

Excerpts from **Harris, Bob. 'Print Culture'. *A Companion to Eighteenth-Century Britain*. Ed. H. T. Dickinson. Cornwall: Blackwell, 2002. 283-193.**

“Establishing the outlines of the growth of a new world of print in the eighteenth century is relatively simple. Figures for newspaper circulation, a fair number of pamphlet and book editions are fairly widely available, and they provide a basis for assessing the expansion of the print trade. They show, for example, that amongst London newspapers circulations did not grow significantly during the century; what changed was the number of titles. They also show that it was school books and almanacs that were commonly printed in the largest editions. What is much more difficult, however, is to assess who the new culture of print reached and how it affected them. Part of the problem is the sheer volume and growing diversity of print published across the century. There is also a general lack of data on who bought or read what, quite apart from the issue of how things were read and with what effect.

Some generalizations are, nevertheless, possible. Literacy was probably less of a constraint than cost. Problems surround the measurement and definition of literacy, but some reading ability seems to have been very widely diffused in urban communities by the middle of the eighteenth century and throughout much of Lowland Scottish society. Apart from popular literature, print was relatively expensive. There was a dynamic in some sections of the print trade towards searching out new and expanded readerships. In the 1730s part-books began to appear, so lowering their cost with each instalment and making them marketable on the lines of other popular literature. At the end of the century Matthew Brown, a printer-publisher from North Shields, produced a Bible, illustrated with engravings by the Newcastle engraver Thomas Bewick, in ninety-three parts at 5 d a part. Brown claimed that it was the cheapest family Bible that had ever been offered to the public. Yet the impression left by the sources is that the purchase and readership of newspapers, books and other forms of print, apart from popular literature, were heavily concentrated amongst the elites and the increasingly numerous and prosperous middling ranks. It is notable that when groups of different sorts wished to reach a popular audience through print, their publications typically were sold in large numbers at a heavy discount to be given away, recognition of the fact that cost would otherwise seriously limit the extent of their influence. Much of the loyalist literature during the Jacobite rebellions of 1715 and 1745–6, and again during the 1790s, was of this kind, as was literature produced by religious Evangelicals, including Methodists, and by societies for the reformation of manners in the 1690s and again in the 1780s. Provincial newspapers needed to circulate on a regional basis to survive and prosper, suggesting a relatively socially circumscribed market for them, especially outside of larger towns and cities. Christopher Etherington’s *York Chronicle* had 2,230 subscribers in 1776. By this date, this was not a notably high figure, and Etherington’s business collapsed in 1777. These subscribers were distributed throughout and around towns and cities in Yorkshire and neighbouring counties.

Access to books, periodicals, newspapers and pamphlets was facilitated by the emergence of circulating, subscription and proprietary libraries and book clubs from the later 1730s and – in the later eighteenth century – purpose-built newsrooms. Between the 1720s and the end of the century 112 book-rental establishments were founded in the capital, and around 270 in the provinces. In Scotland the first circulating library was established by Allan Ramsay in Edinburgh in 1725, but they were relatively slow to spread in the next few decades; the real expansion in libraries north of the border, of various sorts, was in the final decades of the century. Throughout Britain an unknown number of booksellers also rented out books. John Clay, who had bookshops in Daventry, Rugby and Lutterworth in the west midlands in the 1770s, lent out books at the cost of 3 d a volume, imposing no annual fee as was the practice of most libraries. Coffee houses and taverns supplied newspapers and pamphlets, and in some cases books, for their clientele. Yet again, we must be wary about exaggerating the extent to which these bodies opened up readership to groups much below the prosperous middling sort. Subscriptions to libraries and book clubs were relatively costly, although in the case of commercial

libraries in larger towns and cities scales of tariffs could be fairly elaborate, including rates for borrowing individual items overnight or for a week. We know relatively little about coffee houses outside of a small number of relatively famous ones in London and one or two in the provinces. In 1715 a report from Aberdeen described neighbouring Jacobite gentry spreading rumours in the local coffee house, suggesting that at least part of their clientele was the local elite. Where information is available, membership of subscription libraries and book clubs appears to have been typically confined to a fairly representative cross-section of the local elite. This was especially true of book clubs, which often comprised no more than ten to twenty members. Some subscription libraries involved many more people. The Liverpool subscription library, founded in 1758, had over 400 members by 1799. Yet the bulk of their membership was still focused on the relatively prosperous classes, typically, clergymen, manufacturers, merchants and various professionals. The Perth subscription library, founded in 1786, had a membership largely comprised of the town elite – professionals and merchants – and neighbouring gentry and ministers of the church.

