*AHR Forum*

# How Revolutionary Was the Print Revolution?

*Historians and philosophers of history have been assessing the impact of print for some 500 years. And they have always found the job complicated. The Benedictine abbot Johannes Trithemius—reformer, book collector, cryptographer, and much more—recorded the invention of printing as a great achievement in more than one chronicle. He took advantage of the press in several ways: to make his own pioneering works on monastic life and literary history available to a wide public, but also to buy, at low prices, modern devotional works that he could trade to ignorant librarians for the precious manuscripts that gathered dust in their libraries. Yet he also wrote a polemical tract* In Praise of Scribes, *in which he argued for the superiority and durability of the handmade book and dismissed printed works as fated to decay and disappear while manuscripts survived for centuries. Evidently, this witness to the second generation of print saw the impact of the new invention from more than one point of view.*

*So have many others who wrestled with the subject, from sixteenth-century writers like Erasmus and Martin Luther, Louis Le Roy and Jean Bodin, to eighteenth-century Philosophes. From the seventeenth century on, moreover, bibliography began to develop as a formal discipline, and its proponents not only catalogued and sorted books but also hotly debated such questions as the place and time when printing was first practiced. The careers of individual printers and correctors, the work of individual type-founders, the new styles of trade and advertising that came into existence with the printing press all found their students within this rather technical field of scholarship. In the twentieth century, scholars in other fields—notably departments of modern languages—began to apply the new tools of the bibliographers to questions such as the way that European books were shipped to the Americas and Enlightenment ideas moved through the society of the* ancien régime.

*Most professional historians, however, devoted relatively little attention to printing and the social and cultural changes it wrought, until Lucien Febvre and other historians of the Annales school showed that one could trace, in precise*

*detail, the ways that printing altered the lives of authors and readers, using the new, larger libraries of the age of print to chart transformations in the climate of opinion. A historiography of the book grew up in France—a series of monographs and articles devoted less to the formal study of printers and their products than to the use of these as diagnostic tools, which could reveal the temperature and texture of a whole culture. This body of scholarship produced complex—and sometimes controversial—conclusions about the spread of the Reformation and the relations between what were then called elite and popular culture. At much the same time, two influential thinkers outside the realm of professional history—the quirkily speculative Marshall McLuhan and the much more erudite Walter Ong, S.J.—argued in influential books that printing had transformed the Western psyche.*

*In the 1970s and 1980s, finally, a new history of the book exploded into print, drawing contributions from scholars in many nations and falling into many styles. Roger Chartier used the history of printing as a key to the larger cultural history of early modern France. Robert Darnton charted the publishing history of the quarto Encyclopedia, doing a kind of historical archaeology on the printing and sales operations of a Swiss printing shop for which immense series of records survived. Bob Scribner studied the visual forms of propaganda that carried the message of the Protestant reformation to a wide public. And Carlo Ginzburg reconstructed what had previously seemed an impenetrably private realm, that of the individual reader. The history of books and readers gradually defined itself as a field—a site of inquiry where historians, literary scholars, bibliographers, and others debate and collaborate, practicing a number of complementary forms of historical research. University courses on book history sprang up, symposia took place, and journals and yearbooks were created. The history of books became hot—surprisingly so for a subject long of interest only to antiquarians.*

*No one did more to make this new field take shape than* **Elizabeth L. Eisenstein**, *whose massive two-volume survey* The Printing Press as an Agent of Change *was first published by Cambridge University Press in 1979. In this work, which developed from a famous series of articles, Eisenstein argued, in sharp detail, that the printing press had done more than bring messages to new publics: it had, in fact, given rise to the transformations traditionally known as the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Scientific Revolution. Based on wide reading in a vast range of secondary works, provocative and fascinating, Eisenstein's synthesis itself reached a vast public—especially in the abridged*

*and illustrated paperback edition that Cambridge issued in 1987.*

*Eisenstein's book provoked widespread debate. It also helped to inspire a generation of younger scholars to integrate the history of books and readers into the study of intellectual and cultural history—a generational change that is currently reshaping the historiography of all three movements that Eisenstein examined. No one has done so more systematically, or in a more dramatic way, than* **Adrian Johns**. *A historian of British science rather than the whole range of early modern culture, a denizen of archives rather than a synthesist, Johns devoted his massive* Nature of the Book *to reconstructing the world of early modern English printers and authors—and arguing that the nature of authorship had fundamental effects on the thinkers traditionally associated with the Scientific Revolution.*

*In the exchange that follows, Eisenstein and Johns—each in a characteristic and highly individual style—discuss one another's methods, arguments, and conclusions. Their articles enable the reader to watch major historians of different generations and formations at work, and open up a whole series of vital issues. The* American Historical Review *published one of Eisenstein's original, challenging articles. It seems highly appropriate, then, that it provides a stage where the discussion she helped to begin may continue.*

Anthony Grafton