

REVIEW

The Introduction of Print

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Vincent Gillespie and Susan Powell, editors

A Companion to the Early Printed Book in Britain, 1476–1558

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IN THE PERIOD BETWEEN the arrival of the printing press and the beginning of Queen Elizabeth's reign, several political, religious, and intellectual revolutions occurred in the British Isles. In *A Companion to the Early Printed Book in Britain, 1476–1558*, Vincent Gillespie and Susan Powell assemble an assortment of essays on the impact of printing in England (rather than Britain, really) in the context of these other revolutions. Designated a “companion” by the publisher, replete with thirty-two illustrations, the volume offers helpful overviews (some more documentary, some more suggestive) of a variety of topics relevant to the study of the introduction of print into England.

This *Companion* participates in a recent surge of handbooks, companions, introductions, and “approaches to” focused on individual authors, periods, or genres. Apart from their current popularity, such volumes have an established record with academic audiences—typically offering not original research but assistance to readers, whether students or scholars, seeking to get their bearings in a field. Perhaps because of their advertised utility, these collections have become fashionable among publishers; they must also be drawing favorable attention from those purchasing them, or recommending them for purchase, in academic libraries. The full range of readers who might consult “companions,” however, may not find what they seek. Some contributors will have a particular argument to advance, while others will be content to survey points of controversy without making an intervention. The overall intention of this *Companion to the Early Printed Book* is not immediately clear. It is not part of a series from this publisher. Many of the essays in the volume originated in a conference

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held at Oxford in 2009, but this volume seems to be more comprehensive than typical conferences. The editors do not state their purpose explicitly but suggest that the early period of print and its coexistence with an older manuscript culture has not yet been thoroughly surveyed; and they also observe that writers themselves in the period acknowledged the rapid cultural transformations that accompanied the advent of the printing press.

This *Companion* gathers sixteen fairly brief essays in four thematic sections. The first, “The Printed Book Trade,” includes three essays that describe the commercial role of printed materials in this period, while the second, “The Printed Book as Artefact,” offers three essays that treat printing production. In “Patrons, Purchasers, and Products,” five essays address the range of consumers of these printed works. The final section, “The Cultural Capital of Print,” offers five essays that focus on the significance of printed material in this era, including discussions of humanism, the Reformation, and censorship. The organizing principle is chronological, with most essays covering a topic over nearly a century, starting with Caxton and moving forward to the Queen’s Printer, John Cawood. This works especially well in Alexandra Gillespie’s excellent contribution, “Bookbinding in Early Printing in England,” which treats very early examples through to the end of the period.

The *Companion*’s organization occasionally creates some frustrating repetition, however, especially since most contributions, with the exception of James Willoughby’s “Universities, Colleges, and Chantries,” do not refer to material in other essays in the collection. However, most readers are not likely to read this sort of book seriatim and may therefore be untroubled by, for example, several contributors’ references to the first record of a consumer of an English book, James Goldwell, who purchased Durandus in Hamburg; or the frequent allusion to John Foxe’s characterization of the advent of print as providentially coincident with the Protestant era. Students of book history who do read the book sequentially may even benefit from repeated definitions of unfamiliar terms, such as *Sammelbände*.

For the most part, the authors of these essays do not seek to demonstrate an argument. The chronological surveys of topics they provide serve to make this *Companion* particularly useful for readers seeking an introduction to printing practices and their impact in the early sixteenth century. The essay by Tamara Atkin and A. S. G. Edwards is exemplary in this regard, offering a chronological account of a seventy-five-year period featuring the most important printers of each generation, yet without seeking to demonstrate an evolutionary arc. Their essay, “Printers, Publishers and Promoters to 1558,” begins with Caxton and mentions his immediate rivals, moving on to his successors and imitators in the period from 1491 to 1534, when England finally broke with Rome. Atkin and Edwards end with a discussion of the most controversial era, focusing on Thomas Berthelet and Richard Grafton and concluding with a brief account of Robert Wyer, whose commercial pragmatism offers a striking contrast to Caxton’s initial output. A number of the other essays likewise skillfully balance survey and specificity.

Mary Erler's essay, "The Laity," in the volume's third section, also offers an effective compromise between focus and range. Making no claim to offer an exhaustive account of lay purchasers or patrons, she turns to the three kinds of materials most frequently printed in the early modern period—indulgences, almanacs, and Books of Hours—and then traces documented ownership of these kinds of texts among groups of lay readers. The essay gives the reader a cogent sense of the most common uses of print before 1558.

A few of the essays, however, do have cases to make. After Susan Powell's essay on "The Secular Clergy," James G. Clark's on "The Regular Clergy" shows that in their institutional libraries on the eve of the Reformation, new acquisitions might come in the form of either print or manuscript books, with a slight preference for manuscripts, while copies owned by individual clergy might indeed be printed books, which were cheaper. Clark demonstrates that the clergy continued to read in much the same way they had for centuries—even after the introduction of printed material—so that we should qualify the reputation of print as "a force for cultural change" (205). Essays in the final section, on the "Cultural Capital of Print," are also more argumentative than the surveys that make up most of the volume. Following Andrew Hope's succinct survey of English networks for distributing controversial religious material, Thomas Betteridge focuses on Thomas More's trajectory as an agent of censorship and then as the subject of censorship. Arguing that Arundel's Constitutions affected controversial manuscript books less than some have thought, Betteridge claims that More's efforts to suppress printed Protestant material represented a fundamental shift in a regime's role in controlling illicit books. The argument feels truncated, owing to the limited space in this kind of volume, although Betteridge's engagement with the question of metaphor and metonymy—of whether owning banned words can be imagined as embracing a heretical idea—is evocative.

The final essay of this section, and of the collection, Lucy Wooding's "Catholicism, the Printed Book, and the Marian Restoration," similarly offers a provocative argument, in this case for the potential of the printed book in the brief reign of Mary Tudor. Stressing the continuities with traditions going back to the first appearance of print—as well as the Catholic controversialists' awareness and appropriation of the reformers' successful strategies for exploiting print—Wooding claims that the curtailed interlude of Marian reform and revitalization offered an "eloquent and inventive campaign" in print that continued to bear fruit even after Mary I's sister came to the throne (321). The argument is compressed for the purposes of the volume, though covering three-quarters of a century (as other contributors do as well) allows her to highlight continuities between the beginning of the period and midcentury.

Given that the *Companion* seeks to cover comprehensively the selection, production, purchase, and impact of printed material in England to 1558, the treatment of the role of women is disappointing. Brenda M. Hosington's dense, informative essay, "Women Translators and the Early Printed Book," treats seven women who were translators. They faced significant barriers, including potential scandal, in making

their translations public through the printing press, but their already established power and influence eased their way. Women like Margaret Beaufort, Princess Elizabeth, or Margaret Roper thus played “an active and a participatory role in the social and religious culture of their day” (270). More essays on women’s participation in England’s print revolution would have been welcome.

Several of the essays remind us that much of the material in the first age of English printing had a religious or devotional focus, a useful corrective to some recent studies. As Vincent Gillespie suggests in the introduction, historians of the book must remember “to look beyond the world of vernacular romances, chronicles, and other secular materials, even beyond the culturally significant printing of the literary remains” of Chaucer, Gower, and Lydgate, to account for the ubiquity of religious books (4): the ecclesiastical and popular demand for those kinds of titles “reflects the reality of the market for printed books in England before 1558” (7). The essays in this collection offer models for undertaking that reexamination. The *Companion to the Early Printed Book*, then, offers a useful overview of print in this period, while pointing to the high stakes of some key issues.

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