

For example: "Just as the global appeal of Hollywood movies has something to do with the nature of America, the universal appeal of Shakespeare's plays tells us something about the society in which they were created." This is otiose. Still, these lapses aside, Buruma has written a deeply

intelligent book that is a pleasure to read. Above all, he has a nicely oblique, understated sense of humor. Perhaps it is that—the subtle intimation that life and the human universe are really rather droll—which sets the fully-fledged Englishman apart from the mere Anglophile. ■

established place in the following basic story about European intellectual history. Before moveable type and the printed book, scholars had to spend all of their time fretting over the accuracy of their handwritten texts. Scribal errors corrupted everything, making the primary task of academicians a tedious collation and comparison of sources. But the advent of the printing press changed all this, endowing the new printed texts with a new quality: fixity. Standardized, concretized, reproduced in quantity, the printed book could be disseminated in the free-wheeling intellectual marketplace of an emergent "print culture." Here was the stuff of modernity: people reading and interpreting, codifying laws and languages, formulating and circulating their theories of creation. Or, to put it another way: the Protestant Reformation, the Rise of the Nation-State, and the Scientific Revolution.

Thus compressed, the proposition might seem a bit silly, but it has held up surprisingly well. When it comes time to talk about early modernity with a large class of undergraduates yearning to acquit themselves of Western Civ., one seldom omits mention of the rise of a "print culture" and the way newly fixed, reliable texts changed the shape of knowledge in Europe. A part of the story's appeal lies in its crediting a technology—the printing press—with agency. Clio has had an on-going, subtle fling with Vulcan for quite some time. She likes the mechanic's gadgets, his devices. Machines so clearly do things—they raise weights, grind gun-barrels, scale the Alleghenies—that they must work their tireless labors on history as well. Hence a standard account: enter the printing press, enter textual "fixity" and its attendant cultural emoluments, not least among them science itself.

ACCORDING TO JOHNS, however, we have been wrong to credit the machine, and missed the real story in the process. From our vantage point, print might look like a stabilizing medium, and the printing press might seem to impart "fixity" to the written word—but tell that to John Theophilus Desaguliers, lecturer in Newtonian philosophy in the 1720s, who became so fed up with the countless fraudulent books that bore his name (and the countless others that contained his work but not his name) that he circulated an announcement that only books bearing his hand-written inscription were to be credited by readers. Print fixed nothing for Desaguliers.

The harder Johns looks at the "print culture" of early modern London, in fact, the more out of whack the standard story becomes. Rather than stamping out nice, reliable stacks of neatly printed books

Books and Crannies

By D. GRAHAM BURNETT

The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making by Adrian Johns

(University of Chicago Press, 753 pp., \$40)

WE WOULD DO WELL to get the truth about this book out in the open. The truth is that I wrote it. And if you run into this Adrian Johns and he claims it as his own, give him a good drubbing for me, for making off with a decade of my scholarly labors. Another thing: under no condition should you purchase his fraudulent scribbling, rife with errors, a hack job of the basest sort. Allow me to recommend that you destroy any copy you find. Demand loudly of bookstores that they immediately order the true edition of *The Nature of the Book*, the original one wholly corrected by me, and available only from me, directly. Do not be taken in by this impostor!

If you have read this far, and you were born in the last two hundred years, you probably suspect that the above paragraph must be some kind of joke. You are right. But it is the aim of *The Nature of the Book*—a mammoth and stimulating account of the place of print in the history of knowledge—to show its modern readers that their fellows back in the seventeenth century would have had no such confidence. For them, my opener would have been standard fare, another tedious dispute over a pirated book. And should Johns and Burnett intend a duel to settle the matter—that would be a literary spat worth sitting up for.

The controlling claim of Johns's book is

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that the reading context—the tacit knowledge about where books come from, how they find readers, and how they are read, which would have been common knowledge to a writer's contemporaries—has a history, and that this history is required for the proper critical understanding of a printed text. Johns has written a tremendously learned primer on what one needed to know to be a confident reader in early modern Britain: how books were made and sold, by whom, and how one decided which could be relied on.

