

‘Magnalia Historiae Libri  
Americana’; *or, How AAS Brought  
the History of the Book into the New  
Millennium*

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**J**UST OVER TWENTY YEARS AGO, the American Antiquarian Society’s Council approved the Program in the History of the Book in American Culture and shortly thereafter, through the generosity of the friends of James Russell Wiggins, established a lecture series in his name to speak to important issues in the field. I have been asked to help celebrate this occasion and address you as both historian, to offer a retrospective of work done in the history of the book under the Society’s sponsorship, and augur, to limn a prospect for further research in this rapidly maturing area of study. I am honored by the invitation and over the last six months have felt exhilarated as I prepared this lecture. I wish to thank Ellen Dunlap, John Hench, current members of the program, and others on the Society’s staff who have given me this opportunity. And I thank as well all previous Wiggins lecturers, who have done so much to forward the work championed by Russ Wiggins himself.

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First things first. With my abstruse title, which, translated, means 'The Great Works in the History of the Book in America,' I pay homage to a much greater scholar than I who, through his and his family's majestic library, is inextricably linked to AAS. Those conversant in early American literature recognize my words as a play on Cotton Mather's *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702), the 'great works of Christ in America,' an indispensable history of the first three generations of the Puritan settlement of New England. As many of you know, AAS's founder, Isaiah Thomas, purchased a good part of the remarkable Mather family library. As I sought a talisman for my assignment, Mather the historian, evangelist, and, not least, bibliophile, immediately came to mind, for the enthusiasm and dedication with which he studied history and wrote prophecy from the books around him offer much inspiration. With Mather in mind, then, tonight I offer an 'Ebenezer,' as he called his history, to mark the Society's great contributions to scholarship in the history of the book in America.

For the past twenty-five years I have observed nothing less than the emergence of a new field of inquiry, watched its chief players without the distraction of my being committed to any competing discipline, and continue to learn from them all that I can. I believe that AAS tendered its invitation because early on I recognized the significance of the history of the book and embraced its methodology and conclusions enthusiastically, even as I worked primarily in cognate fields. History of the book has helped me to redefine myself as a scholar and teacher, and thus is forever linked to my own intellectual biography. I truly believe that I can speak to this subject from deep familiarity.

Let me first explain how I prepared for this lecture. I first reviewed all of the librarians' (and, later, the presidents') reports to the Council (published in the *Proceedings*) that pertained to the Program in the History of the Book in American Culture. I reread all issues of *The Book*, the useful newsletter of the program, and all of the previous Wiggins lectures. I also perused the syllabi for the annual

summer seminars in the history of the book that early on emerged as central to the program, and as well the agendas of and reports after the various planning conferences for the multivolume series *A History of the Book in America* that I attended subsequent to my appointment to its editorial board in 1992. And, of course, I revisited the significant scholarship in the field, most of which has been produced at least in part through AAS sponsorship.

This was tedious but rewarding work. It makes me recall my muse Cotton Mather's marvelous description of his ancestor John Cotton who, his grandson reported, before retiring each night sweetened his mouth with a bit of Calvin. Picture me, night after night, sweetening my mouth with an issue of *The Book* or a Wiggins lecture or a copy of the *Proceedings*, and you have a sense of my light reading over the past few months! Occasionally, admittedly, I skimmed; but never did I conclude that what I reviewed already had become dated. And there were unexpected pleasures. For example, I learned that virtually every other issue of *The Book* has carried a grainy photograph that includes either John Hench or David Hall, central figures in the program's history. Thus, over the past year I have had the unalloyed pleasure of reviewing how these two have evolved from eager, young scholars, just like the rest of you thirty-somethings here tonight, to the august personages we see before us!

This background reading also provided a stroll down memory lane, for as I worked I strove to recall when I had first become aware of books and their histories in ways that I recognized, albeit in retrospect, as cognate to those in this emergent discipline. My revelation came as I was writing Caroline Sloat about my old mentor and new AAS member Richard Rabinowitz and one of *his* mentors, AAS member Barnes Riznik. At one point I had an epiphany: I could date my introduction to print culture and its import to Old Sturbridge Village (OSV), where in 1969 both these men then worked and I, a rising sophomore in college, had just become a summer intern. This is not the time to rehearse—although I wish that I could—how these two visionaries then had

begun to transform the nature of public interpretation in outdoor history museums. Rather, I point out that one of my first stations as an interpreter at OSV was—*mirabile dictu*—in the Isaiah Thomas Printing Office, where there is a reproduction of the press we have here on the upper landing! There, from André Belanger, one of the older interpreters, I learned to set type by hand in a composing stick; to mind my p's and q's; to arrange forms in a chaise to print different-sized pages; to hammer in quoins to hold the forms; to pound ink balls and roll them over type; to pull the press; and to fold, stitch, and cut pages to make booklets in 8vo or 12mo. In other words, I not only learned how a book was made but I actually *made* books. I was so taken by all this that, after hours, I hand-set my own personal bookplates, examples of which I still cherish.

Imagine my surprise to read, then, in Marcus McCorison's report to the Council and members in October 1983, that the idea for a Program in the History of the Book in American Culture, an initiative that would, as he predicted, 'have the most profound influence' on the Society's future work, dated back as far as 1970, broached in an internal memorandum.<sup>1</sup> What serendipity! Precisely as I was experiencing the materiality of print culture at OSV and thus was launched on my own scholarly trajectory, the AAS staff had begun to consider what thirteen years later finally came to fruition in the program we celebrate this evening!

Its establishment came in the wake of a prospectus that AAS circulated to American and European historians, librarians, and bibliographers that set the projected program in the context of European scholarship in the field, while also identifying certain tasks for research and interpretation on the American strand.<sup>2</sup> This prospectus noted how inquiry into the history of printing and publishing hitherto had been highly specialized and, consequently, fragmented in ways that worked against the framing of

1. *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society (PAAS)* 93 (1983): 242-43.

2. I examined a copy of this prospectus, hand-dated October 12, 1982, found in AAS's archives.

broad interpretive questions. AAS would seek to counteract this scholarly trend by organizing programs and seminars that brought together scholars from different disciplines—literature, politics, history, bibliography, art, science, and technology, among others—and thus work toward a collaborative history of how print was central to the development of American culture. Scholars in the program at AAS, for example, would consider the book as an economic commodity, as well as considering the community of printing craftsmen who produced it. They would also study how the book circulated in various cultural milieus, including the international. Then, too, their work would address literacy and the act of reading, and, by implication, what it meant for a book to be 'popular.'