Several things appear to have been happening, therefore. First, books, periodicals and newspapers were by the later eighteenth century being read more extensively by the upper and middling ranks, both men and women. This simply reflected the much greater wealth of publications available, and also the book clubs and libraries of various kinds. They fed an appetite for fashionable literature, often of a serious kind, which was being produced in ever-increasing volumes by the final third of the century. As book prices rose in the later eighteenth century, and as the number of publications proliferated, few individuals could afford to purchase more than a small selection of them on their own. Many moralists complained about circulating libraries as sources of the moral corruption of women, who were borrowing cheap novels and filling their heads with unsuitable expectations and ideals. (The publication of novels grew rapidly in the 1740s, and then surged again in the 1770s, partly to feed the appetite of users of the commercial and subscription libraries.) The reality seems to have been slightly different – many libraries flourished also because of the great demand for books such as histories and travel literature, although there are very few extant borrowing records. Newsrooms, which emerged at the very end of the century, furnished the same service in respect of periodicals and newspapers, providing a range of these far beyond what an individual would consider purchasing. Books and newspapers also attracted a large readership amongst the commercial classes, for practical as well as cultural reasons. Up-to-date information about international affairs was crucial to traders and merchants, and newspapers offered unexampled breadth and continuity of coverage in this sphere.

Nevertheless, other readerships, some of which stretched further down the social scale, were also coming into clearer definition in the course of the eighteenth century. Weavers, colliers and shoemakers from the west and southwest of Lowland Scotland can be found subscribing to religious works in the middle and at the end of the eighteenth century. Many religious works were also published in serial form, and popular devotional works continued to be, as they had in the previous century, some of the most widely circulated and read. These and other religious works provided one of the staples of the country book trade; they also provided a staple of a growing Welsh-language print trade based in Carmarthen. Such facts warn us against assuming too readily that print was predominantly a secularizing force in this period, at least outside of ‘polite’ society. The market for children’s and popular literature was a buoyant and extremely large one. Practical books and guides proliferated. It was the gaps between these different readerships that may have been widening during the eighteenth century, although in some cases they were overlapping. Working-class autobiographies of individuals who were children in the 1780s and 1790s tend to evoke a world in which books and newspapers were rare, although the fortunate had some access to popular literature. Relatively few new fictional works crossed the divide between high and low culture, one notable exception being Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, which was printed in cheap abridgements.

For those resident in towns and cities, however, print was colonizing increasing areas of society. Urban society was in various ways moving towards much greater print dependency, although this is a process which has yet to be systematically documented. A growing number of professions – such as attorneys and auctioneers – called on the services of printers, for advertisements and forms. The relationships between print and the medical world, amateur and professional, were close and developing ones. Local government in its various guises increasingly exploited the possibilities for communication created by print and newspapers. When a section of the populace rioted because of a shortage of meal in Leith in 1751, a handbill was quickly distributed explaining how the authorities were seeking to redress the grievances of the crowd. Already by 1760 an increasing number of individuals and groups in society (commercial bodies, ministers and politicians of all stripes, charitable organizations, religious groups, victims of crime, tradesmen and merchants, even well-organized sections of the labouring classes such as colliers and weavers) were recognizing that the newspaper represented an unrivalled vehicle for publicity and the dissemination of information. The world of print in the eighteenth century also encompassed a growing number of artisans and members of the skilled labouring classes, as well as the middling and upper ranks. By the later eighteenth century artisans lent one another books and went to debating clubs. They also had access to newspapers through less fashionable coffee houses and taverns in many parts of urban Britain. Newspapers could also be hired from hawkers in the streets; they were also purchased collectively and passed around. In the 1790s, under the impact of the French Revolution and French Revolutionary Wars, these practices appear to have expanded significantly amongst sections of the labouring classes, although it may also be simply that they became more politically threatening and therefore visible to the historian. In Cupar, Fife, weavers were clubbing together to buy copies of the *Scots Chronicle* in the later 1790s. Nor were artisans and shopkeepers who lived in rural villages necessarily cut off from the world of books and print, even before the 1790s. In very remote places, for example Cromarty on the edge of the Highlands, there was the possibility of borrowing books from local merchants. In the aftermath of the Jacobite rebellion of 1745–6, Catholic priests carried political pamphlets and tracts through the disaffected areas of the Highlands. Chapbooks, and indeed in some places other books, were carried by itinerant sellers on extended circuits through the country and to places such as fairs and markets; a flood of print seeped into the most obscure rural areas.

During the eighteenth century, therefore, the tentacles of the print trade extended across many parts of British society. In so doing, they helped to bring into being a culture of unprecedented diversity. It was also a culture in which, for many amongst the elites and middling sort, what a person read became an increasingly important mark of taste and, consequently, social status. This should not disguise the fact, however, that many forms of print in the eighteenth century were not simply a facet of either elite or popular culture, but rather they formed an important bridge between them. As the editor of the *Sheffield Register* declared on 9 June 1797: ‘All ranks of people from the Peer of the realm to the industrious mechanic find something to please them in a newspaper.’”