging persons in the book trade not to commit certain specific offences and to trace and punish those who did commit such offences.

Raymond estimates the number of *potential* consumers by offering figures for the proportion of literate men and women in Britain at various times in the period under review.

A central driving force for the production of, and trade in, pamphlets from about 1640 onwards was the desire for news. Raymond writes that reading news pamphlets could be “irrational, impractical and unprofitable.” It was also impulsive and, Raymond argues, less systematic and practical than some modern writers tend to suggest.

This discussion of news-reading leads Raymond to a chapter on the business of news. He argues that

[p]opular desire for news was a persistent and compelling force within the business of writing and selling pamphlets in early modern Britain, and printing presses became increasingly committed to the supply of news. The provision of news became more entangled with political commentary, and pamphlets offered strong editorial perspectives. The history of the news pamphlet is inseparable from the history of the news periodical, which loomed larger and larger in the marketplace of print through

the seventeenth century ... Though merely a dispensable adjunct in the 1580s, news, news pamphlets and newspapers were by the 1680s inseparable from British political culture.

These themes are developed with a wealth of detail, starting with the 1580s and continuing to what Raymond describes as “the explosion of print” in 1637–42, the period leading up to the Civil War. He notes that, while with the benefit of hindsight the seventeenth-century emergence of the newspaper seems inevitable, in fact the story is more hesitant and indirect. He traces the story in detail, and it is a very interesting one.

Raymond traces the history of periodicals back to 1641, when, he argues, the first true periodicals appeared. By the 1680s the culture of news was highly developed. Of course, like almost everything else in this history, the story is not completely clear cut. Much depends on how one defines true periodicals. Raymond again deals with this question via a group of overlapping stories. His account of developments leading up to the first production of newspapers is one of the most interesting sections in the book. He also traces these developments against their historical context—in particular, the changing face of periodical publication through the years of civil war, the Cromwellian interregnum and the restoration of the monarchy in 1660. It is a sign of the new spirit of inquiry and curiosity about the world that the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* were first published soon after the Restoration, in 1665.

Raymond next doubles back in time to 1637 in order to trace the Scottish origins of the explosion of print during the period 1637–42. He provides interesting statistics of press production during this period. The hero of this account is George Thomason, a London bookseller who began in 1640 to collect pamphlets, news-books, broadsides, sermons, theological treatises and books of poetry. By 1661 he had twenty-two thousand items. These subsequently went to the British Library, where they provide an incomparable starting point for any study of pamphlet literature in the period 1640–61. Raymond notes that what inspired Thomason

to begin this unprecedented collection was his sense that the worlds of politics and of print, and particularly the complex interrelations between the two, were in the process of being transformed. His collection would ... be ... a testament to posterity of a world dramatically invaded by and reordered in print.

Raymond uses the Thomason collection to illustrate the extent of activity in the book trade, a collection that includes the “explosion of print” which occurred between 1637 and 1642. This “explosion” was particularly marked in the latter year. More titles were published in the year 1642 than in the years 1634–39 inclusive. Furthermore, the number published in 1642 (a little over four thousand) was about double that of the immediately preceding year. He argues that the increase in the number of titles indicates a move away from substantial works, long octavos and

folios, towards shorter quartos and broadsides. Thus, the amount of paper used might not have varied by much, but the way in which the paper was employed changed considerably. This trend towards more, but shorter, publications was presumably a response to demands for hastily written tracts to be published rapidly. Raymond notes that during this period books were less likely to be acknowledged by their authors, printers or publishers. Consequently, they provided a vehicle for opinion dislocated from the material circumstances of their production, though reflecting those circumstances in form and typography.

One reason for the importance of Scotland in the years leading up to the Civil War was that the Scottish Covenanters were very successful in written propaganda. In quantity, Scottish propaganda remained limited by comparison with that produced in London, but it had a disproportionate effect both north and south of the border. This effect was partly a matter of skill in preparing propaganda itself and partly a matter of more effective distribution. Raymond gives graphs showing the press output in England and Scotland plotted against date. He suggests that in purely quantitative terms the impact of Scottish printing on England was at its highest in the late 1630s (the period leading to the Civil War) and the mid-1680s (which takes us into the next reign). He argues that in and after 1637 Scottish covenanting propaganda was successfully imported into England because there was a market for it. The reading public was receptive to the writings of Covenanters, as well as to their cause. The Covenanters were also able to assist, and were assisted by, the English puritans.