This prospectus also noted the kinds of scholarly work on the American printing trades that provided a solid foundation for such scholarship and in which AAS already had played a large role; it mentioned as well the tradition of Anglo-American analytical bibliography and textual studies that treated how authors moved manuscripts through various stages of production. The larger project would seek to marry such work to the French tradition of 'livre et société' that already had transformed European study of the subject. 'The new history of the book,' the prospectus continued, proceeds 'from the knowledge that American culture was pluralistic,' comprised of different groups and networks who sought to exploit the new technologies for their own, often very different, purposes. One had to address these subjects in their multiplicity and complexity before one could ascertain what difference print culture had made in the development of American history largely conceived. And there was no better place for such work than AAS, for the new program would be quite simply a natural outgrowth of the Society's past and present interests.

With many responses to this prospectus in hand and, as McCarrison put it, 'after careful consideration by our own committees on the library, on publication, and on education,' the Council formally established the program in June 1983, 'dependent as always,'

McCorison wrote, and you know what is coming next, 'upon the securing of funding.'<sup>3</sup> This Herculean task, to secure the requisite finances year after year, fell to AAS's John Hench, who became the program's point man in Worcester and learned firsthand what it meant to deal with bureaucracies such as the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). The Council also decided that Professor David D. Hall, then at Boston University, should chair the program and become its intellectual guiding light.

John Hench's rationale for and description of the program, delivered to the Council at that same 1983 meeting, was derived from the prospectus, which for the most part had been very positively received by the external scholars. AAS, Hench observed, long had been 'a leading center for the study of early American bibliography and printing and publishing history.' Now the Society was 'setting out to increase its usefulness as a major center for such study' by establishing such activities as 'an annual lecture series, workshops and seminars, conferences, publications, and residential fellowships.' By inaugurating this program, he continued, AAS 'intends to be a major factor in stimulating this developing field of humanistic inquiry.' 'The new approach to the history of the book,' he reminded Council members, 'relates the field closely to economic, social, and cultural history, while at the same time making clear the central role of printing and publishing in the development of culture and society.'<sup>4</sup>

Subsequently, in the summer and fall of 1983, even before the semiannual meeting at which the plans for the program were made public, much energy was circulating. There were committees to form, grants to write, lectures and conferences to plan and schedule. One result was an international advisory board of scholars whose scholarly work already touched aspects of the program's purpose; and an executive committee, responsible for hands-on planning of the program's activities and first chaired by the distinguished bibliographer, G. Thomas Tanselle. Plans were

3. *PAAS* 93 (1983): 242.

4. *PAAS* 93 (1983): 242-43.

laid for a conference, 'Needs and Opportunities for Research in the History of the Book in American Culture,' to be held the following autumn and whose proceedings were published by AAS in 1986 in a benchmark volume. Support for these activities came from the NEH and the Earhart Foundation, two strong friends of many AAS initiatives. And then, on November 9, 1983, David Hall gave the inaugural James Russell Wiggins lecture, 'On Native Ground: From the History of Printing to the History of the Book,' a now-classic formulation that set the scholarly agenda for the program through its first decade and, in many ways, continues to do so.<sup>5</sup> I do not exaggerate when I say that this essay has become what Perry Miller's classic 'Errand into the Wilderness' was for his generation, a foundational blueprint for subsequent work.

What did Hall see as the primary task of the pioneers in this new field on the American strand? After tracing the development of scholarship in both the history of American printing and of American literature, and noting that a hallmark of work in both areas had highlighted tensions between more democratic and utilitarian conceptions of the fields and those based in more purely qualitative or aesthetic questions, Hall argued for a broadly conceived history of the book that detailed the complex relationships among printing, literature, and society. As he put it so memorably, 'The history of the book in America will be cosmopolitan in its understanding of American culture, democratic in its openness to all forms of print, and alert to the uses of power.'

Hall outlined several considerations that should shape emergent study. First, scholars should not engage their work in any dogmatic way but rather in a spirit of pragmatic openness. The history of the book, he wrote, 'is not a system or set of rules, much less a set of a priori truths, but a point of view that unstiffens the heaps, the veritable mountains, of information that have been accumulated by patient researchers on printers, publishers, booksellers, readers, and the physical book.' Scholars had to work

5. 'On Native Ground: From the History of Printing to the History of the Book,' *PAAS* 93 (1983): 313-36.

with such data, in other words, in new and imaginative ways, unsettling shopworn narratives, putting aside dated scholarly preconceptions, and eschewing the imposition of abstruse philosophical schema derived from post-structuralist theory. Coming at the time when the acolytes of French post-structuralism ruled the academy, Hall's words rallied those who championed the centrality of historicist scholarship.

To effect such an intellectual reorientation, Hall argued, scholarship in history of the book should have as primary foci readers and reading, for the same printed words could mean radically different things to different people. *How* and *why* they did so was still little known, and thus the conscientious historian should search the archives for what one might call the praxis of reading, what Hall termed the 'evidence of reading as a style and activity.' This led naturally to a third concern, the role of history of the book in a reconsideration of the stratification of popular culture; for, at this point, we had not yet attained an understanding of this phenomenon that acknowledged culture's 'multiple dimensions,' the 'fluidity' that existed on the continuum between the high, formal, or aesthetic and the more democratic or merely 'popular.'

Finally, what should draw scholars in such endeavors, Hall argued, was nothing less than a utopian vision, the dream of 'the history of the book as the history of culture and society,' for as scholars become aware of the various lines of power generated by texts, they 'map with new precision and complexity the axes of conflict and consensus' within American culture. Hall believed that the history of the book would lead quite simply to a new understanding of American history.

The choice of Hall as program chair and as the inaugural Wiggins lecturer was fortuitous and ideal, for through his lectures and publications he quickly emerged as the most prominent and articulate advocate, theorist, and practitioner of the history of the book in America, roles epitomized in the essays subsequently assembled in his seminal work, *Cultures of Print* (1996), but visible even earlier, and perhaps most powerfully, in his path-breaking *Worlds of*

*Wonder, Days of Judgment* (1989). Therein he offered as the first fruits of his cogitation on texts and readership nothing less than a radically new way of understanding American Puritanism, moving us beyond the visions of his own teacher, Perry Miller, and Sacvan Bercovitch, then the ruling genius in studies of Puritan New England, and into a consideration of a people's 'lived religion,' a phrase which he adopted from French historians and put to work on the American strand. All of the paths Hall subsequently trod—and through whose thickets he so ably and generously guided others—originated in his 1983 lecture in this very room, a presentation that remains the most important in this august series. Indeed, if you read all the lectures, seriatim, as I recently have, you will see that most of his successors have, in their own ways, simply addressed, admittedly with high degrees of imagination and detail, versions of his agenda. Anyone who wishes a speedy yet sophisticated way to think about history of the book can do no better than to familiarize himself with David Hall's pioneering essay.

