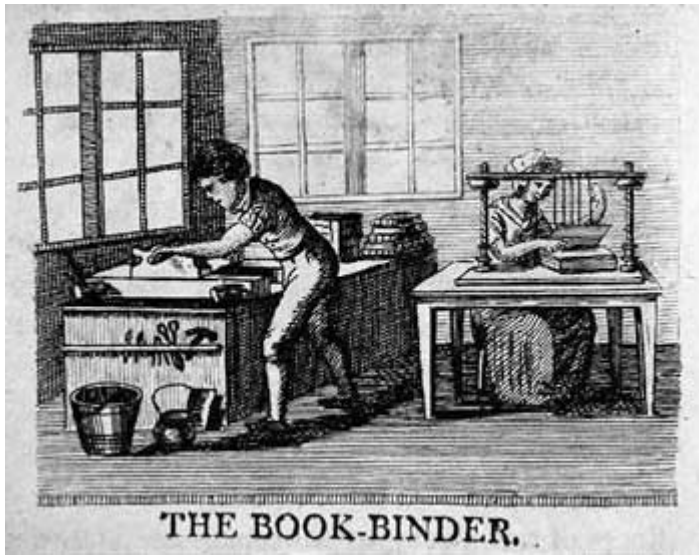


Who Publishes an Early American Book?



From Codex to Kindle

*Content with slow uncertain gains,
With heart and hand prepar'd he stood
To send his works to distant plains,
And hills beyond the Ohio-flood...*

—Philip Freneau, “On the Death of a Republican Printer”

The publication of American writing has a long and thoroughly transatlantic history. The first printing press in British America was up and running in Cambridge by 1639. But for the rest of that century and beyond, the vast majority of books purchased and read by colonial subjects were printed in England. American printers tended to concentrate on short books, almanacs, broadsides, newspapers, and other ephemera, whereas major works by American authors, including Roger Williams’s *A Key into the Language of America* (1643), Anne Bradstreet’s *The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung up in America* (1650), Cotton Mather’s *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702), and Phillis Wheatley’s *Poems on Various Subjects* (1773), typically got shipped to England for publication and were then reimported back to the colonies. Even Benjamin Franklin, who published the first novel in America (he reprinted Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* in 1743) and a number of other books besides, had his own *Experiments and Observations on Electricity* (1751) first published as a pamphlet in London. (His *Autobiography*—that quintessentially American book—was first published in its entirety in Paris, in a French translation, in 1828.)

By the time Franklin the printer became a leader of the American rebellion against the British crown, the domestic production of printed matter—as of other homespun goods, like blankets and soap—was understood to be essential

both to the immediate cause of economic and political independence and to the ongoing work of national self-definition. Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* (1776), Joel Barlow's *The Vision of Columbus* (1787), Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and James Madison's *The Federalist* (1788), William Bartram's *Travels* (1791), Elihu Hubbard Smith's *American Poems* (1793), Hannah Foster's *The Coquette* (1797), and Charles Brockden Brown's quartet of major novels (1798-1800) were all first published in North America. All of these books were reprinted in England, and many other American books, including J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), Thomas Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787), and John Neal's *Brother Jonathan* (1825), were still initially printed abroad. But the transformation of the book trade in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—by new technologies, increased automation, hybrid formats, cheaper distribution, population growth, and the conjunction of literacy and leisure—dramatically enhanced the competitiveness of modern American publishing and made it possible for cities like Boston, Philadelphia, and New York to emerge as regional and protonational publishing centers to rival London.

The rivalry intensified, of course, as the stakes—both commercial and cultural—continued to grow. Englishman Sydney Smith's notorious animadversion ("In the four quarters of the globe," he asked in 1820, "who reads an American book?") was already out of step with the times, for this was precisely the moment when books by American authors, such as Washington Irving, were becoming both popular and profitable internationally. Antebellum American authors from James Fenimore Cooper and Lydia Huntley Sigourney to William Cullen Bryant and Nathaniel Hawthorne did not need Smith to inspire them to pursue a literary program of cultural nationalism on the world stage.



