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The John Coffin Memorial Lecture
in the History of the Book
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The political economy of reading

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Last year, some of us were privileged to hear the first John Coffin Memorial lecture given by Robert Darnton entitled 'The Devil in the Holy Water.' In that talk, by offering a close textual and historical study of just one pamphlet, Darnton showed how much could be learned about Paris day by day when the French Revolution was actually occurring. In terms of 'the history of the book', that talk was at the micro end of the spectrum. This year I propose to move to the other extreme, the macro, looking at books and reading as a whole and over a long time span.

I begin by suggesting some of the big questions that 'the history of the book' should address. What were the conditions within which books came into existence in the form that they did, and not in others? How were those books that did come into existence produced, sold, distributed, and read, in what numbers, by which constituencies of readers, and over which timescales? – again asking why these events happened in the ways they did and not in others? And what were the consequences of the reading of the texts that were inscribed in, and that were carried by, the books? What were the effects on the minds of their readers, and on the mentalities of the wider society within which the reading took place. By mentalities, a word adopted from the French, I mean the beliefs, feelings, values, and dispositions to act in certain ways that are prevalent in a society at a particular historical and cultural conjuncture, including not only states of mind that are explicitly acknowledged but others that are unarticulated or regarded as fixed or natural. And although I say 'books' for convenience, I include journals, newspapers, and other media.

These questions are, of course, not new. However, although there has always been much interest in what certain texts mean, how they came to be written, and in the lives of their authors, less attention has been paid to the processes by which the texts reached the hands, and therefore potentially the minds, of different constituencies of readers. I draw many of my findings from the print era in the English-speaking world, roughly the four hundred years from 1500 to 1900, a long sweep of history with many changes.¹ But, in one respect, that era forms a unity. For, during that time, paper imprinted with words or pictures was the only medium by which complex texts, and therefore complex ideas, could be carried in quantity across time and place. I choose 1900, incidentally, not as the end of the print era, but as a way of conventionally marking the moment when, with the arrival of radio and film, printed paper lost its uniqueness. During those four centuries, almost everyone whose opinions on the matter are recorded believed that the reading of books affected the minds of readers, the mentalities of the people, and the fate of the nation. Whether engaged in politics, education, religion, literature, scholarship, science, propaganda, advertising, or censorship, many of the leading men and women of the past tried to use print to spread their ideas and to advance their aims. This was particularly true during the period from the 1790s to the 1830s, that I have studied in detail, an extraordinary rich and innovative time as contemporaries knew. But, we should ask, were they right to regard books and reading as having power over minds? How can we investigate the validity of the assumption?

Literary and intellectual history, two of the disciplines that have traditionally attempted to retrieve historic mentalities, have mainly been written in accordance with what I call the 'parade of authors' convention. The writings of the past are presented as a march-past of great names described from a commentator's box set high above the column. In literature, we see Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth. In philosophy Hume is followed by Adam Smith,

¹ The evidence for most of what I say in this lecture, with a fuller discussion of most of the issues, and statistical appendices, can be found in my book. *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period* (Cambridge 2004) ISBN-10: 052181006X | ISBN-13: 9780521810067.

Rousseau, or whichever names the writer wishes to include. According to the parade convention, those texts of an age which have later been judged to be the best, or the most innovative, in a wide sense, are believed to catch the essence, or some of the essence, of the historical situation from which they emanated. It is a convention centred on newly written works that, for the most part, denies an active role to readers. Another convention that has come in more recently, I call the 'parliament of texts'. This presents the writings of a particular historical period as debating and negotiating with one another in a kind of open parliament with all the members participating and listening. Thus, when news of the French Revolution reached this country, there was an outpouring of books and pamphlets that discussed the implications, and took the debate from questions of immediate policy to philosophical issues about the nature of human society, the role of the state, the justifications for political, social, and gender hierarchies, and much else.

Under both of these conventions, the historian chooses the texts that march in the parade or sit in the parliament. Both approaches can be linked with critical and hermeneutic analyses of the texts which are not time specific, seeking to understand their rhetorical stance and ideological assumptions, and employing, for example, theories of myth to explain the enduring appeal of certain types of narrative. Some scholars attempt to test the truth of what the texts assert, although, sadly, that is out of fashion. And the texts can be situated in specific contexts. However, as ways of understanding how mentalities may have been historically formed by the historic reading of books, neither approach seems to me to be complete or satisfactory. For one thing, any study of the consequences of the reading of the past ought to consider the books that were actually read, not some modern selection. Nor, in describing the reading of a particular period of the past, can it be enough to draw solely on the texts written during that period, specially significant though these may have been. Much of the reading that took place in the past in the English-speaking world, probably most, was of texts written or compiled long ago and far away.

