An Age of Print?: The History of the Book and the New American Nation

With the publication of An Extensive Republic: Print, Culture, and Society in the New Nation, 1790-1840*(Chapel Hill, 2010), Mary Kelley and Robert Gross have brought to completion the American Antiquarian Society's five-volume* A History of the Book in America. *In a project that has involved historians, bibliographers, literary critics, and sociologists on the editorial board, this is the only volume to have been edited exclusively by historians. Common-place asked Kelley and Gross to reflect on the larger historiographical implications of their work. How does the history of the book in the early republic illuminate and alter our understanding of the formative decades of the new American nation?*

Was the early republic "an Age of Print" made glorious by a "reading generation"? So proclaimed a rising chorus of voices during the 1820s and 1830s in celebration of the progress of letters in a new republic upholding the ideal of an informed citizenry and applauding the advance of civilization across the continent book by book. And so, too, in a more sober vein have subsequent historians taken the extension of communications and the proliferation of printed media to be central and positive developments in the making of the American nation in its first half-century of existence. What could be more indispensable to representative government than a vital free press? What better spur to economic development than the rapid circulation of information through growing markets? What more essential service to national unity than the forging of a common American identity through the creation of a unique native literature?

Those claims are not merely rhetorical. They do identify important features of the vibrant print culture of the new republic. Yet the familiar narrative also

oversimplifies, for it charts a linear and uniform course for a society still bound by colonial precedents and pulled in different directions at once. As co-editors of volume 2 of *A History of the Book in America*, we were faced with a challenge not unlike what the founders of the new nation confronted: establishing an effective organizing framework for a decentralized people rapidly gaining in numbers, diversifying in character, multiple in loyalties, and spreading across space. And how to do so with thirty-two contributors, experts in every aspect of a multifarious print culture, who were commissioned to write about publishing and printing at a time of economic and technological change, about politics and journalism, schools, colleges, libraries, religion, benevolent associations, learned societies, reform groups, ethnic and racial communities, and authors and booksellers in an ever-growing list of genres? *One out of many*: to that ideal the new nation was dedicated. But can a survey of the period 1790 to 1840 find sufficient commonality among its heterogeneous parts to carve out an identity distinct from "the colonial book in the Atlantic world," which precedes it in the series, and from "the industrial book" that succeeds it?

Our answer is crystallized in the notion of *An Extensive Republic*—not just a title for the volume but a clue to the nature of "print, culture, and society in the new nation." "An extensive republic" evokes both the immense geographical terrain over which Americans sprawled in this era and the fundamental economic, political, and intellectual challenges of organizing new communities, markets, and governments across this far-flung space. It had once been a commonplace of political philosophy that republics could survive only in small city-states, where the rulers were close to the people. The framers of the Constitution broke with this premise and brought forth a federal government distant from its citizens and dependent on its constituent parts. Would such an extensive regime last? Decentralization represented a necessary adaptation to the "tyranny of distance" holding a scattered people in its grasp. But it also suited popular preferences and guided the crafting of public policy. The extensive republic was a deliberate creation in the realm of print: an expansive world of communications driven by the choices of a heterogeneous people enjoying unprecedented freedom from state control but still subject to constraints by religious and cultural traditions, economic privations, and egregious inequalities and disparities of power in everyday existence. Seen through the lens of print culture, the early republic marked a distinct epoch in American life.

Consider the singular path taken by the new nation in the world of print. Law and public policy promoted open communications. In contrast to Britain and France, the new republic forswore the state powers customarily employed to police opinion. State and federal constitutions guaranteed liberty of the press, and after the Federalists fell from power, prosecution for seditious libel waned as a threat. No stamp taxes restricted the availability of newspapers to an economic elite. No public authorities inspected the mail to hunt out dissent. No customs officers barred dangerous books from crossing American borders. Congress opened the way to the unrestricted reprinting of

foreign titles, since only books produced by U.S. citizens (and resident aliens) qualified for protection under the 1790 Copyright Act. Such policies set the terms by which Americans gained access to information and entertainment from the wider world, unlike Canadians, who remained a cultural colony of Great Britain down to the twentieth century, and unlike the subjects of the United Kingdom themselves, most of whom were closed out of the market for new books by a publishing industry catering to the social and economic elite. The American reading public enjoyed a wider selection of current books, both foreign and domestic, at lower prices than anywhere else in the Atlantic world.

