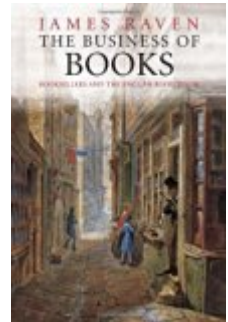


James Raven. *The Business of Books: Booksellers and the English Book Trade, 1450-1850.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007. 448 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-300-12261-9.



Reviewed by Jessica Steinberg

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Commissioned by Brian S. Weiser (Metropolitan State College of Denver)

“The history of the book in England is the history of the interplay between technologies, organization, and demand” (p. 352). It “is ... as much about confrontation as it is about effortless progress--confrontation with technological limitations, with the fragility and unpredictability of demand, and with the law and apprehensive authorities” (p. 351). These statements summarize the main themes of James Raven’s chronological and thematic survey of the English book trade over the course of the mid-fifteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries. In *The Business of Books*, Raven examines the political, economic, technical, and legal forces that propelled the industries to expand; the publishers, printers, and sellers who were engaged in the book trade; and the physical spaces in which books were produced, marketed, and sold. Yet Raven does not present a tale of simple improvement, rather he shows how the individual men and women who were engaged in the book trade created and responded to new opportunities and challenges.

Primarily, Raven deals with the book trade in England, devoting some attention to Ireland and Scotland (though not Wales). Without diminishing London’s dominance, Raven emphasizes that print culture was never a local or even national phenomenon; instead, international influences, particularly those from the Continent, were instrumental in shaping the book trade. In addition to raw materials like paper, printing methods, and literary material, the Continent, and to a lesser extent, the British colonies, served as important markets in which material was purchased and sold. The European industry influenced the English market for far longer than is usually acknowledged, and Raven shows that the English book trade, like all other commodities, must be examined with an understanding of its place in an international context.

A central argument throughout the work is that the profit motive, much more than ideological goals, explains why individuals entered the print trade. While acknowledging that “the book business was obviously different from most other

consumer trades in that it was not simply commercial but intrinsically artistic and political,” Raven argues that “business acumen, rather than political enthusiasm” was the prime mover which drove countless men and women into the print industries (pp. 208, 210). Hence, while ideological considerations could be critical to an individual’s fate, “more booksellers resided (or died) in prison because of debt than because of treason, libel, or blasphemy. Most booksellers and writers were not among the great intellectual and political enthusiasts or their confidants, and were simply concerned with their daily trade” (p. 366). By providing a business history of the book trade, which takes the political context into account, rather than primarily examining the social and political consequences of the press, Raven makes a significant contribution to the history of the press.

The impact of political and religious tensions on the individual printers and publishers and on the book trade more generally is also critical to the work. Raven provides a balanced analysis of the various individuals and events that affected the development of the book trade. For instance, Raven neither demonizes nor laments the brief return to pre-Reformation print material during the reign of Queen Mary, nor does he idealize the surge of new and more diverse works as a result of the Protestant Reformation. Instead, Raven indicates that the arrival of every new monarch benefited some booksellers, printers, and publishers and encumbered others. For instance, a publisher who was sympathetic to Catholicism may have won crown awards and privileges during the reign of Mary, but may have faced the loss of autonomy, liberty, limb, or life under Elizabeth.

Raven’s discussion of the individual booksellers, printers, and publishers—both great and small, male and female—who made up the trade is particularly informative. On outlining their diverse reputations, motives, and personalities, Raven provides insight into the character of the trade. Raven shows that some were sober, some

drunks; some were cautious, others were innovative and brazen risk takers. Yet it becomes apparent that neither innovation nor caution necessarily led to success. The printing, publishing, and selling of printed material was a highly risky activity because of the high input costs, uncertainties whether a book would sell, and the risk of fire. Though a few entrepreneurs became lucratively successful, many more faced bankruptcy and failure. To a degree, these vulnerabilities could be overcome by family and kinship networks and through business-oriented marriage choices. Most important to success, however, was entering the business with sufficient capital. A central argument throughout the work is that the “the prerequisite of available financial assets rather than prior skills in printing or an existing knowledge of literary concerns” remained “essential to successful bookselling careers over four centuries” (p. 17).

The technical and commercial changes that enabled the establishment of a mass consumer market is another dominant theme of the work. Yet, by drawing equal attention to the continuities as to the changes of print material, production processes, and marketing techniques, Raven demonstrates that while the advancement of the book trade was “triumphant,” it was not linear (p. 351). For instance, Raven discusses how the introduction of moveable type, the rolling press, mechanized paper making, steam-driven presses, and rail networks, and the commercialization of English society were critical to the creation of a mass market for print and to the establishment of a more rapid and widely distributed market. Moreover, Raven also shows that peddlers remained central to the distribution of books. Likewise, in spite of the introduction of newsbooks, newspapers, and specialized literature, religious works and almanacs continued to comprise a significant portion of printed material during the duration of the four centuries under study.

Raven's devotion of considerable space to the geographic and physical spaces that bookshops and printing houses occupied is particularly interesting. Using land tax records, maps, and insurance records, among other sources, Raven reveals the impermanence of businesses and the malleability of space, properties, buildings, and locations. Raven also shows how as clientele shifted bookshops developed and changed--both in terms of their layout and what they sold.

The chronological breadth of Raven's analysis--from approximately 1450 to 1800--is both a strength and a weakness of the work. While such a lengthy survey enables him to trace important changes and continuities throughout the development and emergence of a vibrant commercial print culture, it also leaves the reader wishing for more detail on many topics. For instance, in spite of the details Raven provides, the reader sometimes wants more information about the individual booksellers, publishers, and printers. A discussion of readers or consumers is also largely absent. Raven stresses that such exclusion is reasonable because it is outside the scope of the work, but given that he emphasizes changing literary markets and consumer tastes, a brief consideration of readers would have been appropriate.

Nevertheless, these are minor complaints on a thoroughly researched and detailed appraisal of the men and women who made up the printing, publishing, and bookselling industries. Raven's analysis of booksellers' actions, choices, and responses to the changing commercial, political, economic, and cultural spheres which affected their livelihoods clearly illuminates the wider transformations that occurred throughout the period. This work offers a great deal of information and thoughtful analysis for those interested in the press, business history, commercial change, and technological improvements.

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