In both parade and parliament conventions, newly written printed texts succeed their predecessors, engage with them, and in some cases defeat or supersede them, and it can be convincingly shown that this happened in certain cases. As far as readers were concerned, however, chronological linearity was not the norm. No historical reader, whatever his or her socio-economic or educational status, read texts in the order in which they were first published. In nineteenth century Britain, for example, many readers read the texts of the Enlightenment only after they had been subjected to an intensive school education in the texts of the Counter-Enlightenment, and many others, including many women, read the Counter-Enlightenment without having read the Enlightenment at all. In the debates on the implications of the French Revolution, Paine's *Rights of Man* was quickly suppressed, and only a few of the other pamphlets were produced in cumulative print runs of more than 500 or 750 copies. But, for Burke's *Reflections on the French Revolution*, there are records of over twenty thousand copies being produced and circulated in the early 1790s alone.² Pamphlets were of course often read by more than one reader and circulated through book clubs, and information and ideas can travel by word of mouth. But, of the many men and women who tried to understand the implications of the French Revolution by reading the printed discussions, most must have come to their conclusions on the basis of Burke alone.

When we read a book or essay called, say, 'The Age of Wordsworth', should we not be concerned that, in his lifetime, most of Wordsworth's books were produced in editions of about 500 to 1,000 copies of which many were remaindered or wasted several years after

² Figures in *Reading Nation*, 583, 623, and 562.

publication?³ Could that amount of reading have shaped the minds of ten to fifteen million people? Especially when Wordsworth was, on the whole, reinforcing ideas that were mainstream in the culture of his day? How do we deal with the fact that over two million copies of Scott's verse and prose romances had been sold in Britain alone by the middle of the nineteenth century, maybe a million more than all other authors put together?⁴ And Scott was regarded by the best critics as the equal of Homer, a great teacher and model, not a predecessor of Jeffrey Archer or airport pulp fiction?⁵

Furthermore, readers have never been the inert recipients of meanings carried by texts. They had freedom, within their circumstances, to choose which texts to read and which passages to give most attention to, to skip, to argue, to resist, and to read against the grain. As far as children were concerned, if my experience of real children is any guide, their responses were even less constrained. Exclusively text-based approaches, which are caught in a closed circle, cannot ever, without information from outside the texts, take us to impacts and consequences.

So what should we do? Part of the answer is to conceive of a past culture not as a parade or as a parliament but as a dynamic system with many interacting agents, into which the writing, publication, and subsequent reading of a text were interventions that had consequences. Since, according to this approach, the engagement between competing texts occurred mainly in the minds of readers, we must expect the trajectories of development to be different from those of the first writings, or of the first printings, of texts. Which takes me to the 'political economy of reading.'

If that phrase has an eighteenth century ring about it, that is part of my point. The classical political economists of the Enlightenment investigated the observable consequences of different types of governing arrangements on commodities, trade, prices, employment, incomes, and the physical wellbeing of people. They believed that, by understanding economic systems, they could improve the political management of such systems to bring about improvements in the lives of participants, and for the most part they were successful and the subjects they founded have become well-established disciplines with many achievements. I want to carry that tradition forward into cultural systems, tracing the effects of the governing structures on texts, books, access, readerships, and consequential mentalities. If I had been living in the eighteenth century, I would have called my book, 'An Inquiry into the Political Economy of Knowledge.'

How can we set about developing such a political economy of reading? I begin with the economic aspect of political economy. The 'history of the book' is, among much else, the history of an industry, and there is nothing inappropriate about adopting the conceptual tools that are successfully employed in understanding the behaviour of industries with similar characteristics. There are, for example, parallels with pharmaceuticals and information technology, in which intellectual property is central. And we have a body of well-established, empirically-tested, theory about the consequences of different types of economic and business structures. Table 1 is a simple diagram that illustrates the observed economic behaviour of a publisher of a newly written text in the romantic period. On the vertical column we chart price, on the horizontal, quantity. Within constraints not shown here, the publisher chose where to position his intended book on the demand curve, either selling a small number at a high price or a larger number at a lower price. A publisher who