This might seem a mightily pedantic primer, of use only to those whose professional responsibilities (or personal predilections) compel them to read old books as people of old would have read them. But this underplays Johns's hand. For while *The Nature of the Book* will surely help historians of the period understand how their subjects read, the project is much more ambitious than that. Reading, after all, is deeply entangled with knowing. In fact, print represents a remarkable technology for knowing: books are places to record knowledge and ways of moving it around. Understand, then, how people read—particularly how they distinguish between the creditable and the suspect in their reading—and you would seem to have gotten your hands on something important about how people claim to know things. The nitty-gritty of the printer's shop, the stupendous minutiae of bibliography, the Byzantine world of print piracy: all these details about the world of early modern printing are, for Johns, a way to get at epistemic questions. Print in the making, as the subtitle suggests, is knowledge in the making.

This assertion by itself is not new. On the contrary, printing has a reasonably well-

ready for distribution to Europe's centers of learning, the printing press sat at the center of a madcap world of low-lives, shysters, hawkers, and lean deal-makers, all of them more interested in printing their way into some money than serving scholarship. This was the world of the stationer, a community of printers and booksellers who amphibiously negotiated high-culture salons and Grub Street alleys. Their "company," a legal body chartered by Queen Mary in 1577, constituted a semi-autonomous polity for the regulation of print through the seventeenth century. Ordering this anarchic guild was never easy. The prodigious productivity of the printing press itself opened the sluices on every manner of clandestine reprinting, knock-off, plagiarism, and textual manipulation.

Visiting the print shop, an aspiring natural philosopher would not have found a friendly set of docile laborers concerned to get his manuscript carefully into print and ready to box off to his colleagues in Leiden. Instead, if he crossed the threshold at the wrong time, he might send the shop hands scrambling out the back windows for fear that he was the King's inspector (or a competitor) trying to nab them in a late-night job on a seditious pamphlet or a bit of saucy verse. The number of printing shops in London—they are the focus of Johns's book—hovered shy of fifty throughout the century, but these houses were merely nodes in a complex web that made up the stationer's world. To the print shops themselves must be added more than one hundred booksellers (plus many more informal outlets and hucksters), coffee houses where books were read and exchanged, and myriad other places and persons: papermakers, typesetters, regulators both formal and informal, open and covert.

Here was a world where rapacity was bounded only by good business sense, where nearly everyone ran off a few extra copies on the side, where shady dealing defined who was who. Granted, not all the pirates were clever enough to pirate a popular pamphlet that railed against piracy, but a few of them did, as Johns notes, and it is a safe bet they enjoyed a tankard of ale and a good laugh in the pub while the sheets were drying. Too bad their mate the proofreader had to miss the celebration, ignominiously hanged, drawn, and quartered for correcting the punctuation on an anti-royalist booklet. You just couldn't be too careful.

ONE PURSUED AUTHORSHIP in this world at one's peril; but the failure to master this realm guaranteed anonymity at best, ignominy at worst. Little wonder then that those who became

the most celebrated figures of the period for their voluminous accessions to the world of learning—Robert Hooke, Robert Boyle, Christopher Wren, Isaac Newton—became skilled performers in this print circus. As Johns asserts, each of them likely spent as much time steering their work through the maze of London stationers as they did making air-pumps, fiddling with gravity, and generally participating in the dawn of experimental science for which they and their age would become immortal. Would they have become immortal if they had gotten stuck in this maze?

This is an interesting question; and if Johns had stopped here, *The Nature of the Book* would have added a good deal to our understanding of the period, and of the

history of science as well. To the roster of abilities that we can confidently assign to a pioneering natural philosopher—imagination, an eye for significant questions, certain mathematical and mechanical talents—we must now add a capacity to talk one's way into and out of a printshop. Johns's detailed portrait of the stationer's world puts both the texts and the authors of the period in a new light. Given that historians spend much of their time using the books of the past, a thickened sense of their provenance and the idiosyncrasies of their production stands to inform those readings.