The two immediately subsequent Wiggins lectures explored fields that Hall had mentioned in the beginning of his presentation. James M. Wells, for example, reexamined a history of the printing trades, and Larzer Ziff focused on literary history.<sup>6</sup> As Hall had counseled, both scholars attended to the ramifications in the wider society and culture of what before had been more specialized types of inquiry. In 1988, John Bidwell addressed the significance of the printing and reprinting of a single (albeit remarkable) government document, the Declaration of Independence, and detailed how an artifact of print culture whose immediate purpose had been to declare and inform, over time had become cultural capital of a very different kind, a topic that recent Mellon Senior Fellow Jay Fliegelman took up in an even more provocative way in his book, *Declaring Independence* (1993).<sup>7</sup> In 1989, in

6. James M. Wells, 'American Printing: The Search for Self-Sufficiency,' *PAAS* 94 (1984): 269–96; and Larzer Ziff, 'Upon What Pretext?: The Book and Literary History,' *PAAS* 95 (1985): 297–316.

7. John Bidwell, 'American History in Image and Text,' *PAAS* 98 (1988): 247–302.

another Wiggins lecture, Robert Gross, the longtime chairman of AAS's Program in the History of the Book, explored the power of print to shape our political preconceptions and considerations, reexamining the divide between high and popular culture that continues to influence our lives.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, in this presidential election year the significance of print (and, of course, visual) media to the electoral process not only is increasing but has become a formative consideration of each political party.

In their Wiggins lectures Cathy Davidson, Nina Baym, and Mary Kelley, each in her own way, taught us to look more deeply into the coded language of women's writing to discern challenges to the silken bonds by which late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century women were confined.<sup>9</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Carla Peterson, and E. Jennifer Monaghan opened new ways for us to consider the myriad ways that print culture continued the dialogue on race that the Civil War and its aftermath had only exacerbated.<sup>10</sup> All of these and virtually all other Wiggins lectures, delivered with few exceptions by American scholars, were marked by what Tocqueville so long ago described as this nation's hallmark pragmatism. Only Roger Chartier's 1987 lecture, in which he argued the necessity of the move from the history of publishing to the history of reading—and thus reiterated one of Hall's key points—focused on more theoretical concerns, in his case, on what he called 'Frenchness in the History of the Book.'<sup>11</sup>

8. Robert Gross, 'Printing, Politics, and the People,' *PAAS* 99 (1989): 375-98.

9. Cathy N. Davidson, 'Ideology and Genre: The Rise of the Novel in America,' *PAAS* 96 (1986): 295-322; Nina Baym, 'At Home with History: Woman's Sphere Before the Civil War,' *PAAS* 101 (1991): 275-95; and Mary Kelley, 'Designing a Past for the Present: Women Writing Women's History in Nineteenth-Century America,' *PAAS* 105 (1995): 315-46.

10. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., 'Truth or Consequences: Putting Limits on Limits,' *PAAS* 103 (1993): 319-36; Carla L. Peterson, 'Reconstructing the Nation: Frances Harper, Charlotte Forten, and the Racial Politics of Periodical Publication,' *PAAS* 107 (1997): 301-34; and E. Jennifer Monaghan, 'Reading for the Enslaved, Writing for the Free: Reflections on Liberty and Literacy,' *PAAS* 108 (1998): 309-42.

11. Roger Chartier, 'Frenchness in the History of the Book: From the History of Publishing to the History of Reading,' *PAAS* 97 (1987): 299-330.

I should mention other scholars, too, at work on allied topics in those heady days of the mid and late 1980s. Cathy Davidson, for example, early on a member of the program, and whose *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America* (1986) appeared in the year in which she delivered her own Wiggins lecture, is rightly cited as a pioneer in the history of the book on these shores. Heeding Hall's directive, she attended to such matters as literacy rates, the education of women, and the economics of the emergent book trade. She opened new ways for us to understand gender and class in the early Republic, and detailed the ways in which European and Continental literary forms assumed new shapes and filled new roles in the new nation. Fittingly, Oxford University Press recently has reissued the work on its twentieth anniversary, with a new preface. In the same years, David Reynolds was at work on his prize-winning *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (1988), a work that answered Hall's clarion for a reexamination of the relation between high and popular culture, and provided a reevaluation, if not a radical reshuffling, of our understanding of our great mid-century authors. Reynolds's advocacy of 'reconstructive' criticism—a view of literature that regards it as 'simultaneously self-sufficient and historically shaped by environmental factors in society and personal life'—particularly stimulated those in literature departments who wished to challenge the primacy of claustrophobic applications of literary theory centered on post-structuralism in general and deconstruction in particular.<sup>12</sup> Finally, who could forget Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Culture* (1984), as pioneering a study of the history of reception as we have had on these shores? Perhaps no book has been more important for scholars working in the history of the book in the twentieth century, and no member of the editorial board of *A History of the Book in America* has

12. David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (New York: Knopf, 1988), 561.

helped that group grapple more productively with the now-undeniable import of theoretical concerns.

As all this suggests, the Wiggins lecture series quickly emerged as a centerpiece of the program, which also drew strength from other early, seminal publications to which I have just alluded. But what of mastermind John Hench's other plans? How were they implemented and with what success? I already have alluded to the program's first scholarly conference, 'Needs and Opportunities for Research in the History of the Book in American Culture,' which set the example for many such conclaves that the Society has sponsored; but there were many other significant occasions. I single out for your attention one held in the summer of 1987 and cosponsored with the Library of Congress's Center for the Book, on 'Teaching the History of the Book,' and another in 1991, on 'Iconography and the Culture of the Book.'

Certainly of equal importance, and perhaps of even greater cumulative impact, have been the annual summer seminars in various aspects of book history that commenced in 1985 when Stephen Botein offered 'The Making of Literate America: Diffusion of Culture Based on Printing, 1759-1850,' and one of which I was privileged to teach this past June. Particular stalwarts in this endeavor have been David Hall and Michael Winship, each of whom has offered several such tutorials; but over time the list of seminar leaders has been as remarkably varied as distinguished. Relying on visiting scholars and AAS staff as well as core faculty, these classes have introduced hundreds of participants—graduate students in history and literature, bibliographers, public librarians, advanced scholars seeking to revitalize their scholarship and teaching, collection curators, and AAS staff—to the latest scholarship in history of the book and given them ways to integrate such knowledge with their own scholarly and pedagogical interests. Over the years the weeklong seminars, which build deep camaraderie among participants and loyalty to AAS, have proved one of the program's most popular and memorable components.