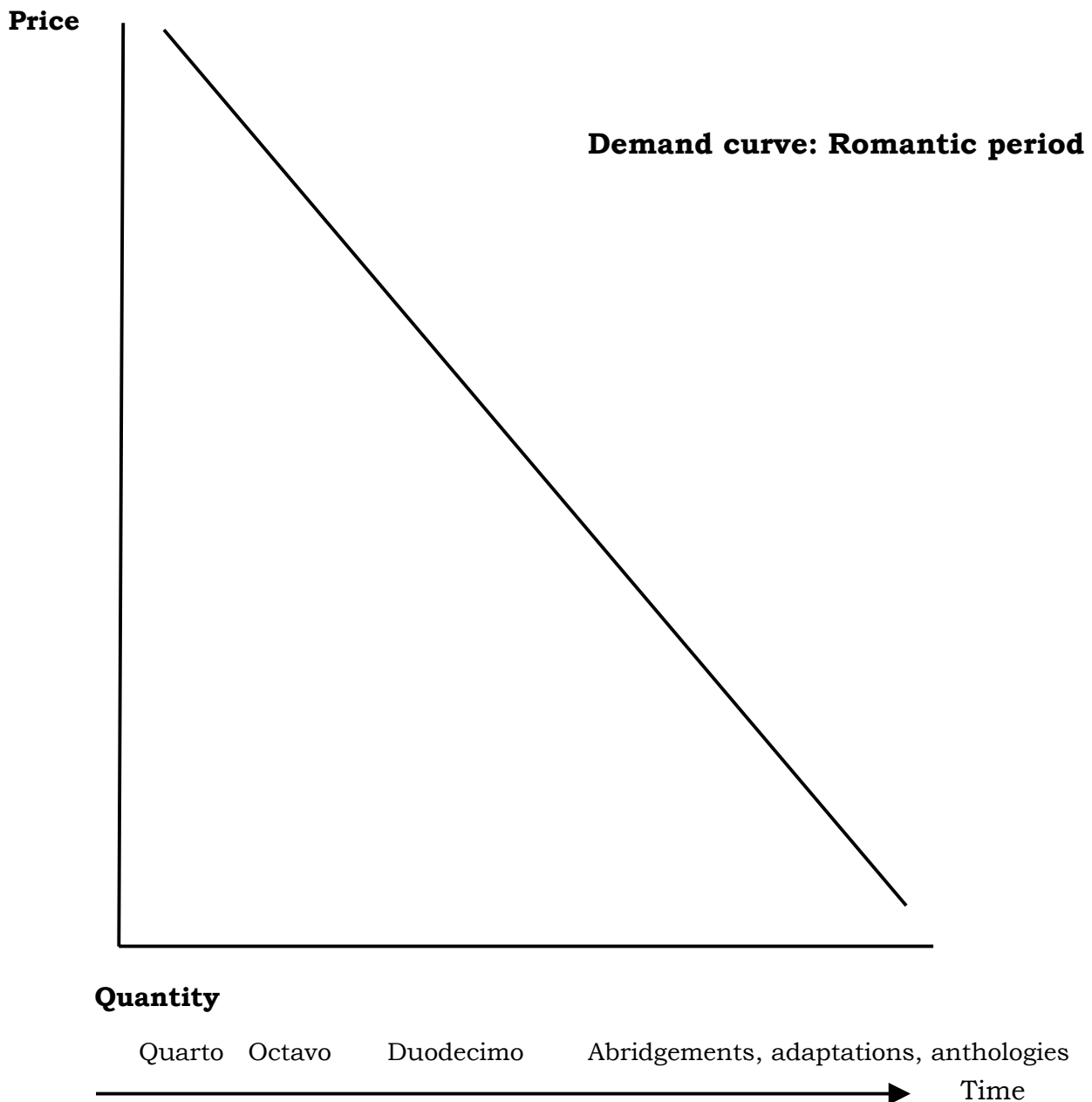
³ Figures in *Reading Nation*, 660.

⁴ Figures in *Reading Nation*, 632.

⁵ For the high reputation of Scott among all ranks of society through to 1914 and later see *Reading Nation*, 419.

holds the exclusive right to copy and sell a particular text, that is the copyright-holder, will maximise his financial returns if he moves down the demand curve in a series of discrete tranches over time. That is the classic behaviour of a monopolist.

Table 1



One reason why I have shown an ideal demand curve is that, in its shape, it neatly matches the actual books of the romantic period. I take two of the most praised and most demanded literary works of the time. Scott's *Lady of the Lake*, moving down the demand curve from quarto, to octavo, and then to duodecimo, and then stopping. And Byron's *Don*

Juan, on which, for reasons I need not go into here, intellectual property rights turned out not to be enforceable.⁶



Don Juan was tranced down far further—indeed to the lowest point on the curve obtainable with the technology of the day, tiny books, crammed pages, tiny print, scarcely readable with the naked eye.