But there is more. By representing this stationer's world in its full chaotic splendor, Johns unsettles the received idea of a "print culture": rather than merely gener-

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ating grist for the mill of learning, the printing press spawned a complicated commercial world where men and women wrangled over textual property and tested the unconsolidated boundaries of print propriety. Johns's claim is that if we wish to understand how the printed book came to be a reliable instrument for the production and distribution of knowledge, it is this wrangling that we need to understand.

FOR THE FIXITY OF the printed word—its vaunted reliability—never sprang automatically from the new technology. It emerged slowly as a social context stabilized around the practice of printing itself. What mattered were people, norms, laws protecting textual “property,” a consolidated notion of authorship. Only within the scaffolding of these nascent cultural forms could the printed word stand up to scrutiny. The erecting of that scaffolding not only affected the origins of what we think of as science, it is just possible that many of the innovations that we associate with the “scientific revolution”—learned journals, the research article, scientific societies, even the book review itself—might actually be that scaffolding. Thus scrutinized, the institutional structures of early modern science start to look a good deal like a set of strategies to get a grip on the chaotic world of print.

This is not a small punch line, but this is not a small book. So much can be affirmed by any reader who notices, on passing page one hundred and eighty-five, that the second chapter remains unconquered. By the end of that chapter, however, the reader has been introduced to the hurly-burly of the London book trade: the inside of the printer's house; the physical labor of printing a page; the myriad folk necessary to undertake a book; the door-to-door “mercury women,” who slung copies over their shoulders and padded about to private homes and bookshops to sell them. Piracy was not an aberration, it was closer to a way of life. If the prospect of sending a manuscript off to the publisher seemed banal at the start of *The Nature of the Book*, on finishing chapter two one can see how a prospective author might have had a nostalgic yearning for a good old-fashioned scribal monk in his celibate cell, outfitted with some foolscap, a quill pen, and a spare decade.

Much of the rest of Johns's book details the different means by which this hectic world was called to order. An extended visit to the Stationers' Hall serves this function. Here a somewhat fractious “commonwealth” of craftsmen defined the proper practice of book making. If there was “fixity” in the printed word, that fixity

had more to do with what stationers would and would not let each other get away with than it did with any occult virtue imparted by the press itself. Their “register”—a ledger where individual members inscribed titles that they claimed as their prerogative—served as one means to stabilize who had a right to print what. It was also subject to fraud and manipulation, particularly if you could get friendly with the clerk who kept it. Overstep the bounds of propriety, however, and you lost credibility. In a world that demanded lots of collaboration, the loss of credit meant almost certain failure.

THOSE WHO LOST OUT in this politic world sought other grounds to claim a right to print and to sell books. One place they looked was to the crown. Did a royal patent to print certain texts—say, books of law—trump the traditional authority of the guild? In Restoration Britain, this was a question one could get killed over, particularly if one seemed to be slighting the authority of Charles II. In marshaling evidence for their respective positions, the two sides in this dispute turned firmly to the past, and sought to ground their claims in different stories about the origin of printing. If printing had arisen as a craft, practiced by free men, then it fell under the protection of its own customs and traditional associations. Suppose, though, that the printing press had made its way to Britain by means of the King's own agency, his recruiting spies back in the late fifteenth century to snag a shop assistant from a Dutch atelier. If this was so, then the right to print derived directly from the crown. Contesting printer-authors constructed elaborate genealogies of their craft, all with an eye toward establishing the true nature of print, and, in the process, ratifying one or another kind of print-regulation.

Thus printers themselves stepped forward as the first historians of their trade, and they bear part of the responsibility for mythologizing the print revolution. Their labors bequeathed to us a story about the Adamic printer, Johann Gutenberg, a story that came to be codified as part of a heated dispute among English stationers such as William Prynne and John Streater about who had the authority to print what. It would be very easy to forget, too, that modern notions of authorship and copyright were codified in the context of these same disputes. As legal entities, authors simplified the messy world of early modern book making: define the author as the person responsible for a book, and the business of finding out whom to blame just got considerably easier.

