

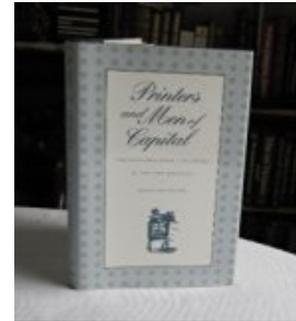
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Rosalind Remer. *Printers and Men of Capital: Philadelphia Book Publishers in the New Republic*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996. xiii + 210 pp. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8122-3337-7.

Reviewed by Philip Scranton (School of History, Technology, and Society, Georgia Institute of Technology)

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This slender monograph, which originated as a UCLA dissertation, works toward filling a temporal and analytical gap in the history of American printing and publishing. Rosalind Remer rightly notes that previous, often antiquarian, research has focused on colonial printer/publishers, often heroizing them as masters of a complex and increasingly politicized trade. More recent studies, particularly John Tebbel's many volumes, examined book publishers from the mid-nineteenth century through the 1960s—an age of national marketing initiated by railway networks and confirmed through extensive advertising to consumers, book retailers, department stores, et al. Remer asks, appropriately: how did the American book trade accomplish the double transition from local to national distribution and from printing/publishing generalists to a division of labor between publishing specialists and printers, with whom they contracted for book production? Philadelphia, which with Boston and New York constituted the early republic's centers for book making, draws her close attention.

At its opening, this study reprises colonial printers' multi-faceted activities as job work operators, newspaper editors, importers and publishers of books and pamphlets, and retailers of same. After 1783, Philadelphia printers moved aggressively into the new republic's early political battles, creating a series of mostly ephemeral newspapers supporting one or another of the emerging factions (while drawing revenues from patrons to sustain their vigorous prose). The shifting tides of political advantage boosted or destroyed these printers' ambitions, for, in business terms, "the most practical patronage came directly from government printing jobs," available only to those backing winners (p.

34). Though newspaper controversies raged throughout the 1790s, once the federal seat (and its revenue stream) shifted from Philadelphia to Washington in 1800, area printer/publishers paid appreciably more attention to state and local government custom and to the commercial possibilities of books. For the latter, federal influence remained relevant. Under the nation's first copyright regulations, works published by American authors or any foreign books revised by Americans for domestic use could be defended at law against infringers. As indiscriminate reproduction of English texts had long been both part of the printer/publisher's repertory and a competitive problem, this provision shifted the terrain. Those making books hastened to adapt, rather than duplicate, "foreign" works of history and geography, school texts, dictionaries, and so forth for American audiences, thereby securing copyright protection.

Yet multiple problems remained. Printing books meant little unless they could be distributed and sold, bringing in funds to cover costs and, with luck, generating profits. Moreover, there was clearly a learning curve in mastering book production and marketing. In the two decades after 1800, a cluster of Philadelphia printing masters gradually dropped job work and newspaper ambitions to specialize in creating and vending books, in time abandoning the mechanics of printing to become contracting publishers. By 1820, this core group negotiated with authors, commissioned printing and binding, ran city bookshops (some with branches), and developed national networks for distribution, thereby defining publishing as an independent vocation. Key to this process of differentiation were a series of trade organizations and gradually refined trade practices. Although

a few journeymen tried to strike out on their own as publishing entrepreneurs and others formed a short-lived labor association (the Philadelphia Typographical Society), veteran master printers had far better chances for success. Following up on a mid-1790s effort, a group of nascent publishers created the Philadelphia Company of Booksellers in 1802, which encouraged cooperation among producers to limit duplication of reprinted titles, sponsored collective promotional literature, and sought “to bring growth to the trade by encouraging ... risk-sharing” (p. 61). Thus Company members co-published a series of schoolbooks, each contributing to the expenses and subscribing for a portion of print runs. Though, like the journeymen’s Society, the Company lasted only a few years, it did bring members of this emerging network into close and fraternal contact, both with one another and with more distant printer/publishers, the latter through a series of book fairs held alternately in New York and Philadelphia. At these twice-yearly sessions, booksellers arranged “exchanges” (trading at list price copies of their imprints for those of colleagues, thus broadening their stores’ stocks), debated distribution dilemmas, and solidified wider credit relationships. The fairs, too, foundered in a few years, but the business links and trade consciousness they fostered would endure, widening the gap between publishers and “mere” printers.

As Philadelphia’s most prominent bookman, Matthew Carey addressed the distribution obstacle by dramatically expanding an older trade practice. To get books on store shelves beyond the coastal cities, publishers had at times used commission sales, acting as quasi-wholesalers who selected and shipped parcels of books to shops in interior towns, though retaining ownership. Frequent correspondence with hundreds of vendors enabled Carey to develop an information base about what moved and what did not, thus identifying local and regional reading tastes. Early on, Carey also employed “a full-time book peddler” to travel the back country, in this case the celebrated Parson Weems, who sold religious tracts and took orders throughout Maryland and Virginia (p. 130). The city’s Woodward house ultimately engaged forty-seven such minister-salesmen, whereas McCarty and Davis hired “professional” travelers “who derived their whole living from selling books” (p. 136). Carey and others also collaborated on extensive co-publishing ventures with up to a dozen colleagues along the Atlantic coast, in order to finance multi-volume sets (e.g., Shakespeare, the Waverly novels), often soliciting advance subscriptions and again sharing risks and rewards.

Collectively, these marketing tactics swelled the circulation of books throughout the early republic. However, the trade’s expansion depended upon “an extraordinarily delicate business structure,” centered on credit relationships (p. 116). Publishers rarely had cash in hand to fund printing costs, hence printers often took payment in books or discountable notes, rather than wait for publishers to amass income from sales. At the other end of the pipeline, rural shops and peddlers were notorious slow-pays and, laterally, publishers usually had elaborate interfirm credits and debts, carried on their accounts. In this regard, Remer elegantly explicates publishers’ accounting practices and demonstrates that their complex credit networks reinforced a workable sense of community. Publishers routinely endorsed notes for printers and one another, and just as routinely, extended them, because protesting a default, much less instituting a lawsuit over a debt, could set off widening ripples of credit collapse. Indeed, when Carey refused to extend an endorsement for C. and A. Conrad, forcing their bankruptcy, the outcome haunted him for years, not least because his fellow creditors stripped the firm’s principal assets while Carey was out of town, leaving “not ... a single dollar’s worth for me” (p. 119). He lost \$22,000 in the affair. Though Remer does not press the point, I would consider this sequence a trade community’s exemplary revenge on a member who had broken unwritten compacts and threatened its fragile foundations of trust and credit.

Overall, Remer’s study provides a corrective to earlier scholars who dated the divorce of publishing and printing to the mid-nineteenth century and regarded publishers’ marketing efforts before the railroad age as minimal. Equally valuable is her reconstruction of the extensive interactions among publishers, of their business practices and networked credit relations, and of their growing self-awareness as a community promoting both entrepreneurship and “a national society and culture” (p. 152). Though the writing is at times wooden (passive voice abounds), this work should be welcomed as a substantive contribution to understanding a crucial economic sector’s transformation in the early decades of the republic.

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