I have the actual numbers for the three main variables, price, quantity, and time. For *The Lady of the Lake*, the prices are, in shillings, 42, 12, 9, a drastic reduction, and the sales rose from about one thousand to tens of thousands. It took fifteen years to move from the large expensive quarto to the smaller less expensive duodecimo. In the case of *Don Juan*, the price fell from 57 to 5 shillings, less than a tenth of the initial price. Sales rose from a few thousand to several hundred thousand. And that move down the demand curve took place in less than two years from the time *Don Juan* was first published as a completed work. The *Lady of the Lake* did eventually follow *Don Juan* down the demand curve but not until the 1840s when the copyright expired, prices fell, and access widened even more dramatically.

We can relate the book prices to the incomes of different constituencies of potential buyers and readers. The quarto volumes, for example, would have cost about a third of the weekly income of a gentleman, say a retired senior captain of Nelson's Royal Navy whose income was about 100 shillings a week. The tiny editions of *Don Juan* by contrast became affordable by clerks, artisans, and others hitherto excluded from modern reading. During the romantic period, incidentally, there were no free public schooling or free public libraries, no railways or rapid communication between people. My simple demand curve, therefore brings

⁶ Discussed in chapter 16 of *The Reading Nation*.

out the relationships between the governing regime of intellectual property, price, access, and the timing of access, in all its starkness.

For most of the print era in England, the *Lady of the Lake* pattern was the norm, although of course not all texts conform so neatly, and only a small number were ever reprinted at all. Until 1774 English publishers practised perpetual intellectual property and stayed high on the curve. Indeed during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they crept higher up, selling smaller numbers at higher prices, and abandoning the lower tranches. And when perpetual monopoly was ended by the courts after a long period in which the statute law was ignored by the industry, and the lower tranches were opened up, we see that prices tumbled, production soared, and access widened. In the case of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, a best seller from the moment it was published in 1719, the archives show that, within about five years, it sold more copies than in the seventy years since it first appeared. With Shakespeare, within twenty five years of 1774, more copies were sold than in the one hundred and fifty years since the first collected edition of 1623. And, if you are thinking that the fall in price was due to mechanisation of book manufacturing, as is often asserted, that was not the case. The books that poured from the English presses in rising numbers at falling prices after 1774 were manufactured by traditional hand-craft methods largely unchanged since Gutenberg.

On the lower part of my demand curve diagram, I have mentioned anthologies, abridgements, and adaptations. They are part of the means by which ideas were, and are, diffused, in economic terms 'trickle down'. They enabled longer texts to be made available to wider readerships, including young people, to the-less-well educated, and to the economically disadvantaged. They help to bind a society together, uniting the reading experiences of one generation with that of others, introducing children to texts which they may later read in more sophisticated versions, and maintaining a shared memory across time, place, and social situation. One pattern that I noticed in my scrutiny of the archival record is that, quite suddenly, in about 1600, the English book industry stopped producing texts of this kind that drew on copyrighted material. There were, for example, no abridgements of the eighteenth century novels, of Adam Smith, of Gibbon, of the English translations of Homer or Virgil, long works that cry out for abridgement. The judicial decision of 1774 not only enabled innumerable complete texts to be read by millions who had previously been excluded but resulted in a flood of anthologies, abridgements, and adaptations that drew on the same body of older texts and carried the ideas to even larger constituencies including children.

The patterns relating to abridgements, anthologies, and adaptations, Alps on the landscape of book history, were not brought to light either by traditional descriptive bibliography or by narrative history. But, as with tranching down, once noticed, the explanation jumps from the page. The business purpose was to prevent the high price market in the complete texts from being undermined. Since the clampdown was not retroactive, the older texts, that is those for which an intellectual property ownership claim had been made before 1600, continued to be reprinted. This resulted in the build up of vested commercial interests in prolonging the existence of the older texts that had been first printed before the clampdown.⁷ A political economy approach helps to explain why after 1774 the reading nation grew rapidly until near universality was reached by the end of the nineteenth. It explains why Shakespeare disappeared from popular reading, from 1594 to 1808, and why a body of texts of mediaeval romance that had been continuously favoured for many centuries should suddenly lose all appeal around 1800.

⁷ Discussed in chapter 4 of *The Reading Nation*.