Indeed, in conjunction with the various fellowships earmarked for work in the history of the book as well as those awarded more generally that often fund scholars with such interests, the summer seminar program has made AAS into one of the nation's premier research centers. In two short decades, AAS has joined the elite company of the Huntington Library, the Newberry Library, the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, and the National Humanities Center as a 'must' destination for scholars in the know, a 'veritable research spa,' in former fellow Scott Casper's now-immortal words.<sup>13</sup> And Casper is right, for AAS has distinguished itself as a place where fellows luxuriate as much in each other's and the staff's company as in the riches of the Society's collections, and where the splendid idiosyncrasies of the Goddard-Daniels House trump anything a Hilton or Marriott could offer! An AAS fellowship, I would argue, has become as much a state of mind as anything else, with scholars from around the world and from a wide range of disciplines unselfishly participating in a common enterprise in the history of the book in Worcester, Massachusetts, a city they would recognize for no other reason.

I must mention one more major initiative that Hench singled out back in 1983, the publication program. The annual Wiggins lecture, each of which appears under separate cover as well as in the *Proceedings*, forms one part of this, the essays in the venerable journal, now under Caroline Sloat's expert supervision, another. But from an early point the program projected a benchmark scholarly work to be mentioned in the same breath with cognate projects underway in Europe. We would call the Worcester version, *A History of the Book in America*.

It has been long in coming, given the collaborative work involved, and the program's originators failed to realize the immensity and

13. Scott Casper, 'The Fellows' Experience: The American Antiquarian Society as Research Spa,' *PAAS* 107 (1997): 267-78.

complexity of the task. I chuckled, for example, to read, in Mark McCorison's Report of the Council in May 1986, that plans were 'well forward on a two-volume work on the history of the book in America to be edited by David Hall.' Even more amusing, McCorison noted that the work was scheduled for publication in 1990 or 1991, to coincide with the anniversary of the establishment of the printing press in British North America!<sup>14</sup> But when the November 1988 issue of *The Book* arrived, it carried as a supplement Hall's four-page prospectus for the project, which by then had grown to a projected *three* volumes. Of course, the first volume was not published until 2000, to glowing reviews from all parts of the globe; and now the projected volumes number no fewer than *five*, the remaining four of which are in various states of completion.

Willy-nilly, through the 1990s this project became a major pre-occupation of the program, and particularly of its ever-expanding editorial board and its individual volume editors (as well as of the Society's support staff), who organized and oversaw conferences of contributors here at AAS, scheduled meetings of relevant parties at national professional meetings, and consulted with each other in countless hours of telephone calls and e-mails. My deep involvement with the program began in 1992 when I was named to the editorial board. Hall's modest goal for the project, expressed at the conclusion of his prospectus, was that it 'summarize the best scholarship on the history of the book' and as well 'provoke more research and encourage venturesome interpretations.'<sup>15</sup> With the first volume, *The Colonial Book in the Atlantic World* (2000), as an earnest, this project will indeed fulfill his wish and stand as one of the most instructive and successful examples of collaborative scholarship any of us will see.

To complete my retrospective I mention several more key moments, either of achievement or transition, from the late 1980s

14. Marcus A. McCorison, 'Report of the Council,' *PAAS* 96 (1986): 15.

15. 'Prospectus: A History of the Book in American Culture,' Supplement to *The Book: Newsletter of the Program in the History of the Book in American Culture* (November 1988): 3.

on, which have had a bearing on the important work of the program. We should recall, for example, that during these years talk of the new field of history of the book was in the air—John Cole's program at the Library of Congress is a notable example—and, as new initiatives began, many who had done research at AAS became chief players on other parts of the playing field. This was evident as early as 1988, when the *American Quarterly* devoted a special issue, edited by Cathy Davidson, to the topic.<sup>16</sup> Its list of contributors read like a transcript of the 'Visitors' Book' at the front desk in Antiquarian Hall: E. Jennifer Monaghan, David Nord, Ronald Zboray, Janice Radway, Barbara Sicherman, and others.

Another key moment occurred in 1993, when the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading, and Publishing (SHARP), an organization that has erected a large and now-indispensable tent under which those interested in all aspects of book history gather for fellowship, held its inaugural conference. In 1996 SHARP's annual meeting was held here in Worcester at a memorable event that united two of the most important sponsors of the new field of the history of the book in American culture.

The Organization of American Historians held its own session on book history in April 1994. That meeting was led by Robert Gross, of the College of William and Mary, who in 1992 had succeeded David Hall as chairman of the program as Hall devoted his full energy to chairing the editorial board of the book project and, with Hugh Amory, editing its first volume. Already a Wiggins lecturer, Gross also had served on the program's executive committee and had been named co-editor, with Mary Kelley, of volume two of the book project.

Around the same time, lest we forget, Ellen Dunlap succeeded Marcus McCorison as president of AAS and continued to support and to extend his vision for how the program fit with AAS's many other important initiatives. One of the most important coups came early in Dunlap's tenure, in the spring of 1993, when NEH

16. Cathy N. Davidson, ed. 'Reading America,' *American Quarterly* 40 (March 1988).

offered major funding for the collaborative history of the book project, and Cambridge University Press signed on as publisher. Dunlap also oversaw, in the fall of 1994, a revamping of the program's committee structure, enlarging the advisory board and replacing the executive committee with a committee of overseers whose purview included not only the program but also the AAS library.

I wish, too, to mention a few publications by scholars involved in the program that seem to me to have greatly fertilized the field from its earliest days. I already have mentioned three—Hall's *Worlds of Wonder*, Davidson's *Revolution and the Word*, and Reynolds's *Beneath the American Renaissance*. To this list I would add the late William J. Gilmore's *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life* (1989), in which he detailed the remarkable complexity of reading communities in rural New England and offered new ways for historians to conceive of the universe of knowledge on a regional and even local basis. Then, too, I would note Richard Brown's *Knowledge Is Power* (1989), a pioneering study of how people learn to know things in new ways and what they do with such knowledge, followed by his equally provocative *The Strength of a People* (1996), in which he demonstrates how the new nation's newly informed citizenry put such new types of knowledge to use culturally and politically. My short list of personal favorites (my omissions do not imply any value judgments) would also include Michael Winship's *American Literary Publishing in the Mid-Nineteenth Century: The Business of Ticknor and Fields* (1995), Ronald Zboray's *A Fictive People* (1993), and David Hall's collection of essays, *Cultures of Print*. Any of you who wish a more thorough canvass of the significant American texts in this field right to the present moment should refer to Joan Shelley Rubin's recent essay—'What Is the History of the History of Books?'—published last year in the *Journal of American History*.<sup>17</sup>