By detailing all this—how authors got

to be authors, how printers got to be printers, how the “print revolution” was part of an invented tradition—Johns wants to show how much of what we take for granted about a “print culture” might conceivably have worked out otherwise, how little came as a gift of the printing press and how much came as a result of efforts to fix the mess that the printing press introduced.

NO QUESTION WAS more urgent in this arena than how people were to read the many new texts to which they had access. In an especially impressive chapter, Johns situates the activity of reading in the context of early modern theories of mind, showing that proper reading meant the proper disciplining of exuberant (and potentially noxious) “passions.” It would be fair to say that from Thomas Willis (a natural philosopher at Oxford) to John Locke, English thinkers in the seventeenth century were as concerned with the impact of reading upon the mind as twentieth-century Americans are concerned with the cerebral effects of video games and television.

Johns goes on to reveal that “bad” readings were understood to have pernicious consequences. If the contest over who had the right to print books could not be separated from struggles between republicans and monarchists, the struggle over how to read those books could not be separated from the pitched battle over the enthusiastic interpretive exercises of non-conformists, those who quaked and shook their way through intimate readings of Scripture. Just as new institutions regulated—with varying degrees of success—the volatile world of printing, still other institutions and practices seemed to be needed to stabilize the equally volatile world of reading. Nor were these enterprises entirely unrelated: when, in 1653, John Field misprinted I Corinthians 6:9 so that the unrighteous did inherit the Kingdom, the problem transcended copy-editing.

In the light of Johns's work, we may reframe the problem of knowledge in the long seventeenth century, and call it a problem of stabilizing the social forms that guaranteed reliability in book makers and book users. Then take a close look at the Royal Society. Chartered by Charles II in 1662, the Royal Society has long occupied a quasi-sacred place in the history of science. Here a coterie of curious gentlemen nurtured the nascent experimental philosophy. They watched experiments, recorded their observations, accepted submissions of papers outlining inventions and questions. Here, if anywhere, the institutional context of scientific investigation was born. The motto of the society—*Nullius*

in Verba, Nothing by Words—captures the spirit of a Baconian enterprise, one intent on rejecting scholasticism and its endless disputations, and hankering to twist nature's tail in an effort to figure out what was going on. And given this paradigmatic rejection of words, it merits attention that the Society was perhaps best known for its *Transactions*, often cited as the earliest scientific journal in Europe.

WHAT WAS THE Royal Society, Johns asks, if not an ingenious solution to the problems posed by a world of unreliable print and ungovernable readings? The Society worked like a print licensor (its secretary had served the King in just that capacity), granting its imprimatur to works. This did not mean that the Society ratified the truth of their content; it meant that the Society vouched for their reliability: they were what they said they were. Like the stationer's commonwealth, the Society kept a register, in which it recorded all communications and claims. As the stationer's register rewarded openness by guaranteeing a record of property, so the register of the Royal Society served as a repository of claims to innovation. In negotiating conflicts of precedence, the register could show who was a usurper, and who had simply been outdone.

The Royal Society's structure and textual practices—its meetings, its role in encouraging candor and distribution of information while limiting plagiarism, its concern with intellectual property and credit, its appraisals of recently printed books—can be understood as an array of strategies to stabilize the printed word, to make sober and public the practice of text-making, to frustrate the pirates. The enterprise of understanding Creation could not free itself from the systems of communication available; and a glance at the world of the stationers proved these were daunting indeed.

The Royal Society, then, emerged as a very clever solution to a set of perplexities faced by anyone wanting to read or to write a book. It worked to create a sanctuary for the right books and the right ways of using them. Against this backdrop, science itself appears to take shape as a very particular set of ways of reading and writing. Seem far-fetched? It might not have seemed so strange to John Flamsteed, the Astronomer Royal, as he stoked the flames under a giant stack of book signatures at the top of Greenwich Hill in March of 1716. The book in question bore his name, and it represented a decade's labor at his telescope, charting the sky of the northern hemisphere. Master of his telescope but flummoxed at the printshop, Flamsteed had fought a losing battle with

Isaac Newton and Edmund Halley over how his magnum opus would go into print. The details of this struggle make up the capstone chapter to *The Nature of the Book*. Here a well-known scientific dispute is retold as a dispute about print and propriety, with a conclusion that speaks for the book: science took shape in the transit to print.