"The Book-Binder." Page 38 of William Darton, *Jack of all Trades; For the Use of Good Little Boys* (Philadelphia, 1808). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

As it turned out, what many ambitious American authors really did need was an extension of U.S. copyright protection to foreign authors. Rather than take big financial risks on protected but unproven American authors, many American publishers preferred to maximize profits through cheap, unauthorized (but legal) reprintings of works by foreign authors, who were not only denied compensation but also often received no acknowledgment of authorship whatsoever. This state of affairs was hard on authors on both sides of the Atlantic. And, because of the promiscuous diffusion of unauthorized and uncredited reprinting, it also made hash of notions like Sydney Smith's (and our own) that the national literatures of Britain and the United States were, in the early nineteenth century, perfectly discrete and readily distinguishable from one another.

More meaningful differentiation came later, if fitfully. In 1845, for example,

New York's Wiley and Putnam launched their Library of American Books series, which, under the direction of Evert Duyckinck, contracted with a formidable array of American authors for original works, including Margaret Fuller's *Papers on Literature and Art*; Edgar Allan Poe's *The Raven, and Other Poems*; William Gilmore Simms's *The Wigwam and the Cabin*; Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Mosses from an Old Manse*; and Herman Melville's *Typee*. By 1847, however, the series was already defunct—insufficiently profitable in an era when there was still no easy conformation of literary culture to cultural nationalism. After midcentury, the increasing centralization of markets and, ultimately, the emergence of international copyright law in the 1890s helped make “American literature” into both a more profitable and a more culturally self-assured phenomenon. The emergence and later (often *much* later) canonization of such authors as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Walt Whitman, Herman Melville, Emily Dickinson, and Henry James seem, at least in retrospect, to mark the certain beginnings of a consequential and lasting national literary heritage, as do the retrieval and republication of earlier American authors in projects like Charles L. Webster and Company's ambitious eleven-volume series *A Library of American Literature from the Earliest Settlement to the Present Time* (1887-1890). This massive anthology reached back across three centuries to assemble and nationalize well over one thousand authors, from John Smith, William Strachey, and John Cotton to Catharine Maria Sedgwick, John James Audubon, and William Ellery Channing, along with up-to-date selections from the post-Civil War period.

In the twentieth century, works by early American authors gained new levels of support and prestige from both public and private sectors. In 1934, Congress established the National Historical Publications and Records Commission (NHPRC). Since then, the NHPRC has supported the publication of an extraordinary number and range of American writers, including William Penn, Elizabeth Drinker, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Meriwether Lewis, Washington Irving, William Cullen Bryant, and Chief John Ross, to name just a few. In 1963, the Modern Language Association—a professional association of scholars of literature and language—launched its Center for Editions of American Authors (now the Center for Scholarly Editions or CSE). To date, dozens of CSE-supported and approved editions of early American books have appeared, including Edward Taylor's *Upon the Types of the Old Testament*, Cotton Mather's autobiography *Paterna*, the poetry of Benjamin Tompson, novels and other writings of Charles Brockden Brown, Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Sermons*, and Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*.

These editions have been a magnificent gift to devotees of American literature and history. However, the editorial apparatuses that augment these editions are often quite elaborate, based as they are on exhaustive research on manuscripts, variant printings, and other materials. Consequently, they sometimes distract readers whose interest in these books is not the same as a professional scholar's. Some volumes are bulky and hard to hold. Others are prohibitively expensive, while others still have lapsed out of print.

Thus, there have been complaints. The most vehement of all came not from a "civilian" reader but from one of the twentieth century's most important literary critics, Edmund Wilson, whose 1968 screed in *The New York Review of Books* asserted that these new scholarly editions of "our classics" were not only incompetently edited and poorly designed in and of themselves but were also "obstructive to their republication in any other form." The form Wilson himself envisioned was something along the lines of France's Bibliothèque de la Pléiade: compact, affordable editions that would be newly and responsibly edited but less cumbersomely annotated. (Readers familiar with the Pléiade series, launched in 1931 and numbering well over five hundred volumes to date, will recognize Wilson's view of it to be somewhat idealized. For all of their many virtues, the Pléiade volumes are unevenly edited, and they are quite expensive, even when purchased in France.)