The time lags in access that resulted from these governing economic structures and business practices were not trivial. For example, in the romantic period, a large constituency of middle class readers were caught in the print of texts produced in an England of two or more generations before, texts that became more out of line with their real life experience every passing year. The poor were caught in texts first printed several hundred years earlier, English language bibles, almanacs, chapbook abridgements of mediaeval and Renaissance romance such as *Guy of Warwick*, *Bevis of Hampton*, and *the Seven Champions of Christendom*. Those at the top of the demand curve could of course buy the less expensive books and many did. Samuel Pepys and James Boswell, for example, loved the old abridged chapbooks and made collections. But those at the lower tranches could not regularly buy access to the books in which more modern texts were inscribed.

Although I have given literary examples, the same broad patterns are discernible across the whole range of printed texts, science, medicine, philosophy, history, and so on. Those at the top had modern knowledge, those at the bottom had superseded knowledge, those at the top had clinical medicine, others had folklore and unwanted children. Those at the top had science, the rest had astrology. And the effects on minds were cumulative, affecting the horizons of expectations of succeeding generations.⁸ What this simple diagram shows is a reading nation in which different layers of readers interacted with texts of differing degrees of modernity and obsolescence within their economic circumstances and cultural horizons.

Some may query my use of the word 'obsolescence' in this context. I do not wish to imply that the longer the time that has passed since a text was first produced or made available in print, the less truthful, valuable, or useful it must necessarily be. By the same argument, 'long-lived' texts do not become admirable just because they were first produced long ago. Readers have often been able to draw contemporary, maybe even universal, meanings from texts that are not contemporary, sometimes from unpromising material, and there are innumerable examples of men, women, and young people successfully surmounting the obstacles to access to knowledge and education brought about by high prices. But, for an understanding of the political economy of reading, we should beware of putting too much weight on anecdotal evidence whose representative quality is uncertain. George Craik's *The Pursuit of Knowledge under Difficulties: illustrated by anecdotes* was a Victorian favourite, but occasional exceptions, reassuring though they may be in some ways, also confirm that the norm was the norm.⁹

What determined the shape of the demand curve? Many factors we can think of — literacy, incomes, horizons, censorship, appeal to readers, none of which are static, and all of which have to be investigated and factored in. The curve for books as a whole, for example, looks very steep in the century before the romantic period, in the sense that the number of additional copies which were sold if the price was reduced was modest. By 1900, as a result of a virtuous circle of cheaper books leading to more reading, it had become much flatter as more and more men, women, and children joined the reading nation.

I mention one other factor, the effects of the changing technology. To my initial surprise, I found that the figures for edition sizes, that is print runs per edition, for British books in the early nineteenth century were not all that different from those found in the previous centuries of the print era, when the population, the economy, and the market for

⁸ For a discussion of this key concept see *The Reading Nation*, chapter 14.

⁹ In Clare Pettitt's phrase, 'if the self-made man remains a "wonder", the threat to the status quo is limited'. Clare Pettitt, *Patent Inventions, Intellectual Property and the Victorian Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 77.

books were only a fraction of what they had become. The normal range, from about 500 to 3,000 copies per edition, with a few outliers on either side, is similar in France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Italy for which there are sixteenth century figures. It seems to be constant across Europe and North America. Only in the mid nineteenth century, with the introduction of printing by stereotype plates do we see much of a change and some print runs become longer. Why, we should ask, did the coming of print in fifteenth century Europe result in more texts? Surely the political and ecclesiastical leaders of the time, who claimed a monopoly of truth, should have preferred more copies of the existing body of texts? There is a simple economic explanation relating to the marginal costs of producing extra copies. With moveable type, after about 3,000 copies, the producer of a book maximises his returns relative to his costs and risks by putting the type back in the case, and starting again with a new edition if demand exceeds 3,000.

The political economy point is this. In the past, the differing technological and economic limitations on manufacturing of copies of texts changed the balance of production, and therefore of reading, between old and new texts. Some technologies encouraged the production of more copies of the existing body of texts. Moveable type encouraged the production of more newly composed texts. I have summarised these patterns in the Table 2.

Table 2

MANUFACTURING: Tendencies

Manuscript era

Encouraged the production of more copies of the existing body of texts relative to new texts.

