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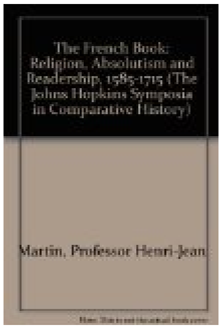

The French Book: Religion, Absolutism and Readership, 1585-1715 (The Johns Hopkins Symposia in Comparative History)

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Books and Their Readers

This volume presents in printed form the Schouler Lectures delivered by Martin at Johns Hopkins University in 1993. The *doyen* of *histoire du livre* has used the occasion to restate and summarize the main themes of his life's work. He also takes note of the contributions of younger scholars who have followed the trail he and Lucien Febvre blazed beginning with the 1958 publication of *L'Apparition du Livre*. The text of the lectures has been augmented by an appendix detailing the many paths that remain to be explored in the history of books and readership in early modern France. The present volume thus offers an excellent introduction to an important part of the cultural history of the *ancien regime*.

Each of Martin's four essays pursues a different theme, but they work together to flesh out the complex relationships among printers, readers, government and religion in the France of the seventeenth century. The first, "The Catholic Reformation and the Book, 1585-1650," examines how religious upheaval shaped the French book trade. Martin notes that the hierarchy of the Catholic church, though at first enthusiastic about printing, had seen the problems it might pose by 1515; from that date, an ecclesiastical seal of approval, the imprimatur, restricted the freedom to publish all over Europe. The outbreak of the Reformation made ecclesiastical censorship ever more stringent, a process culminating in the creation of the *Index of Prohibited Books* in 1564. In France the *Index* opened an era of conflict between government and church authorities over who should control the printing industry and the works it produced. The issues of that conflict quickly faded with the onset of the religious wars in 1566. Efforts to control printing and publication had little effect during the years of conflict. Presses on both sides spewed forth an endless torrent of polemical literature, ranging in size from full-scale learned treatises to the most ephemeral of placards and pamphlets.

The peace achieved under Henri IV found the printing world firmly divided along confessional lines. Both sides had a problem. The number of active print shops which had grown up during the war years was far too high for the amount of work available in peace time. Catholic printers gained much new business from the Church, in the form of theological tracts, new editions of saints' lives, and the increasingly popular handbooks of mystical spirituality. They grew reluctant to alienate a most important patron by printing works of which the Church disapproved. Protestant printers eagerly brought out the books forbidden to Catholics, but found insufficient demand to make a living from them. The same held true for French-language Bibles and service books. They therefore turned to new editions of the classics, maps, and tales of exploration and discovery in the world outside Europe. Most of these works, like those of the Catholics, still appeared in Latin. Vernacular texts remained the purview of a small and specialized group of printers.

The caution and discretion of Catholic printers paved the way for a government control of printing more stringent than that of the Church. Martin turns his attention to these matters in Chapter Two, "Absolutism and Classicism." He begins by tracing the French monarchy's involvement with printing during the sixteenth century. Francis I, in particular, believed that a single national language could draw the diverse provincial cultures of France together. He thus required (from 1539) that all government documents be written and printed in French, going so far as to finance the creation of the accents and diacritical marks needed to reproduce the spoken language on the page. Those literati who supported the king's aims followed him by producing histories that magnified the deeds of the kings of France and the emblems and image books which built up the culture of their glory. The later Valois kings made similar efforts, but met with less success in their strife-ridden situation.

Cardinal Richelieu was the first politician to understand the power of the press and control it effectively in the interests of monarchial glory. Richelieu directed the printing industry in both a negative and positive fashion. On the one hand, the 1629 *Code Michaud* allowed the chancellor to appoint censors who were to certify all manuscripts before publication. On the other, Richelieu sponsored the *Gazette*, the first French language newspaper, and also the *Academie francaise*. The latter brought the most talented writers of the day under the cardinal's aegis and ensured that the development of a pure and classic national language took place under the government's patronage. These and other initiatives deeply divided the French printing community between government supporters and those who resented the restrictions of censorship when many French printing shops, particularly in Paris, were suffering from lack of work.