17. Joan Shelley Rubin, 'What Is the History of the History of Books?' *Journal of American History* 90 (2003): 555–75.

I also single out one more publication for special mention, because it is linked so intimately to AAS. This is the recent *Perspectives on American Book History* (2002), edited by Scott Casper, Jeffrey Groves, and AAS's Joanne Chaison, and whose contributors include many who have been fellows at AAS. The book, published by the University of Massachusetts Press with the cooperation of both AAS and the Center for the Book at the Library of Congress, grew from Casper and Groves's summer seminar in 2000 and comprises a collection of original essays as well as primary source materials in print culture, aimed specifically for use in the classroom. Accompanied by a CD-ROM of over two hundred images keyed to different sections of the work, this handsome volume provides instructors with a unique, convenient, and inexpensive tool with which to build courses in the history of the book. This volume merited a special symposium at the Library of Congress in November 2002, where, among others, its editor, Paul Wright, who had convinced the University of Massachusetts Press to undertake this important production and carried it off so handsomely, spoke to the volume's significance. 'PABH,' as it is affectionately known, wonderfully marks the confluence of the great collections of AAS with the marvels of the electronic age.

Before I turn to the future, with fondness, gratitude, and humility, I also ask us to remember several co-laborers in this vineyard who sadly no longer are with us. First, there was the remarkable and much-beloved Steve Botein, who led the earliest summer seminars with infectious enthusiasm and died at a tragically young age, on the very last day of his class in Worcester in the summer of 1986. I had met him the previous fall, at the Institute of Early American History and Culture in Williamsburg, where he was editor of publications and I was an NEH senior fellow. I remember the fondness with which he spoke of AAS and his eagerness to return to Worcester to commence his new class. A scholar whose work had provided an earnest of great

scholarship to come, he continues to live among us through the Stephen Botein Fellowships at AAS, endowed to enable scholars to continue the kinds of research and fellowship he exemplified.

William J. Gilmore-Lehne, another leader of the summer seminars and one of Antiquarian Hall's legendary readers, died unexpectedly in 1999. A scholar of capacious intellect and a teacher whose enthusiasm was contagious, Gilmore-Lehne gave us one of the most significant early works in the history of the field. I fondly remember one of his visits to Chapel Hill, in 1995, when he participated in an NEH-sponsored seminar on 'Regional Print Culture in the Classroom.' I recall in particular a moment when, ever exuberant, he bent a rare pamphlet wide open, the better to make his point to the class, as a curator of rare books looked on aghast at his manhandling of the artifact! To that curator, a book, rightly so, was an object to be protected; but to Gilmore-Lehne it was alive and spoke with tongues of fire that he wanted us all to hear.

On November 19, 2000, James Russell Wiggins himself died at the age of ninety-six. He was a long-time friend and supporter of AAS and served as its president (chairman of the Council) from 1970 to 1977. In the 1950s and 1960s he built the *Washington Post* into the great paper it is, and his lifelong interest in journalism made him secure funding for an endowment for a curator of newspapers at AAS, a position first held by the late Joyce Tracy. As I already have mentioned, the endowment established in his name funds this annual Wiggins lecture, a cornerstone in the Program in the History of the Book in American Culture.

Finally, in the late fall of 2001 we lost Hugh Amory, only a year after the publication of the magnificent first volume of *A History of the Book in America*, over which David Hall and he labored for a dozen years. Many of you here knew Amory better than I, for I only encountered him at annual meetings of the project's editorial board. I went out of my way to sit by him at lunch and recall his infallible courtesy and genuine interest in whatever I was working on. Somehow during my years at Harvard I had missed

him and it was my loss, for he had an extraordinary range of knowledge and an insight that redirected many meetings that without his input would have come to an impasse. I dearly miss him as a scholar, but I know he is missed more so by those of you who knew him as a friend. We will all be pleased to have his collected essays, due out soon and edited by his collaborator and friend, David Hall.

This brings us to the present moment, and to a look at the future. To address this issue, I return to David Hall's tantalizing comment, offered in that inaugural Wiggins lecture, that the history of the book, properly conceived and accomplished, leads to nothing less than new ways to view the history of American society and culture. As Hall worked through his own *Worlds of Wonder*, for example, and his edition of Jonathan Edwards's ecclesiastical writings in the Yale edition of that theologian's works, he elaborated the notion that scholars in his own field of religious studies should work to unearth and describe the history of 'lived religion' rather than just of theology or ecclesiology. That is, one should strive to uncover the experiential dimensions of what it meant to believe and act on this or that point of doctrine, to experience one's religion in this or that way. In a recent essay review in *American Literary History* entitled 'Book History, Sexy Knowledge, and the Challenge of the New Boredom,' Matthew Brown puts it another way, explaining how history of the book might reinvigorate literary studies. 'Surely,' he writes, 'a history of consciousness, of affect and imagination, of politics and conflict,' can be explored through what unimaginative critics, still linking book history to what they take to be desiccated bibliographical studies, term this 'boring canon.'<sup>18</sup> In the remainder of this lecture I wish to suggest how a rigorous and imaginative exploration of print culture can indeed bring us to a deeper understanding of the *lived*

18. Matthew P. Brown, 'Book History, Sexy Knowledge, and the Challenge of the New Boredom,' *American Literary History* 16 (2004): 703.

*experience* of Americans at different points in their history. We have not yet realized, I argue, the full potential of how the book captures the past as people experienced it, or, to recur to Brown's term, allows us to grasp aspects of their very 'consciousness.'

I take as my fulcrum here Emerson's dictum, offered in 1837 in his landmark address, 'The American Scholar,' that 'there is then creative reading as well as creative writing.'<sup>19</sup> Deeper and more imaginative attention to print culture, 'creative reading' can indeed bring us closer, as Hall prophesied, to important aspects of early American history that hitherto have escaped notice, in particular, to the relationship between the verbal and the tactile, and thus to the very *difference* of the past from who and what we now are and how we now experience our world. How did words 'mean,' not just intellectually, but to the whole person, mind and body? How might a study of print culture help us consider as much as possible the nature of what people *felt* as well as thought? It was, after all, the archetypal American Henry Thoreau who reminded us that 'critical acumen is exerted in vain to uncover the past,' for 'the *past* cannot be *presented* [and he intended the pun]; we cannot know what we are not.' And thus, he continued, 'it is the province of the historian not to find out what was, but what is.'<sup>20</sup> He meant, I believe, that to learn of the past is to set it against what we now, as sentient beings, know, to consider its final and irrevocable distance and difference from the present. To learn this, we need to get as close to the knotty warp and woof, the woven texture, of the past as we can, to compare it to the fabric of our own lives and know that difference. History of the book offers many ways to evoke, even if not fully to encapsulate, such difference, such otherness, in ways that we have not yet contemplated, if we read creatively.

19. Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'The American Scholar' (1837): in Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983), 59.

20. Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 153.

This past spring, when Joanne Chaison was looking for a suitable woodcut to adorn the announcement for my summer seminar, she found a wonderful depiction of a printer's devil labeled, 'Jack of All Trades.' She liked the image, she explained, because she thought that the phrase captured the eclectic nature of my own work. So, let me follow her lead. Let's revisit a few disparate historical sites to learn what print culture suggests of their uniqueness.

First, let us seat ourselves before the early nineteenth-century minstrel stage. Our imaginative foray derives from my work in the history of American music, particularly of the banjo, that quintessentially American instrument, and dovetails with recent attempts by Mark Smith, Richard Cullen Rath, and others to recapture the aural past by recovering what they term early American 'soundscapes' or 'soundways,' the 'paths, trajectories, transformations, mediations, practices, and techniques' that people 'employ to interpret and express their attitudes and beliefs about sound.'<sup>21</sup> Some of you know that the banjo derives from instruments brought to the western hemisphere in the seventeenth century by enslaved West Africans. For two centuries it existed as an artifact of folk culture in the plantation economy of North and South America, and the Caribbean. In British North America, its distinctive percussive sound eventually melded with the tradition of Scots-Irish fiddling to form a unique blend of two widely divergent musical traditions. Through the 1830s, however, the banjo and its music remained embedded in the African American folk culture. When whites learned to play it, they did so by direct transmission, by ear from African Americans on southern plantations.<sup>22</sup>

But in the early 1840s the tunes and songs characteristic of the Southern plantation began to be performed with more and more frequency on the northern stage as the phenomenon of blackface

21. Richard Cullen Rath, *How Early America Sounded* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 2.

22. See Gura and James F. Bollman, *America's Instrument: The Banjo in the Nineteenth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

minstrelsy swept first the United States and then Europe. Stage minstrels comprised primarily whites who had learned the staples of such music from Southern sources, often directly from African Americans. But as minstrelsy proliferated, other musicians, again primarily in northern cities far from the music's source, sought access to the repertoire. Entrepreneurs recognized the commercial value of such music, and as early as 1839 George Willig, a Baltimore music publisher, brought out a grouping of four folios of sheet music called *Virginia Reels*, the first publication of such tunes with African American origins. But Willig scored these for a quintessentially western instrument, the piano, on which in the folk tradition the tunes had never been played.

Beginning in the late 1840s and culminating in the next decade, however, several enterprising performers on the banjo, the iconic instrument of the minstrel show, transcribed into standard, European musical notation tunes that up until that time they had learned by ear, and wrote instructions on how to play them on that instrument. These manuscript compilations found publishers, primarily large New York and Boston music wholesalers such as Oliver Ditson, Firth & Son, and T. S. Gordon, who printed these tunes in banjo tutor books and thus made available for the first time a style of playing music—an aural tradition—that hitherto had resided exclusively in an American vernacular. Folk culture, in other words, had become popular culture.

The banjo tutors about which I am speaking—Elias Howe's *Complete Preceptor for the Banjo* (1848), Tom Briggs's *Banjo Instructor* (1855), Phil Rice's *Correct Method for the Banjo* (1858), and James Buckley's *New Banjo Book* (1860)—thus offer the first extant record of how one should play tunes that had their origins on African instruments and then were modified by African Americans in the South as they encountered the Western musical tradition, and thus of how such tunes sounded on original instrumentation. Anyone who could read standard musical notation now could master an esoteric music previously transferred solely through the folk tradition. The explosion of print in antebellum America thus not only preserved a significant

aspect of folk culture but also expedited its proliferation as music that had been associated with the minstrel stage began to circulate widely in Victorian America. These printed banjo tutors offer the only evidence we have as to how nineteenth-century players performed such music on the banjo, and thus of how the music *sounded* on the minstrel stage and in the Victorian parlor. Through such books, contemporary musicians can get us as close as we can to what it was like to hear the banjo on a minstrel stage in Niblo's Garden or other venues in New York City.

Let me give another mid-nineteenth-century example of this intersection of the verbal and aural in print culture but now seat you in a very different locale, a New England meetinghouse. Scholars of American Transcendentalism generally agree that Theodore Parker's *Discourse on the Transient and Permanent in Christianity*, a sermon delivered at the ordination of Charles Shackford in the Hawes Place Church in Boston on May 19, 1841, is a seminal document of the movement. But not many have realized that initially Parker had no intention of publishing it. To him it was but another occasional address, of no special significance, for he had often broached its themes before. Indeed, Parker had first preached essentially the same sermon to his West Roxbury congregation two weeks before Shackford's ordination, when it did not greatly surprise his parishioners, accustomed as they were to their minister's theological radicalism. Nor at first was there any overt criticism of the sermon either by participants in the ordination or within Shackford's fellowship itself.

This seemingly unexceptional oral performance began its journey to the world of print when some conservative Trinitarian guests invited to the ceremony used the occasion to question Parker's orthodoxy, in a lengthy letter to the conservative *New England Puritan* that also included their summary of the sermon.<sup>23</sup>

23. See Gura, "Theodore Parker and the South Boston Ordination: The Textual Tangle of 'A Discourse on the Transient and Permanent in Christianity,'" *Studies in the American Renaissance*, 1988 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1988): 149-78.

Appalled by what he regarded as a misstatement of his views, Parker thereupon published what we have come to know as *The Transient and Permanent*, bringing the sermon before the public, as he put it, 'in consequence of some incorrect rumors and printed statement respecting its contents.' But when the conservative clergy read the printed sermon, they claimed that it was not what they had heard at Shackford's ordination and accused Parker of modifying the text to downplay the radicalism of his original utterance. Parker had only exercised the prerogative accorded countless other ministers when they prepared sermons for publication: he altered it for the new medium. But the problem for the conservative clergy was that, simply put, what appeared in print was not what they had heard, and they said so and charged duplicity.