Promoted stability/obsolescence in the culture

Exclusively moveable type, 1500-1835

Encouraged the production of more new texts relative to existing texts

Promoted dynamism/change in the culture

Stereotype and electrotype, 1835-1914

Encouraged the production of more copies of the existing body of texts relative to new texts

Promoted stability/obsolescence in the culture

Twentieth century

[Not enough information available]

Electronic age, 1990s onward

It is technologically possible for both new and old texts to be copied and circulated instantaneously, at infinitesimal cost, in unlimited numbers. However the governing structures of intellectual property devised before 1500 for the moveable type era

perpetuate the patterns of demand curves, price, and access observable in the book industry

Risks promoting a return to the patterns observable in 18th century England in which elites have access to new knowledge/ideas but others are trapped in older, often obsolete, forms of knowledge, and some are excluded altogether from the benefits of modernity.

I turn now to the last link in the chain of the analysis. When we have retrieved historic reading patterns, can we perceive an overlap with subsequent historic mentalities? Can we confirm that the universal assumption that reading had consequences for mentalities was valid? Obviously there is more scope for judgement and interpretation in answering this question than in the others noted so far, some of which are largely factual. And, in order to avoid circularity, we need to use manifestations of mentalities that are external to the texts. For myself, having done the political economy work in considerable detail for a particular historical period, I do discern a recognisable correspondence between historic reading patterns and consequent mentalities. The correlation is far from exact, but over the whole print era, the links, both general and particular, between texts, books, reading, and wider consequences appear to be secure. For example the persistence of rural religious pre-Enlightenment constructions of essential Englishness into the industrialised urban world, the emergence of a distinctively working class sceptical urban reformist culture, and the persistence in belief in astrology and other ancient supernaturals despite the efforts of church and state — in all these cases, the overlap is with books and readers not with authors and texts. We also have the astonishingly neat overlap between the immersion of the English-speaking reading nation for over a century in the neo-chivalric romances of Walter Scott, the values of Victorian Britain, and the states of mind that we detect in the American Civil War and the First World War, connexions that had been remarked upon by Mark Twain, Paul Fussell, and others.

If I am right, and it is accepted that reading has been shown to have historically shaped mentalities, then the implications are immense. For, having disconnected outcomes from traditional text- and author-centred approaches, we have connected them to other ways of understanding complexity. One striking conclusion is the extent to which simple, well-understood, and empirically well-tested economic models, such as price and quantity, monopoly and competition, have been able to account for the behaviour of the printed book industry, and therefore also the patterns of readerly access, during all the centuries when print was the paramount medium. The study has shown that the tendency of monopolistic industries to pay most attention to the topmost tranches of the market, to move slowly down the demand curve, to ration supply to the market in order to protect the market value of their properties, to neglect large constituencies of the market altogether or to supply them with obsolete and often shoddy goods, can be observed in the monopolies and cartels operated by the printed book industry through the institutions of private intellectual property. Basic economic theory can, therefore, help to explain how the reading nation came to be divided into overlapping layers of readers, differentiated not only by income, by socio-economic class, and by educational attainment, but by the degree of obsolescence of the print to which each layer had access. To have linked mentalities to historical reading is, therefore, to have linked them to the economics of the production and marketing of texts in the age of print.

I now turn to the politically-decided component of the political economy of reading. In Table 3, I offer worked examples of the effects of different types of governing regime ranging from private monopoly ownership of all texts in perpetuity, as in England until 1774, total absence of intellectual property as in eighteenth century Ireland, and various forms of mixed, protectionist, and offshore regimes. Again you may wish to dispute my data or my inferences from them, although nobody has yet done so –nor indeed do I know of any alternative data having been collected. What I emphasise is that, in every one of these regimes, we can trace the effects of the politically-decided regime on the behaviour of the book industry, the shape of the demand curve, and trace the consequences for prices, access, timing of access, horizons, and readerships, and therefore on the constituting of knowledge among different constituencies.

Table 3

INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY REGIMES: Consequences

Private beneficial monopoly ownership of all texts from Bibles to ballads, in perpetuity. England until 1774

Produced a stable and prosperous industry, in which authors, publishers, manufacturers, and distributors were increasingly well rewarded.

Enabled long and substantial new works of lasting value to be carried into print.

Concentrated the benefits on the richer members of society, tended to delay and restrict access for others, and held back the majority from access to modern printed knowledge.

Almost complete absence of intellectual property. Eighteenth century Ireland

Irish book industry became an offshore centre, reprinting texts originating in Great Britain, mainly for export.

Local economic benefits in employment, and cultural benefits for the local English-speaking population who had access to many modern texts at a fraction of British prices.

Mixed systems 1. Copyright one generation. Scotland 1714 to 1808. England 1774-1808

Huge expansion of the book industry, of new writing, and of access to reading of recent works.

