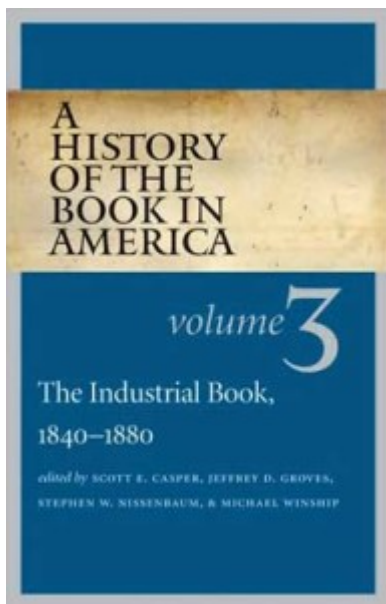
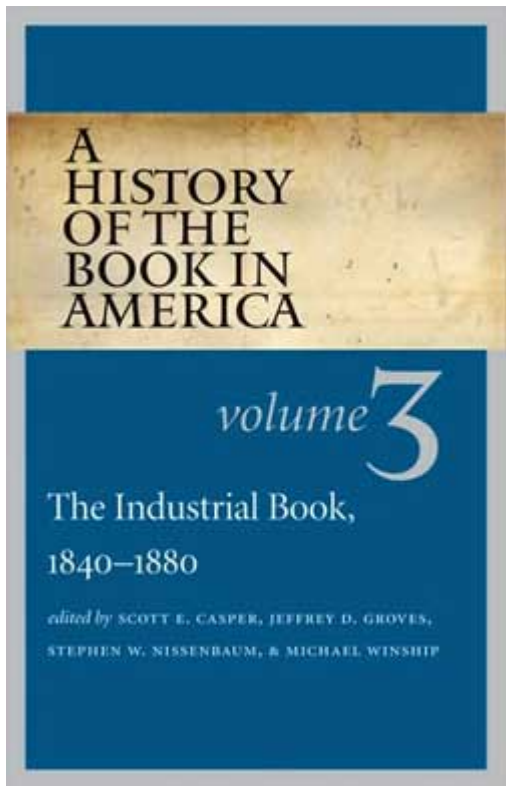


## The Industrious “Industrial Book”



Scott E. Casper, Jeffrey D. Groves, Stephen W. Nissenbaum, and Michael Winship, eds., *A History of the Book in America: Volume 3: The Industrial Book, 1840-1880*. General editor, David Hall. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, in association with the American Antiquarian Society, 2007. 539 pp., hardcover, \$60.00.

Following a time-honored American literary tradition (see, for instance, the *Leatherstocking Tales*) and suited to our own age of random access, this well-

designed, masterfully researched, and highly readable third volume of *A History of the Book in America* appears after the first volume but before the second, which is not yet published. No matter; with the *OED*'s likely abandonment of printed and bound volumes, the luxurious ambition and material heft of *these* volumes (and their relative affordability, at \$34.95 for the paperback of volume 1) is welcomed in any order. The new volume's "industrial book" evokes a discourse of Franklinian "industry," hinting towards an "industrious book," making its virtuous and commercial way through nineteenth-century culture. The "industrial book" moreover compellingly suggests an artifact that condenses within itself the labors of many men, women, and children (the latter were often employed in binding and hand coloring); their technologies and their machines (or, à la Thoreau, perhaps the other way around); and their economic, communications, and transportation networks.

Some books of these midcentury decades fall easily under the rubric—*Uncle Tom's Cabin*, for example, famously churned out by steam presses running round the clock, or *Moby Dick*, whose "Cetology" chapter wryly links the industrial whale to the codex. And yet, of course, by "book" the series means not only books but that harder-to-name object of study, sometimes a printed artifact, sometimes any inscription or anything in print's general neighborhood (handwriting, say, but also Dickens's Little Nell in Parian ware), as well as the practices or attitudes associated in some way with print (reading, for example, and diary keeping but also union organizing, copyright case law, school curricula, literary taste, etc.). As to the parameters of 1840 to 1880, the editors don't elaborate. But by eluding traditional periodization, the identification of this four-decade period of fervid geographic, demographic, and cultural expansion (vaguely, antebellum through Reconstruction, encompassing the "American Renaissance") with "the industrial book" liberates this volume from the thrall of curricular- and discipline-bound chronologies.