The Modern Language Association survived Wilson's assault, and its Center for Scholarly Editions is still going strong—without being "obstructive" to the republication of American classics "in any other form." Indeed, Wilson's vision of an American Pléiade was more or less realized in 1979 with the founding of the Library of America (LOA), a not-for-profit publisher of, in their own words, "the best and most significant American writing." There are now roughly two hundred titles in print, and the average price per volume today is little more than half that of the average Pléiade volume.

The first books LOA published, in 1982, were Walt Whitman's *Poetry and Prose*, Herman Melville's *Typee, Omoo, and Mardi*, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin, Oldtown Folks, and The Minister's Wooing*, and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Tales and Sketches*. Since then, LOA's list has expanded in many directions to include writers from the early seventeenth century to the present day and every conceivable type of writing, from sermons, elegies, speeches, and autobiographies to pulp fiction, journalism, letters, and librettos. The editorial impulse has been expansive, without descending to the merely documentary. "Literary interest," "greatness," "quality," "richness"—the language of aesthetic value abounds in LOA's promotional material. In a brief film commissioned for its twenty-fifth anniversary, Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. pointedly assures viewers that the series seeks to embrace "the rich variety of the American tradition in all of its dimensions ... without sacrificing standards ... Never does the Library of America say, 'We're including these texts because of diversity, for self-esteem reasons, to be ethnic cheerleaders.'" LOA thus embraces its taste-making and canonizing power—though always with a lusty appetite for what its founding president, Daniel Aaron, called America's "interstitial literature." "I mean," he explained in 1981, "those odd works in all forms and genres that collectively add so much texture and color to American writing. In bringing out the most notable writing of travelers, naturalists, social theorists, scholars, and artists, we disclose the luxuriance of a literary landscape so often described in the past as parched and empty."



Neil Gustafson, a professional actor, portrayed Isaiah Thomas in a one-person play called *Preserving All Others*, which was performed as a public program in the fall of 1999 and sponsored by the AAS. Gustafson also performed Thomas as part of a K-12 program called *Isaiah Thomas–Patriot Printer*. The latter program toured to schools and community groups and was witnessed by over seven thousand people during its seven year run from 2000 to 2007. Here, Mr. Gustafson is standing before Old Number One. Isaiah's original printing press now on display in Antiquarian Hall. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts

Indeed, LOA relishes its sense of itself as a “rescuer” and “guardian” of American literary treasure, holding to orthodox notions of literary value while also practicing a limited but healthy ecumenicalism. Very much *unlike* the publishers of the Pléiade, which brought out French translations of Poe, Tolstoy, and Plutarch before getting around to an edition of Proust, LOA is relentlessly nationalist. It publishes English-speaking North American writers almost without exception (a notable exception—one that definitely proves the rule—being a newly commissioned translation of Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*). It publishes English-language writing by immigrants, like Vladimir Nabokov, and by Americans who preferred to live elsewhere, like Henry James and Paul Bowles; by misunderstood patriots, like Thomas Paine, and by misunderstood traitors, like Ezra Pound; by founders, slaves, presidents, conservationists, tycoons, and sometime-anarchists.

Who else might belong in an American Pléiade? According to LOA's 2008 board of directors' report, approved authors for possible future volumes include Civil War diarist George Templeton Strong. That's fair enough, but why not Fanny Kemble? T. S. Eliot, sure. But how about W. H. Auden? Toni Morrison, positively. But where's Caryl Phillips? Many factors influence such decisions, of course. But it's not inappropriate to keep asking such questions, especially in light of publisher Max Rudin's dual characterization of LOA as both “an authoritative national library of American writing” and “a cultural work-in-progress.” The fate of national literatures, including our own, is difficult to predict as nation states themselves undergo the prodigious crises and transformations of late capitalism.

