Histoire et civilisation du livre: Pour une histoire transnationale du livre


Histoire et civilisation du livre is an important book history annual published by Droz in Switzerland and issued with the sponsorship of the French national graduate school for library and information professionals (L’École nationale supérieure des sciences de l’information et des bibliothèques). The school has a strong tradition of scholarly work in the field of book history and two of its faculty serve on the editorial board—along with other distinguished French scholars from institutions such as the Bibliothèque Nationale, Centre Nationale de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), L’École pratique des hautes études and the University of Paris III. French speaking scholars predominate among the contributors, although most volumes include at least a few papers from outside the Francophone world; occasionally articles are published in English or German but these make up a small minority of the papers that have appeared since this international review was launched in 1966.

Recent volumes of Histoire et civilisation du livre bring together a number of papers on a central theme—and these themes include a wide range of topics such as Parisian publishing since the eighteenth century; architectural publishing in Paris; and the history of books in China and Europe.[1] Volume VIII, which is devoted to the theme of transnational history, was edited by two well established book historians: Martyn Lyons[2], an Australian scholar and Jean-Yves Mollier, a professor at the University of Versailles. In their introductory essay, Lyons and Mollier define transnational history as an approach that seeks to shed light on the bonds that bring different societies together. Lyons and Mollier have identified four principal themes regarding transnational histories of the book: (1) translations; (2) cultural exchanges, especially between the center and periphery; (3) international law and transnational organizations; (4) multinational publishers.

This volume contains several essays that deal with large geographical areas such North America, Latin America, Africa and the Arab states. Other papers focus on the reciprocal influence between two countries (e.g. lusophone publishing in Paris, French booksellers in 18th century Russia, Parisian books in Hungary and Central Europe, and Dutch books in Indonesia) In contrast, a few essays have a rather narrow focus, such as the ones on the sale of novels in 19th century Rio de Janeiro; on music publishing in 16th century Paris; or on the portrayal of books and reading in Tintin—a Belgian forerunner of the graphic novel.

Most of the papers in this collection are twenty pages or less in length and are well documented. Of special value is the essay in French on the history of the book in North America by Jacques Michon from the University of Sherbrooke. Michon discusses the tensions between United States and Canadian publishers and while he cites many articles in French and English, his essay draws heavily on chapters that appeared in the History of the Book in America (5 volumes, University of North Carolina Press, 2000–2008) and the History of the Book in Canada (3 volumes, University of Toronto Press, 2004–2007). In contrast to the continental focus of Michon’s paper, the essay on publishing in Latin America discusses transatlantic commerce between the Iberian Peninsula and the New World. The footnotes in this essay by Brazilian scholar Eliana Regina de Freitas Dutra provide a valuable guide to research on book history in Spanish and Portuguese.

In her historiography of the book in Africa, Elizabeth LeRoux, a professor from the University of Pretoria, provides a useful overview of research done on publishing south of the Sahara. Her short bibliographic essay is organized by themes such as “an emerging industry,” “toward print culture,” and “new approaches.” LeRoux concludes that the majority of those working on book history in Africa are literary scholars, leaving “great scope for further research on this continent” (109). Although she does not claim to have done a comprehensive review of existing works, her impressive bibliography contains over 150 items; about 90% of the works cited are in English, a dozen are in French, and a few are in German or...
Franck Mermier, an anthropologist and a Near Eastern specialist at the CNRS in Paris, has contributed an excellent overview of the book in the Arab world. His article follows the trajectory of book production in Arabic from the 16th century, when the Ottoman emperor first allowed non-Islamic texts to be printed with movable type. The slow, halting development of printing during the Ottoman period was pioneered by Orthodox Christians and later broadened by government printing in countries such as Egypt, Morocco and Lebanon. Egypt rapidly became an important center of publishing and in 1969 an Arabic book fair was organized in Cairo. Mermier’s bibliography includes over fifty items in French, English and Arabic. His essay is followed by a brief paper in English on book history in India. Abhijit Gupta, a professor at Jadavpur University, outlines major trends in Indian publishing from the early missionary presses established during the raj to digital initiatives in the Indian book industry. Although this article is not as thorough or as well documented as the ones on Africa and the Arab world, Gupta does discuss recent scholarly developments since the 1990s “when the discipline of book history formally entered Indian academia” (156).

Because of its broad international scope, Volume VIII of Histoire et civilisation du livre would be a useful addition to any library with a strong collection in world history. Academic libraries that do not subscribe to the journal should definitely consider purchasing this volume if they serve a clientele who reads French fluently (16 of the essays are in French, two in English).

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[2] The author’s name appears as “Martin Lyons” in this volume, but on his website and most of his other publications his name is shown as “Martyn Lyons.”