The introduction describes the 1876 meeting of the American Book Trade Association (ABTA) in Philadelphia and its centennial fanfare. While a trade show may seem a pallid starting point, it helpfully positions literature, literacy, and literary culture in the demystified context of trade and finance, of masculine clubbiness and display, and, as importantly, of failure: the ABTA folded two years later. During the period this volume covers, book production and distribution began, if very unevenly, to assume its modern form: printing shifted from a craft to an industry, printers became publishers, authorship became a profession, literary property became regulated, and reading became, increasingly, a value as much as a practice.

As its loose frame indicates, this volume is a collection of essays providing specialists' syntheses of broad areas of inquiry, rather than an overarching narrative. Organized thematically, around such matters as manufacturing and labor, trade and government, serial publication, ideologies and practices of reading, and cultures of print, and moving, generally, from economic and institutional history to cultural history, each of the eleven chapters (many divided into mini-essays by various authors and all supplemented by rich

bibliographic essays) is charged with covering the whole period. The most elegant essays—among them, Meredith McGill's on copyright, Bruce Laurie's on labor, David Henkin's on urban print, Louise Stevenson's on books in the home, Susan Williams's on authorship—offer a panoramic history in and around the period and zoom in on representative events. Henkin, for example, contrasts the Philadelphia the friendless young Benjamin Franklin famously encountered with Horace Greeley's New York a century later, which welcomed that ambitious youth with a riot of raucous and abundant signage. Like these wordy urban streets, the capacious "book" takes in a wide range of cultural forms and locations, from the African American Amos Webber's diary, kept from 1854 to 1903, to the professionalization of learned culture through journals, research universities, and scholarly societies, to the circulation of religious tracts in staggering numbers during the same period.

In his essay, "The Census, the Post Office, and Governmental Printing," Scott Casper writes, "What seems a largely administrative history—of statistical categories, postal regulation, and a printing bureaucracy—is also a political, social, and ideological one" (179). Indeed, sections about new technologies and new business practices (on manufacturing and on international trade, for example, both by Michael Winship) not only provide the statistics that make this a durable reference book—drawing out and interpreting data of this massively documentary epoch from census and congressional reports—but also suggest directions for social, cultural, and literary history. For example, the robust international trade in print in the midcentury—which shows, among many other things, a spike in exports to Brazil, Colombia, and Spain in 1865-6 (152)—cries out for interpretation and research, especially given the hemispheric and transatlantic turn in American studies.

Amid these riches, readers may still wish for more in the field or approach that most interests them or that they most lack in their own reading and research. In this volume, for example, there is not even an index entry for "children," "children's literature," or "juvenile literature." Nonetheless, I've annotated my copy with some two dozen such index entries, which is by way of saying that this is a topic that is inescapable in the period and, in my view, worthy of a sustained examination rather than glancing references. At the 1876 American Book Trade Association meeting, here offered as a framing heuristic, eighteen of the ninety-five publishers' displays featured schoolbooks and/or juvenile books (20-23); whole schoolrooms (in one case with a real kindergarten teacher and students demonstrating the Froebel system to spectators) were replicated throughout the exposition (30-31). While a portion of one chapter is devoted, importantly, to the trade in schoolbooks, nothing is made of their content, and yet children of the nineteenth century who read "the industrial book" in the 1840s and '50s became its adult consumers and producers in the 1870s and '80s.

But it's in the nature of such a magnificent beast as *A History of the Book in America* to stimulate and even to invite alternate genealogies. In what amounts almost to a prospectus, John Hench, formerly vice president of the American

Antiquarian Society, suggested as much, writing in 1994 that the “multivolume work we have undertaken to produce will be a giant step toward a new understanding of American culture through a systematic, collaborative examination of the mediating role of print, but it will certainly not be the last word on the subject. Did we believe that it would be definitive, we would have substituted the article ‘The’ for ‘A’ in the title.” Such scholarly generosity is a marker of this magisterial series, whose volumes one anticipates eagerly and will return to again and again.

### **Further Reading.**

John Hench’s article, “Toward a History of the Book in America,” appears in *Publishing Research Quarterly* 10:3 (Fall 1994).

This article originally appeared in issue 8.4 (July, 2008).

---

Patricia Crain is associate professor of English at New York University and the author of *The Story of A: The Alphabetization of America from The New England Primer to The Scarlet Letter* (2000); she is working on a book about children’s literacy in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century United States.