I came upon this topic when I purchased a copy of the sermon that said 'second edition' on its title page, for I was surprised to find a lengthy appendix about which I had not known. This is its story. Within a week or so of the first edition's being exhausted, Parker issued this second, with exactly the same text as the first, but, in a gesture to his critics, with a nine-page addendum that listed literally hundreds of 'various readings' assembled from a comparison of the printed discourse to the manuscript sermon as he claimed to have preached it. To learn precisely what Parker had said, then, one had to pencil in hundreds of emendations, something that not many would have taken the time to do. The true substance of what Parker spoke at Shackford's ordination, in other words, hitherto had resided in an unwieldy appendix to this second edition of *The Transient and Permanent*. Most of us have come to know the sermon through its inclusion, in its first edition, in Perry Miller's classic anthology of Transcendentalism published in 1950, but that is not what people heard that spring day in the Hawes Place Church. I am pleased to say that several years ago, I reassembled the complete text, which Joel Myerson, AAS member and dean of Transcendentalism scholars, published in his *Studies in the American Renaissance*. To some, my work may seem trivial, but

to me it seemed important to reconstitute, possibly for the first time since the early 1840s, a text more evocative of what Shackford's new congregation heard and so the better to appreciate what the fuss was all about.

Consider, too, another example from the same period of American history, regarding a hitherto unnoticed text that I recently discovered while commencing my work on a synthetic history of the Transcendentalist movement. Years earlier I had read a wonderful satirical view of the Transcendentalists in George Wood's *Peter Schlemiel in America* (1848), a take-off on Adalbert von Chamisso's *Wonderful History of Peter Schlemiel* (1813), the tale of a man who was rendered invisible by the loss of his shadow and who through his invisibility became privy to situations and secrets presumed closed to others. When I returned to Wood's American version of the tale last year I paid particular attention to the footnotes in his satirical report on the doctrines of the Boston Unitarians and Transcendentalists. As proof that Wood knew what he pilloried, he cites, for example, Andrews Norton's *Evidences of the Genuineness of the Gospels*, Emerson's 'Divinity School Address,' and other such well-known titles. But also, whenever he wanted to poke fun at the New Englanders' extreme religious views, he referred to a text that I did not know, cited simply as 'Studies in Religion.'

I finally tracked it down. In 1845 one Eliza Thayer Clapp anonymously published a book by this title.<sup>24</sup> As it turns out, Clapp was a profoundly committed Transcendentalist and contributor of poetry to *The Dial* whose little volume is one of the most moving lay expressions of the movement that I know and which is, to the best of my knowledge, a text hitherto lost to history yet very significant. Indeed, in a letter appended to the preface to Clapp's later *Essays, Letters, and Poems* (1888), the Transcendentalist minister

24. [Eliza Thayer Clapp], *Studies in Religion, by the author of 'Words in a Sunday School'* (New York: C. Shepard, 1845).

Frederic Henry Hedge testified to the profound effect of her earlier work on him. 'Of all my female friends,' he wrote, 'and indeed of all my friends—there was none who seemed to me to possess more profound spiritual insight,' especially in her *Studies in Religion*, which he termed a 'revelation' to him at a very important period of his life.<sup>25</sup> Not only is this one of the few Transcendentalist texts we have by a woman, but it also gets us about as close as we can to an understanding of how New England's rank and file received, understood, and recycled the high intellectual philosophizing of the Transcendentalists, a revelation available to us now only through print culture. Now, when my students complain that what I have hitherto claimed as the quintessential description of a transcendent experience—that moment in Emerson's *Nature* (1836) when he describes himself as a 'transparent eyeball' with the 'currents of the universal being' circulating through him—is too abstruse, I can read from Clapp, a 'regular' person who similarly felt subsumed into the timeless but said it in more accessible, if finally less poetic, language.

Let me offer a final, and very different, example of 'creative reading,' from the exploration of the great American West, and for this purpose seat you in a late-nineteenth-century Victorian parlor with a massive book in your hands. Late in 1853 Colonel John C. Fremont, already renowned for four expeditions west of the Mississippi, commenced what proved his final one, from Kansas City to the Wasatch Mountains in Utah. He undertook this arduous voyage to document for Congress why this passage, the 'central route,' was best for a transcontinental railroad. The better to make his case, he enlisted Solomon Nunes Carvalho, a Sephardic Jew from Baltimore, to accompany him and record the landscape in the first photographic process widely used in the

25. Frederic Henry Hedge in Clapp, *Essays, Letters, and Poems* (Boston: privately printed, 1888): ix-x. On Clapp, see George Willis Cooke, *An Historical and Biographical Introduction to Accompany 'The Dial'*, 2 vols. (Cleveland: The Rowfant Club, 1904), 2: 101-12; and Joel Myerson, *New England Transcendentalists and 'The Dial'* (Cranbury, N. J.: Associated University Presses, 1980): 125-26.

United States, daguerreotypy, which Carvalho, also a painter, recently had mastered.<sup>26</sup>

A daguerreotype image is not what most of you think of as a photograph, for it is made by the action of light on a highly polished, silver plate, sensitized with vapors of iodine and bromine, and which, after exposure to the light, was developed in mercury vapors and 'fixed' with sodium thiosulfate. Thereafter, it remains permanent and offers an image of astonishing clarity, a veritable 'mirror of nature,' as it often was called. The main drawback to the daguerreotype process is that, rather than producing a negative from which one can make any number of direct copies, it produces only a single positive image, and so is unique, reproducible only by taking another daguerreotype of it. On an earlier expedition Fremont himself had tried to make daguerreotypes but failed. On this expedition he secured the services of someone with a well-established reputation in the art.

Over the next several months, often in the most unfavorable conditions, Carvalho took several hundred daguerreotypes of the expedition route. When Fremont returned to the East, he gave them to the famed photographer Matthew Brady, who by then had mastered the new 'wet plate' photographic format that yielded negatives and thus allowed for countless direct copies of images. Fremont copied many of the plates, and from others had engravings made for a planned report of the expedition, a project that unfortunately never came to fruition. He stored Carvalho's plates and the copies Brady had made in a warehouse in New York City, where they were destroyed in the great fire of 1881. Thus, the documentary record of the first expedition to the American West to be so extensively daguerreotyped tragically vanished.

*Except for what was saved through print culture.* Some of the engraved plates that were made from Brady's copies survived the fire and were used in various subsequent publications. A significant

26. Carvalho tells his story in S. N. Carvalho, *Incidents of Travel and Adventure in the Far West* (1857; reprint, Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1954).

number were included, for example, in Fremont's massive *Memoirs of My Life* (1887) and others in a prospectus for that work and in what appears to be a set of proofs pulled from the plates for a projected (but not realized) second volume of these *Memoirs*.<sup>27</sup> Scholars believe that about thirty-four of such reproduced images thus remain from Carvalho's daguerreotypes of the fifth expedition and which are thus available to us as an evocation of this significant enterprise, as they were to readers who bought a copy of Fremont's last book.