The federal government did not simply keep its hands off the press. It also fostered communications by building a postal system to knit the country together. Under the Post Office Acts of 1792 and 1794, newspapers and magazines circulated through the mail at subsidized rates, while newspaper editors exchanged issues and reprinted from one another at no cost. Other public favors were bestowed by politicians at all levels, who dispensed contracts to print the laws, official advertisements to newspapers, and appointments to patronage posts. Politics—the rise of organized parties and the furious fight for power among them—drove the expansion of the press, with numerous printers and editors earning their pay as editorial voices for partisan causes. Did this print culture sustain the critical public sphere of the eighteenth century? Not in the terms set by Jürgen Habermas, whose concept of “the bourgeois public sphere,” attuned as it is to the *ancien regime* of European monarchies, no longer suits a republican polity, where the great majority of officials were chosen at the polls by an ever-wider electorate of white males. The ideal of an impartial press, acting for the common good, faltered; politics took on the competitive spirit of the marketplace. Yet, “the public sphere of civil society” remained crucial to those groups—notably, women and African Americans—excluded from formal participation in the affairs of state. Obliged to see themselves represented—and often caricatured—in the press through a white male gaze, they created independent forums in voluntary associations and in print to engage with the events and debates of the day, fashion their own identities, and contribute to the making of public opinion.


Robert A. Gross

Distinct from British models of hierarchy and power, the extensive republic of print nonetheless owed substantial debts to the former mother country. Nothing surprised us more in assembling this volume than the continuing dependence of the new nation on the texts, practices, and institutions of British print culture. Before the Revolution, the colonial bookshelf was stocked with publications shipped from London; after Independence, British titles continued to dominate but now in editions “made in America,” as booksellers from Boston to Charleston reprinted with abandon. American publishing was built on piracy, following a strategy pioneered in Edinburgh and Dublin and transplanted to our leading port cities. The entrepreneurs of the book trade often spoke with Scottish and Irish accents; so did the workmen at the press and the case. The business model of book-selling derived from British experience. Small-scale firms constantly struggled to stay afloat, publishing houses banded together to cut costs, limit risks, and reduce competition. Far from welcoming the brave new world of laissez-faire capitalism, they clung to conservative ways. No “market revolution” propelled their pursuit of profit. Congregating in Northeastern cities, book publishers could not keep up with the westward growth of the country. Well into the 1830s they relied on a technology of printing that would have been familiar to Gutenberg. It was nonprofit voluntary societies—the American Bible Society and the American Tract Society—and not commercial enterprises that took the lead in adopting steam-powered presses and stereotype plates. Even then the leading inventions originated across the Atlantic. Slow to innovate, cautious about risk, the book trade could not sell directly to a nationwide market until the coming of the railroad. In an extensive republic the implacable realities of geography favored reliance on the tried-and-true.

Whether they got their print from commercial publishers or voluntary societies, readers were well supplied. We were struck by the initiative shown by those evangelical Protestants who sought a national conversion and a global

millennium. Determined to disseminate tracts and Bibles “with cheapness, security, and expedition to the most distant places,” as the American Bible Society put it, they flooded the market. Between 1825 and 1835, its first decade of existence, the interdenominational American Tract Society issued more than thirty million tracts. In the three years between 1829 and 1831 alone, its pamphlets reached five million Americans annually. Religious works, sold for a pittance or given away for free, competed for readers’ attention with newspapers and magazines of all sorts, including the new urban penny papers, and a proliferation of genres from almanacs, dictionaries, and schoolbooks to geographies, histories, and novels. The works that readers acquired, that they read in local libraries, in post offices, in literary societies, and in taverns, and that they got from itinerant evangelicals, served widely varying purposes. Readers “poached,” as Michel de Certeau has described the agency readers exercise as they engage texts and write them anew.

Nowhere is the appropriation of literacy and print more apparent than in two of the new reading and writing publics on which we focus. Between 1790 and 1840, African Americans and Native Americans, faced with relentless discrimination, looked to reading and writing as political and cultural resources in their push for liberty and sovereignty, respectively.

African Americans deployed literacy and print in the sustained and sustaining challenges they mounted against slavery and discrimination. The meanings attached to these technologies depended upon specific and highly localized contexts. We found Ellen Butler’s exposure to literacy particularly instructive. In recalling life on a plantation in Louisiana, she described an opportunity that had a double edge: “When the white folks go off they writes on the meal and flour with they fingers. Then they know if us steals meal… That the way us larn how to write.” Free-born abolitionist Sarah Mapps Douglass became conscious of the power of literacy and print in strikingly different circumstances. Initially, she had identified herself as an African American in the context of membership in Philadelphia’s black elite. As Douglass told members of the Female Literary Association, she had “formed a little world of my own, and cared not to move beyond its precincts.” Threats from whites who were seizing northern free blacks and sending them South and increased contact with southern blacks who sought refuge from slavery in the North widened her horizons, generating racial solidarity with all African Americans. “The cause of the slave [is now] my own,” Douglass declared at one of the literary society’s meetings. “Has not this been your experience, my sisters?” Many responded in the affirmative. Not only did the members engage in practices of reading and writing, but they also followed Douglass’s advice and chose texts that were “altogether directed to the subject of slavery.” Those readings were taken directly from William Lloyd Garrison’s *Liberator*, and they inspired conversations that led, in turn, to published essays in that abolitionist organ.