Period coincides with flourishing of the Scottish Enlightenment and British romantic period.

Mixed systems 2. Copyright two/three generations. United Kingdom until 1911

Expansion continued. Period of tranching down lengthened. Price of access to new texts compared with the old widened.

Mixed system 3. Asymmetrical. Short copyright for locally produced texts, none for imported texts. Early United States

Enabled a profitable American printed book industry to develop. Disbenefitted foreign authors.

Produced immense benefits to the United States by encouraging an inflow of modern knowledge from the intellectual centres in Europe.

By making the price of access to texts of British origin, eg Scott, cheaper than access to those produced locally, reinforced the intellectual hegemony of British texts which the colonists had hoped to throw off.

Offshore. 17th century Netherlands, 18th century Ireland, early 19th century Paris

Mitigated the censoring power of British political, ecclesiastical, and corporate institutions.

Enabled textual controls on libel, pornography, etc., to be circumvented.

Mitigated the power of price to deny or restrict access.

Precursors of Creative Commons: Eighteenth century examples of authors refusing copyright in order to reduce the price, widen the access, and increase the potential impact of the reading of their words.¹⁰

Paine's Rights of Man, 1791.

William Fox on the Slave Trade, 1790.

Both pamphlets were influential almost at once. The slave trade, scarcely questioned before the 1780s, was legally abolished in 1808.

Globalised copyright, almost perpetual, divided into ever smaller packets, over a widening range of texts. Contemporary world

Risks a return to the socially differentiated patterns of access to modern information and knowledge of pre-1774 England.

In general, it emerges that the development of virtually all aspects of texts, books, and reading, including the English-language Bible and Shakespeare, have been influenced by the three main governing structures of the print era, private intellectual property in the hands of the text-copying industry, cartelisation within the industry, and a close alliance between the state and the industry in which the industry delivers textual policing and self-censorship in exchange for economic privileges. It emerges too that the governing structures of private intellectual property enforced and guaranteed by the state, which, in England, were first put in place in the early sixteenth century and, although constantly undermined by manuscript, pirate, and offshore publication, had a large measure of success in achieving their aims. If the

¹⁰ *Reading Nation*, 257, 624; 257, 624.

findings of my inquiry are confirmed, then it follows that these governing structures helped to determine society itself, affecting every stage of cultural formation from textual production, through the choice, production, and distribution of print, to readerly access, readerly horizons, choice of reading, reception, and consequent mentalities. And these conclusions and findings about the consequences of different types of regime hold true irrespective of the actual texts that are being turned into books, throughout the print era. We have here, I suggest, the framework within which the role of particular texts can be traced. We have useable models for the political economy of reading.

The fierce debates about intellectual property that occur today are mainly conducted not in terms of political economy but in absolutist language that ignores consequences. One is the language of property and of theft. Bill Gates, the President of Microsoft, recently described those who challenged the politically-decided regime within which the firm makes its monopoly profits as 'communists'.¹¹ The absolutist language obscures the main point. For intellectual property is essentially different from real property, One is physical and visible. The other is immaterial and invisible. The custom and practice of real property have existed throughout recorded human history, in essentials unchanged at any rate in the Western tradition. Intellectual property is a European invention of the fifteenth century which has subsequently been subject to many changes in law and in practice. With a piece of real property, say a house, the owner can make drastic alterations and the result will still be recognisably the same house. But the owner of a house cannot make a second house by making an abridgement of the first house. If the house is divided among a number of people, each can only enjoy a share, and the more the property is divided the smaller the share that each one gets. With intellectual property, on the other hand, division need not lead to any diminution of utility. My experience of reading Shakespeare is not diminished if you read Shakespeare.

In addition to 'property', the present arguments about intellectual property are permeated with another absolutist language, the author as unique 'creator', who has the right to own and defend his creation. But we know historically that even the most creative writers, such as Shakespeare, did not start with nothing, but adapted what already existed. No one, whether author or intellectual property owner can reasonably claim that any substantial text has been compiled solely from privately owned materials. By its use of language, which is essentially social, by its appeal to memory and readerly notions of genre, and by its repetition of recognised old as well as new sentiments, all texts inescapably draw on knowledge which they share with their readers. Indeed, without the shared public element, texts would have had little or no appeal to readers. The intellectual property in every newly printed text is, in effect, the asserting of a private ownership claim over part of a language and intellectual domain which has previously been both open to the public and free. However, in the English book industry by the seventeenth century, the whole discourse of property as it applied to real property, including the penalties for stealing it, damaging it, and trespassing on it, the political rights and privileges attached to the possession of it, and the legal protections against confiscation, was being applied to this recently invented form of private wealth.