How might earlier American writing continue to fare in this light? So far, there are only about two dozen LOA volumes of writing chiefly or exclusively from before 1850—though these include three of their all-time bestsellers: Thomas Jefferson's *Writings*, Thomas Paine's *Collected Writings*, and Edgar Allan Poe's *Poetry and Tales*. Certain authors who may or may not someday have volumes of their own, such as Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards, already appear in compilation volumes, like *American Sermons* and *American Sea Writing*. Other pre-1850 authors—Sarah Kemble Knight, Samson Occom, and Maria Gowen Brooks among them—who will never have an LOA volume of their own (if only because their known works wouldn't fill out the minimum six hundred or so pages stipulated in the production parameters) appear in these and other

compilations, including *American Poetry: The Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*.

Then there is the issue of completeness. There is already an excellent LOA volume of some of John Smith's writings. But will there be another? Do we need another, when we've already got Philip Barbour's three-volume *The Complete Works of Captain John Smith*? What about William Bradford, who has neither an LOA edition nor any modern authoritative edition of his complete writings? These are questions not only about what the market will bear and about how we might recognize meaningful national continuities between, say, William Bradford and William Styron, but also about what readers presently want and about what they might come to value (or reject) only later. How do you maximize and maintain over time the ready availability of diverse American writings amidst twenty-first-century commercial and cultural vicissitudes?

The answer today would seem to be electronic publishing. LOA doesn't yet—and may never—try to reach the consumer market with the digitized versions they nevertheless produce and store of all of the books on their list. Someday, perhaps soon, the astral light now cast by LOA's American Pléiade will be complemented, if not entirely supplanted, by the worldwide glow of server farms, to which all sorts of contemporary readers are already so often turning for reading material of all kinds. More and more, we point our computers' browsers at what we want to read, instead of lacing up for a walk to the library or the bookstore.

We head to Websites like [Google Books](#), right now the dominant player in the mass digitization of printed matter culled from major libraries. The prospective vision (on which Google trades) of open or minimally restricted access to the entire documentary archive of humanity makes this project fantastically exciting. And the potential consequences for global democratic society are revolutionary almost to the point of being unglimsable. But the reality of Google Books is quite different, as the most recent legal efforts to rationalize the balance between private interests (of authors, publishers, and Google itself) and the public good make soberingly clear.

We also point our browsers at some much smaller, noncommercial Websites already highly valued by scholars of early American literature. [The Charles Brockden Brown Electronic Archive and Scholarly Edition](#), for example, is producing a digital archive of all of Brown's uncollected writings, and its creators have designed it, crucially, to complement rather than supplant the six-volume Kent State edition of *The Novels and Related Works* and LOA's own one-volume edition of three of Brown's novels. And Yale's massive edition of *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, projected to reach forty-seven print volumes, is also being digitized in collaboration with the Packard Humanities Institute. Such projects, however, are cost- and labor-intensive, in part because they adhere to such strict editorial and production standards.

Many of us are also devoted to online archives that combine the ambitious scope

of Google Books with the not-for-profit ethos of the more academically oriented projects. The [Open Content Alliance](#), for example, is a collaboration among commercial, not-for-profit, and governmental entities, and [Project Gutenberg](#) is a more open, all-volunteer, minimally regulated experiment akin to [Wikipedia](#). Both are ready suppliers of numerous early American texts.

Which of these various models and initiatives will continue to thrive and adapt to changing reading behaviors—and how reading behaviors will be changed by them—is hard to predict. Digital display interfaces, such as the Amazon Kindle and the eSlick Reader, currently vie with print-on-demand technologies. Both may turn out to be mere interim stages in the pursuit of what presently seems to be the Holy Grail of electronic ink and paper technologies: a digital book one could leaf through just as if it were made of conventional paper, a single physical volume that could display any downloaded text. In the not-too-distant future, the volume of Poe you hold in your hand could in a matter of seconds be transmuted into a volume of Freneau. Whether Freneau will, as a consequence, be more often or more appreciatively read remains to be seen.

Further Reading:

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Review of Books 56:2 (February 12, 2009).

This article originally appeared in issue 9.3 (April, 2009).

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