AMBROSE BIERCE ONCE reviewed a book in a single sentence: "The covers of this book are too far apart." Having traversed all the territory embraced by the covers of *The Nature of the Book*, I will say only that they are very far apart. If Johns did not write so well, it would be difficult to imagine navigating so vast and meticulous a study. But he writes very well indeed, offering elegant conceits for each chapter, regularly reviewing the territory covered and that lying ahead, and periodically proffering a zinger to hold the reader's attention.

John Streater was born in Lewes, Sussex.

It was a godly town, and Streater's was a godly family. His brother Aaron, for example, combined sectarianism with illicit medical practice and a keen interest in explosives.

It is difficult to imagine a nicer way to meet the Streeters.

Still, as I made my way through Johns's volume and was exhorted to think harder about the social contexts out of which books emerge and into which they go, I could not help but turn my thinking to the nature of *The Nature of the Book*: the meticulous scholarship, the low throb of the footnotes on each page, the bibliography of one thousand six hundred printed items, the cullings from nearly twenty archives. Who, I began to wonder, actually reads such a tremendous accomplishment?

This is not the first time I have wondered this about a scholarly book. But here, in Johns's case, the question took on a new urgency: most scholars who write endless turgid books do so for want of the ability to write something less turgid. While *The Nature of the Book* is not the least bit turgid—the thoroughly brilliant first page is the best five hundred words I have ever come across in an academic book—it is nearly endless. This might not matter, if one did not sense in *The Nature of the Book* a 240-page book yearning to breathe free, ruddy with its author's intelligence, packed with his painstaking research, endowed with his narrative gifts. A book, for God's sake, that people—real, thinking people, with lives—could actually sit down and read. I will not speculate as to why this book is not with us, though I

must strongly suspect that a glance at the context that has produced this one—an academic world that has seen a preposterous escalation in what a young scholar must publish to secure a tenured position—would tell us much about how it came to be what it is. In the end, that ghostly book would have been a much less impressive thing than *The Nature of the Book*, but it would have given pleasure to many more people.

AND NOT MERELY pleasure. A part of what makes Johns's book so timely is that we find ourselves, at this very moment, in the throes of a textual revolution of comparable scope to the one that was precipitated by printing itself. Anyone casting about to understand just what Johns is getting at—how a technical innovation could precipitate a chaotic scramble to reconstitute textual authority and reliability—need look no farther than the computer perched on his desk.

Imagine, for a moment, a future history of the late twentieth century. It argues that the electronic text revolution was simple: people had more texts at their disposal, greater flexibility in using them, greater ease in moving them around. How foolish such an account would seem! We, alive now and watching it happen, know only too well that electronic systems for moving and composing text and images have outstripped our social codes and norms: teachers have no way to monitor the plagiarism of sources; parents have no way to regulate children's access to the most dazzling pornography; massive quantities of information about each of us drift free for public access; other people can use your e-mail signature to send hate-mail to your boss.

Meanwhile, just as Johns describes in the context of the seventeenth century, we are already setting about mythologizing this revolution, creating folk histories, and deploying new systems (social, technical) to restabilize credit and security in this new and chaotic world. One utopian story credits e-mail and desktop publishing with the fall of the Berlin Wall. On the dystopian side, we hear that webs of electronic exchange have destabilized stock markets and national economies.

Johns would have us remember that the technology does nothing by itself. What will be interesting is to watch how our social lives, our institutional forms, and our very theories of knowledge are refigured in order to stabilize what a new textual technology has set in flux. Taking Johns's argument in its most ambitious formulation, the last time this happened nothing less than science emerged from the fray. If he is right, we may expect some remarkable things ahead. ■