¹¹ In an interview on 5 January 2005. There is some disagreement about what Mr Gates actually said on this and on other occasions when similar remarks were allegedly made. According to Microsoft, what Mr Gates said, on this, the most recent reported occasion, was: 'There are some new modern-day sort of communists who want to get rid of the incentive for musicians and moviemakers and software makers under various guises. They don't think that those incentives should exist'.

Today the texts over which a private property right is being asserted, and payment demanded for its use, are becoming ever shorter and the degree of creativity required is minimal. When Warner Brothers learned that Groucho Marx was making a parody of their film *Casablanca*, their lawyers sent him a stern warning. Groucho replied that the Marx Brothers existed long before the Warner Brothers and he claimed rights over Brothers.¹² Today he might not have been able to laugh his way out. Just a few months ago Lady Thatcher made a successful claim against the BBC for breaching what she said were her property rights in a phrase of her creation used in her memoirs "Treachery with a smile on its face."¹³ 'Emily Dickinson firmly believed that we cannot fully comprehend life unless we also understand death.' In making this banal remark, I have committed an offence. For I have not acknowledged that this thought was allegedly created by Wendy Martin in 1988 in an article in *The Columbia History of American Literature*. This example comes not from some extremist booksellers' trade association but from the professional guidance to academic researchers published by the Modern Language Association of America.¹⁴ The MLA notes that 'a starving person who steals a loaf of bread can be rehabilitated . . . but sadly, almost always, the course of a professional writer's career is permanently affected by a single act of plagiarism.' So, before the police arrive, can I confess that I have made use of ideas 'created' in 2003 in the *Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*.

I wonder what the political economists and jurists of the Enlightenment would have made of this? If spoken language is the main faculty which holds human beings together in society, they asked, why should written words be private property? Following their lead, we can describe private intellectual property for what it is, a state-guaranteed monopoly right to copy and to sell a text, a restrictive business practice which, if it is to be permitted, has to be justified by the public policy benefits that it may bring to the society that grants the privilege. And that argument about benefits can only be conducted rationally if it is informed by a developing understanding of the likely consequences of different regimes, for readers as well as authors, in other words by a political economy. Such a discussion should, of course, consider the incentives that some types of regime may provide to useful innovation as was agreed in the eighteenth century. But, to avoid abuse, whenever there is monopoly, there should also be regulation.

So, returning to the 'history of the book', what is needed if we are to develop a political economy of reading? For a start, if we want to do political economy, we have to have economic information. It would be a fairly simple task, with modern technology with many hands contributing, world wide, to place alongside the plentiful information we already have about texts, such scattered information as survives about production, prices, access, and readerships, over time. From such information we will perceive patterns and develop provisional explanatory models. Emerging results can be challenged and either replicated or amended. Emerging results in one reading nation may be transferable, with adaptations, to the experience of others. Such a project would fit well with the other projects at present underway, such as putting texts on line or the collecting examples of recorded historic reading. Having information of this kind would enable us to build a fuller and more theoretical understanding of texts, books, reading, and consequences. And, since such information is unlikely to be found for periods after 1900 when there are just too many

¹² Discussed by, among others, Lawrence Lessig, *Free Culture* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2004) 147-48.

¹³ Reported in *Daily Telegraph*, 25 April 2005.

¹⁴ Joseph Gibaldi, *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 6th ed. (New York: Modern Language Association, 2005), from the chapter on intellectual property newly added to this edition.

media and too many transactions, we should improve our understanding not just of ‘the history of the book’ but of cultural production and consumption of all kinds into our own time.

One last point. Contrary to what Wordsworth believed and wrote about in *The Excursion*, his mind was not formed by experiencing Nature direct in the mountains of the Lake District. He was participating in a tradition that went back many centuries. Nor was the mind of Byron's Bonivard chainless and free in the dungeon of Chillon, although his heroic story may have provided encouragement to innumerable readers and listeners. The more complex aspects of our minds — I leave aside the lessons we learn from putting our hand in boiling water — may be, to a larger extent than we understand or care to acknowledge, temporary outcomes of the consumption of the texts to which we and our predecessors have been exposed, texts produced by political and economic processes involving property, and therefore power. If we wish to improve our understanding of why, as societies, we have come to think the way we do, and to give ourselves, if we choose, a greater degree of freedom, we need a political economy of reading.

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