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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.

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Rosalind Remer's *Printers and Men of Capital* is the first archivally based study of the gradual evolution in the nineteenth-century United States of the colonial printer into the Victorian publisher. To facilitate her analysis of this transition, Remer has written a case study of a single branch of the publishing trade in a single city. Though she includes chapters on the colonial press and the newspaper press in the 1790s, her book is basically a collective history of Philadelphia book publishers in the half-century between the 1790s and the 1840s. During this period, Remer posits, many of Philadelphia's leading publishers crossed the "invisible line" that separated the often precarious craft traditions of the eighteenth-century printer from the bourgeois solidity of the nineteenth-century entrepreneur (p. 151). How and why a generation of Philadelphia publishers crossed this line is Remer's major concern.

Remer's book will be of interest to business historians for several reasons. Most important, it provides a detailed introduction to business practices during a period that many business historians overlook. Indeed, Remer's description of the business strategies that publishers pursued is among the strongest features of her book and helps to explain why the Business History Conference awarded the dissertation on which it was based the prestigious Herman Krooss Prize. Remer is particularly good at describing the various accounting techniques that publishers relied on to keep track of their stock and the elaborate trade networks that they established to expand the size of their market. Parson Weems, it turns out, was by no means the only itinerant bookseller to recognize the business potential of the hinterland. Throughout the early republic, Philadelphia publishers sent out agents to tap the commercial potential of the trans-Appalachian West.

Another virtue of Remer's book is the contrast she draws between business practices in the early republic and the colonial era. Though Remer is ultimately more impressed by the obstacles Philadelphia publishers failed to surmount than by the constraints they overcame, her book provides abundant evidence for Thomas C. Cochran's suggestive claim that the early republic deserves to be remembered as one of the most innovative in

all of American business history. The networks the publishers established may have been "modest, disorganized, and decentralized" in comparison to those that emerged after the coming of the railroad, yet they were remarkably elaborate for their day (p. 147).

The contrast Remer draws between the colonial era and the early republic raises a number of interpretative questions. What difference, if any, did the establishment of the central government make for the publishing trade? Remer is well aware of the importance of political printing during the 1790s, when Philadelphia was the national capital. Yet she downplays the possible role that the publishing of government documents might have played in the book trade. J. H. Powell helped to open up this subject many years ago with a suggestive book on the history of government printing. More recently, William J. Gilmore has calculated that, throughout the early republic, government bodies commissioned around one-quarter of all the imprints in the United States. Remer, perhaps wisely, has chosen to exclude government printing from her study. Yet until someone explores the relationship of the government and the press, the history of publishing in this period will necessarily remain incomplete.

Further questions are raised by Remer's claim that, in the early republic, population growth and geographical expansion outstripped the country's communication, transportation, and financial capabilities (p. 9). Like Ronald Zboray, whose ***Fictive People*** reaches a similar conclusion, Remer downplays the many improvements in transportation and communications that took place prior to the coming of the railroad. To substantiate her claim, Remer stresses the failure of Philadelphia publishers to establish distribution networks that were truly national in scope. Remer can hardly be faulted for observing that the communications and transportation infrastructure in the decades between the 1790s and the 1840s was less well developed than the communications and transportation infrastructure at midcentury. One wonders, however, if this is the relevant comparison. Remer herself documents the impressive intraregional networks that publishers established in the decades following the adoption of the Constitution. Might it not make more sense to compare these networks with the far more limited networks that existed in the colonial period, rather than with the even more elaborate networks that were soon to emerge?

Questions such as these highlight the impressive strengths of Remer's book. Carefully researched, judiciously argued, and elegantly written, it provides business historians with a wealth of information about a subject they have too often ignored. Publishing is a much more important business activity than most business historians have acknowledged. In ***Printers and Men of Capital***, a key chapter in this story has found its historian. Should other historians follow Remer's lead, business historians will find themselves much better able to generalize persuasively about an important nineteenth-century industry that, at least in certain respects, looks forward to the information-based enterprises that have come to loom so large in the contemporary world.

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