The deaths of Richelieu and Louis XIII, followed by the Jansenist controversy and the Fronde, restored a chaotic liberty to the press. Mazarin, Richelieu's successor, took few reprisals against the printing teams who had worked for the *Frondeurs* and the young Louis XIV took little interest in books, except as art objects. As ruler in his own right, he was, however, wise enough to support Jean-Baptiste Colbert in reviving Richelieu's measures and taking the further steps needed to bring publishing to heel. Forced consolidation of shops reduced the competition for business that had led printers to produce politically undesirable materials in order to have work. Those whose output addressed the themes the government favored were nourished with extended copyrights and other kinds of privileges. Those who produced more subversive texts found themselves forced out of business. In the controlled atmosphere thus created, the disciplined and formally perfect literature of Classical France reached its highest peak of development.

The 1685 revocation of the Edict of Nantes upset the balance Colbert had worked so hard to achieve. Many of the Huguenots who left France in search of religious liberty belonged to the world of printing. Settling in Holland and Switzerland, they turned their skills to producing all the types of literature regarded with disfavor by the government of Louis XIV. Smuggled carefully over the border, these works were received gladly by those more interested in new ideas than in perfect style. Meanwhile, the printing hierarchy set up by Colbert grew ever riper for subversion and overthrow in the eighteenth century.

In Chapters Three and Four, Martin turns his attention to the book as artifact and the people who read it. Chapter Three, "The Reading Public and Its Books," allows Martin to summarize his own research, the groundbreaking studies based on estate inventories of deceased book owners and on the account books of the Grenoble book seller Jean Nicholas. He pauses to acknowledge some of the criticisms and modifications proposed by scholars who have continued his work. Ownership of a work, he notes, does not necessarily mean it has been read; furthermore, the notaries who inventoried estates tended to overlook small and ephemeral printed works, which may have been the most often read of all. Martin believes that the records of the Nicholas bookstore, 1645-1668, help to correct the estate inventories. Jean Nicholas sold printed material of all types, and his records indicate what sorts of people bought it.

The account books paint an unsurprising picture. By far the bulk of purchases were made by the successful lawyers and judges attached to Grenoble's *parlement*. They acquired legal materials, novels and poetry, histories of the recent past and political pamphlets, especially during the Fronde. But Nicholas' records do not show, and Martin does not discuss, the fate of his wares after they left the shop. Were they read aloud, to a group, or silently, by a single individual? Were they kept, lent, or resold? In particular, Martin's sources do not allow historians to grasp the ways those too poor to buy books of their own might have found access to printed material. Martin seems to consider literacy among these less wealthy strata of society to have been negligible. Though he mentions Christian Joutard in Chapter Two, he does not discuss Joutard's suggestion that the Catholic Reformation's emphasis on education had appreciably raised literacy levels in French cities by the end of the sixteenth century.

Yet Chapter Four, "The French Classical Book," can be read as suggesting that seventeenth-century printers tried to make their output more easily comprehensible to just such new readers. Martin here discusses the evolution of printed texts in France, starting from the substitution, by command of Francis I, of clear Roman-style type for the almost illegible black letter that imitated late medieval bookhands. Punctuation and diacritical marks were devised by the Estienne printing dynasty, again by royal order. The only spontaneous step in the process was the substitution of paragraphs for long blocks of text. Printer/editors began to break up Classical texts in the early seventeenth century in order to make them easier for readers to follow. Division of plays into scenes and acts followed, and the revolution was complete by 1680. Martin closes the chapter with another type of book, the allegorical emblem collections so popular in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century France. These also reached their highest development in the reign of Louis XIV, when they were turned almost exclusively to proclaiming the glory of the king.

To the text of the lectures, Martin has added a conclusion in which he reviews the growth of French book history and points out the many areas where work needs to be done. He makes no acknowledgement of the studies of scholars who are not French, such as Robert Darnton. That particular omission might be explained by the fact that Darnton has focused on the eighteenth century and Martin's main interests lie earlier. The neglect of Roger Chartier's important contributions is harder to understand since he studies the same time period as Martin and has occasionally even collaborated with him.

In spite of these lacunae, the work as a whole is a stimulating introduction to an important field of French historical scholarship. Those with serious interests in *l'histoire du livre* will probably not learn anything new from it, but it might well attract graduate and undergraduate students who want to learn more. It would be most appropriate reading for a seventeenth-century course. The interesting illustrations add to the attraction of the volume as a whole.

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