Raymond identifies the importance of print in the sequence of events leading up to the English Civil War as follows:

[I]n 1637 an influx of numerous and potentially disruptive books ... particularly from Scotland both precipitated and accelerated trends in the British book market. The number of books in print began to increase; their average length decreased as the quantity of topical pamphlets soared; more works were published anonymously ... The king responded to covenanting propaganda; sympathetic members of Parliament promoted and supported it; godly Londoners distributed it. All were soon engaged in their own propaganda campaign: in 1641–2 the London presses erupted into activity producing many thousands of energetic, vehement and denunciatory pamphlets that overshadowed all that went before. London stationers saw the commercial possibilities ... and took advantage of freedom when it beckoned ... The flames lit in Edinburgh in 1637 thus spread south.

Raymond outlines the “means by which pamphlets multiplied and effected dialogue, between and within pamphlets in a community of discourse.” He notes the power of pamphlets to fabricate pervasive rumours. However, he also points out the important role of pamphlets in bringing about the restoration of the monarchy in 1659–60. He also deals with the development of printed disputes. He identifies and describes various types of pamphlet: the pamphlet in the form of a letter, the

pamphlet purporting to reveal an adversary's private papers, the pamphlet setting out an imaginary dialogue, Theophrastian character pamphlets and pamphlets containing official printings of sermons delivered to the Houses of Parliament.

Raymond has a chapter on female authorship and pamphleteering. He argues that women found it difficult to be heard. They participated in manuscript culture with relative freedom, but when they spoke in print they did so tentatively. Raymond points out that

[s]tatistical analysis of women's printed writings in the seventeenth century shows that there were few published books by women in any genre, including didactic works, mothers' advice books, literary or pious works, until the 1640s when there was a dramatic increase. This expansion was significantly focused on prophetic and political writings, namely pamphlets. When women did start writing in numbers, they wrote short prose works mainly of topical and religious interest.

Raymond gives a graph showing the number of published writings by women plotted against time. He notes that no woman can be identified as the author or editor of a newsbook, newspaper or journal during the seventeenth century.

Finally, Raymond has a chapter on pamphlets and polemic in the Restoration era. Pamphlets played their part in the return of the monarchy to Britain in 1660 and in celebrating the accession of Charles II. Raymond identifies his themes in this chapter: the "formal self-consciousness that was central to the uses of the pamphlet in this period; the awareness of the history of pamphleteering; the use of reprinting as a means of commenting on the present; and the attenuation of the bond between small quartos and prose controversy." During the Restoration period, there was a movement in the printing trade towards increasing specialisation.

Raymond concludes that

Restoration pamphlets were sharp-edged weapons, the product of more than a century of development and refinement. Pamphlets fitted neatly into the political culture of Britain, which operated through eloquence, performances, persuasive fictions; but they did so because they were shaped by the commercial practices and distribution networks of a quasi-monopolistic book trade that had evolved semi-autonomously from the state; and because they appropriated and exploited the panoply of literary forms, genres and voices at a time when the idea of a distinctive literature in English was becoming a reality. The formulation works in all directions: the power of pamphlet-prose was built upon the pamphleteers' intimacy with the printing practices and the idea of cheap print, their engagement with political culture, their ability to reach readers, their sense of their own discomfiting authority within the world of government ... To writers and politicians the pamphlet offered a means of speaking to anonymous yet defined constituencies. To booksellers and printers it provided a means of making money. To readers, pamphlets were provocative and imaginative engagements with the world of news, politics, ideas and words.

The second book under review is part of a series explained by its publishers in the following terms:

Since the 1970s there has been a broad and vital reinterpretation of the nature of literary texts, a move away from formalism to a sense of literature as an aspect of social, economic, political and cultural history. While the earliest New Historicist work was criticized for a narrow and anecdotal view of history, it also served as an important stimulus for post-structuralist, feminist, Marxist and psychoanalytical work, which in turn has increasingly informed and redirected it. Recent writing on the nature of representation, the historical construction of gender and the concept of identity itself, on the theatre as a political and economic phenomenon and on the ideologies of art generally, reveals the breadth of the field. *Cambridge Studies in Renaissance Literature and Culture* is designed to offer historically oriented studies of Renaissance literature and theatre which make use of the insights afforded by theoretical perspectives. The view of history envisioned is above all a view of our own history, a reading of the Renaissance for and from our own time.

Alexandra Halsz has applied this approach to a critique of some pamphlets written by a number of late sixteenth- or early seventeenth-century authors including Robert Greene, Thomas Nashe, Gabriel Harvey, Thomas Deloney and John Taylor. This involves applying specialist thought patterns developed in the late twentieth century to late sixteenth and early seventeenth-century writing.

A problem in the present case is that the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century writing tends to become lost in the twentieth-century critique. The result is a book by a specialist critic for other specialist critics. It may have less appeal to readers whose primary interest is the early modern book trade.

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