

Book Reviews

Stuart Bennett. *Trade Bookbinding in the British Isles 1660–1800.* London; New Castle, Del.: The British Library; Oak Knoll, 2004. 176p. \$85 (ISBN 0712348484;1584561300).

Connoisseurship, with its focus on the materiality of cultural artifacts, has been an undervalued skill in the Age of Pure Theory. However, there are many welcome signs that the pendulum has begun to swing the other way, and the appearance of Stuart Bennett's monograph on early modern British trade bindings is one of them. Bennett comes to his task from the book trade where, over a distinguished career of some thirty years, he has built a reputation as a very smart bookman (forgive the archaism, please) whose catalogues of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century British literature have been easily among the best and most interesting in the business. His most recent contribution to the literature is a reminder of how valuable the store of information tucked between the ears of many booksellers can be to the world of learning and to the practices of curatorship. In Bennett's case, a lifetime of handling British books has led him to some major revisions in the received wisdom that many of us (myself included) have duly absorbed and erroneously passed along to others. Now, at least, there can be no excuses for not getting things right.

Briefly, Bennett makes and (I think) documents a seemingly unremarkable claim, namely, that the vast majority of books sold in Britain and North America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were sold bound, not in sheets. In and of itself, such an assertion will mean little to any except specialists. However, insofar as it consigns to the realm of the fabulous a cherished chunk of wisdom that has resisted critical scrutiny for so long, it alerts us to the tenuous character of much of our supposed knowledge of

our collections and their origins. The value of Bennett's patient and compulsively empirical study is in reminding us how we may look at—and still not see—our collections. The cliché “hidden in plain view” occurred to me more than once in reading Bennett's book. “We” had long assumed that those rows of leather bindings, many humble and unadorned, in our stacks were the results of negotiations between book buyers and bookbinders. The more ornate and embellished the binding, the more assured its bespoke creation. We had long assumed that, for a variety of reasons, books were shipped and sold in sheets, especially books headed from Britain to North America in the eighteenth century. Whether overland or by sea, sending books in sheets seemed a better business plan than sending them bound. But all of these were only assumptions, assumptions that had no real evidence to justify them. Bennett has now set the record straight, and in doing so has opened some new portals for curators and historians of the book alike.

When we think of publishers' bindings or trade bindings, we think of large runs of uniformly bound copies of the same book, the model that came into practice in the earlier nineteenth century and persists to the present. However, that is only one model of trade bindings. The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had another, more interesting, more variegated model that could fill booksellers' shops with arrays of bound volumes designed to appeal to the economic and aesthetic range of their client base. British book buyers may well have customized their bindings, but they did so like Samuel Pepys: after they had bought the volume bound from their local merchant. Often books would be bound by publishers or by syndicates of booksellers with copyrights; sometimes



they would be bound or customized by the bookseller functioning only as retailer and responding to local tastes and requirements. Either way, British book buyers in the eighteenth century had long since grown accustomed to acquiring their tomes “ready to use” since the sixteenth, if not the fifteenth, century, according to Bennett. The varieties and generic similarities across these bindings reflect both the economics of publishing and the evolving tastes of the times. Binders were at the bottom of the food chain, and the publishers and booksellers who controlled the ebb and flow of their work made sure that wages remained low throughout the period.

For historians of the book, Bennett’s study is richly suggestive of the density and sophistication of the British book trade in the early modern period. We have long known about the London syndicates and publisher cartels that attempted to control copyrights and distribution, and there is a growing body of literature on the struggles of the provincial book trade. Samuel Johnson, on intimate terms with the book trade, long ago showed us the tiers of middlemen who steered “product” from publisher to retailer and so increased the markup at every stage in the process. But what we had not really appreciated before Bennett was the extent to which the trade was, as we might say today, “vertically integrated,” with publishers actually maintaining their own binderies or stables of binders. With the costs of paper large and relatively fixed, binders represented a leverage point for the trade in which wages, designs, and material could all be adjusted to achieve desired profit margins. The British book trade was no place for amateurs by the eighteenth century. It was Big Business. To what extent these business practices were employed on the Continent remains to be studied. Perhaps Bennett’s inquiry will provoke similar forays by Continental scholars.

For curators and collectors, Bennett’s book is an invaluable road map through the maze of trade binding styles avail-

able throughout the period. It provides a wealth of detail on individual publisher styles, on the chronological evolution of binding styles and materials, and on the cryptic and arcane vocabulary binders used to describe their menu of offerings to publishers and booksellers. Hundreds of illustrations with generous captions allow Bennett to make his points in considerable detail and constitute a major exhibition in their own right. Indeed, I found the examples much more compelling than the narrative, which really could have been condensed to a single chapter. The illustrations also may encourage professionals to compare and contrast examples from their own collections with those in the book. They may even have provided lifetime employment for the dwindling cadre of rare book catalogers who now can go back and update appropriate MARC fields based on Bennett’s gallery guide. Although localizing and attributing unsigned bindings from the early modern period is notoriously difficult, Bennett’s painstaking efforts are the best points of departure yet.

Although it is good to have Bennett’s excellent work in the form of a book, it is exactly the sort of project that would be well, if not better, served on the Web. The author himself alludes to this in his conclusion, and I would like to stress it here. Bennett has accumulated the nucleus of a rich and valuable database of images and descriptions that could easily be augmented over time by librarians, collectors, and booksellers on both sides of the Atlantic. A dynamic database would permit the kind of clustering and associating that the book does not and thus might help establish relationships among books otherwise not immediately apparent. The Web would permit image management, allowing viewers to zoom in, adjust color values, and so on. So, if a second, expanded edition of Bennett would be welcome someday, why should we have to wait for it? We could begin growing it now, on the Web.—*Michael Ryan, University of Pennsylvania.*