For Native Americans, the specificity of context governing African Americans’ experiences was equally important. Consider the Cherokee, who continued to

struggle for basic rights newly independent white Americans called their own. For them, too, literacy and print carried multiple meanings and possibilities. In the wake of the Revolution, which brought military and political defeat and the loss of millions of acres of ancestral lands, the Cherokee found themselves on the defensive as they engaged in yet another battle for survival as an autonomous and sovereign nation. In this struggle the Cherokee embarked on an ambitious cultural renovation. The effort followed two trajectories: the spread of English-language literacy among an influential but relatively small number of Cherokees and the invention by the Cherokee Sequoyah of a written system of language, which was rapidly adopted by many of his countrymen. English-language literacy enabled the creation of a national political structure with a written constitution and a written body of laws, both of which were designed to validate assertions of sovereignty. Equally important, English-language fluency empowered Cherokee leaders in the negotiation of treaties with state and federal officials, who remained relentless in demands for land.

These innovations entailed cultural costs. Representations of Cherokees as a separate and self-sustaining people were elided, and properly “civilized” and “Christianized” exemplars took their place. Perhaps the most famous of these icons, the native Christian convert Catharine Brown, appeared in a series of portrayals compiled by Congregationalists affiliated with the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, one of the most expansive of the voluntary societies bent on putting the “heathen” on the path to salvation. The *Memoir of Catharine Brown: A Christian Indian of the Cherokee Nation* was widely distributed as a separate imprint and excerpted as well in the Congregational *Panoplist and Missionary Magazine United*. Sequoyah chose an alternative path in the battle for political sovereignty and cultural autonomy. He eschewed white religion and literacy and invented a Cherokee writing system (in the form of a syllabary) entirely separate from English. The syllabary’s appeal was immediate. It was also lasting. By 1835, 16,500 people remained on Cherokee land in Georgia. In one of every two households, one member read Cherokee. By contrast, only one of six families claimed a member literate in English. “Language,” observed one Presbyterian missionary only four years after Indian Removal and the Trail of Tears, “stands closely identified with habits and prejudices, cherishes them and keeps them alive.” What appeared to an evangelical minister bent on converting Indians as “habits and prejudices” represented in the eyes of the Cherokee the cultural identity they were so fiercely determined to preserve.


Mary Kelley

Advancing technology, expanding genres, proliferating publications, new communities of readers and writers: in such signs of the times contemporaries discerned an ascendant “Age of Print.” Many hailed the progress of civilization; some feared the degradation of learning in the literary marketplace. Whether enthusiasts or critics, these self-appointed custodians of the word exaggerated the significance of print in everyday life. *An Extensive Republic* documents the perpetuation of older modes of expression and communication in the small-scale, face-to-face settings of everyday life and their alteration in tandem with print by the gathering forces of social and economic change. Americans of the early republic lived in a world of mixed media, with printed words and images commingling with word of mouth, oral performances of all kinds, the composition and circulation of manuscripts, and the display of signs and symbols in public spaces. Far from challenging or supplanting these older forms, print amplified their influence. Merchants’ letters became “public intelligence” in the press; the pages of newspapers were inscribed with private, handwritten messages, even proposals of marriage, and dispatched through the mail. Farmers marked up almanacs with laconic notes on weather and crops; readers in town and country recorded passionate responses to novels on margins and endpapers.

Print was, then, multiform in its possibilities, and it did not move in a single direction of change. “Extensiveness,” in the end, connotes more than a rapidly increasing geography and population; it captures the rich variety of a novel print culture, whose effects we came to see in the distinctive republic it helped to forge. Print heightened both national attachments and sectional resentments. It undercut local economies and facilitated inter-regional exchange. It pursued inclusive audiences across social divides and carved them up into segments according to class, region, religion, occupation, ethnicity, gender, and race. It defined lines between the sexes, then challenged and transgressed them. It fostered rationality and faith, instruction and

entertainment, virtue and vice. It contained the multitudes and contradictions of the sprawling nation it served.

Robert A. Gross is the James L. and Shirley A. Draper Professor of Early American History at the University of Connecticut. After starting out as a social historian of the Revolutionary era, he now looks broadly at culture, politics, and society in America during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with particular focus on Transcendentalism and reform in New England during the antebellum era.

Mary Kelley is Ruth Bordin Collegiate Professor of History, American Culture, and Women’s Studies at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. She has written widely on women’s and gender history, and especially on the impact of women’s access to learning, formal and informal, on their self-definitions and their entry into public life. Her current project focuses on reading and writing practices in early America.