My point here is that in the middle and late nineteenth century the intersection of the new technology of the daguerreotype with burgeoning print culture miraculously preserved what in no other way we could now experience, in this case, the same visual landscape of the great American West that Fremont himself saw. Again, I must impress on you that here I speak not of what you all associate with nineteenth-century images of the West, the paper photographs taken on the subsequent, and justly famous, expeditions and about which Martha Sandweiss recently has written so memorably, but records from the dawn of photography.<sup>28</sup> As Gigi Barnhill and I learned this summer in AAS's seminar in book history when we presented a session on the intersection of print and photography, this fortuitous, and still underexplored, confluence has preserved other such marvels—for example, a series of engravings from daguerreotype views (now lost) of New York City's streetscapes in the 1850s, published in *Putnam's Monthly Magazine* in the late 1850s. Heretofore historians of the book have been quick to point to the shift from oral to print culture, but equally significant were shifts in what visual culture made it possible to experience, through the technology of print.

Think, for example, of the African American reformer Sojourner Truth's carte-de-visite advertisements for herself, recently

27. On Fremont's efforts, see Robert Shlaer, *Sights Once Seen: Daguerreotyping Fremont's Last Expedition through the Rockies* (Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 2000).

28. See Martha A. Sandweiss, *Print the Legend: Photography and the American West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

analyzed by AAS member Nell Painter; the Tauchnitz edition of Hawthorne's *Marble Faun*, which one could customize by inserting one's own chosen photographs of Rome, where the novel is set; and Alexander Gardner's remarkable *Photographic Sketchbook* of the American Civil War, the first great project in documentary photography.<sup>29</sup> And consider, too, such a seeming commonplace as one entry in the Boston Athenaeum 1856 catalogue, *29th Exhibition of Paintings and Statuary*. Among its scores of exhibits was item 24, a daguerreotype copy by the eminent Boston firm, Southworth and Hawes, of Gilbert Stuart's oil portrait of George Washington.<sup>30</sup> Small potatoes? No. This is perhaps the first recorded example of a photograph presented as a bona fide work of art, and the catalogue thus signals nothing less than a new chapter in the history of aesthetic sensibility. Many such topics, defined by the intersection of technologies of visual and print culture, are ripe for exploration and can only teach us more of the experiential dimensions of early American life.

I return now to the passage from Emerson's 'American Scholar' that you already have heard and cite it in its full context. 'One must be an inventor to read well,' he observed. 'As the proverb says, "He that would bring home the wealth of the Indies, must carry out the wealth of the Indies." There is then creative reading as well as creative writing. When the mind is braced by labor and invention, the page of whatever book we read becomes luminous with manifold allusion.'<sup>31</sup> Over the past twenty years of the Program in the History of the Book in American Culture, Antiquarian Hall has been filled with scholars willing to do just this kind of work, willing to labor to carry out the wealth of the Indies, reading

29. See, for example, Nell Irvin Painter, *Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996); Susan S. Williams, *Confounding Images: Photography and Portraiture in Antebellum American Fiction* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997): 147-81; and Alan Trachtenberg, *Reading American Photographs* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1989).

30. Item No. 24, *29th Exhibition of Paintings and Statuary* (Boston: Boston Athenaeum, 1856).

31. Emerson, 'American Scholar,' 59.

creatively, inventively, unlocking the mysteries of the past and showing its great difference from us. Moved by the pioneering work, and encouragement, of many whom I have mentioned this evening, younger scholars, even as I speak, are making the pages of books 'luminous with manifold allusion' and thus provide eloquent testimony to the vision of those at AAS who founded the program, and by extension, to the wisdom and prescience of Isaiah Thomas, the founder of this august institution. I cite but two examples of such path-breaking work by our younger co-workers, both scholars of nineteenth-century American poetry. Meredith McGill, for example, in her *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834-1853* (2003), has given us new ways to understand the formation and politics of literary reputation in the American Renaissance; and my new colleague Eliza Richards has produced brilliant work on the circulation, reception, and literal reenactment of nineteenth-century poetry in the nation's periodical literature, reminding us that poetry originates as a living, spoken art.<sup>32</sup>

With such wonderful new work uppermost in mind, as we reflect on the Society's visionary commitment to the Program in the History of the Book in American Culture we must recognize that for twenty-five years we have been sowing for a harvest not yet fully reaped and whose bounty is yet unknown. Having just completed a book on the great eighteenth-century thinker Jonathan Edwards, here I cannot resist recurring to one of his brilliant metaphors, offered in his posthumously published *History of the Work of Redemption*.<sup>33</sup> 'God's providence,' he wrote,

may not unfitly be compared to a large and long river, having innumerable branches beginning in different regions, and at a great distance one from another, and all conspiring to one issue. After their

32. Eliza Richards, *Gender and the Poetics of Reception in Poe's Circle* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

33. Jonathan Edwards, *A History of the Work of Redemption*, in *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 26 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 9: 520.

very diverse and contrary courses which they hold for a while, yet gathering more and more together the nearer they come to their common end, and all at length discharging themselves at one mouth into the same ocean. The different streams of this river are ready to look like mere jumble and confusion to us because of the limitedness of our sight, whereby we can't see from one branch to another and can't see the whole at once, so as to see how all are united in one. . . . But yet if we trace them they all unite at last and all come to the same issue, disgoring themselves into one the same great ocean. Not one of all the streams fail of coming hither at last.

Indeed, to those unfamiliar with the field, work in the history of the book it often looks this way, a 'mere jumble and confusion,' a set of micro-studies whose final import seems limited. But like Edwards's regenerate parishioners who saw 'further' and understood the final beauty of the universe, we who work in this room have caught glimpses of that larger 'issue,' that place where all the streams and tributaries unite into a new and different history of American culture than hitherto has been available.

The Transcendentalist Bronson Alcott, whose dreamy 'Orphic Sayings' often made the journal *The Dial* the butt of laughter, also lit on another apt metaphor for that about which I speak. Writing in his *Concord Days* he noted that we too often are tempted to regard 'truth' as something precise, absolute knowledge of which is attainable through assiduous seeking. But, Alcott noted, truth is best thought of as 'spherical,' for unlike something in one plane, it cannot be circumscribed but only approached from different tangents. 'Of two or more sides,' he wrote, 'none can be absolutely right.'<sup>34</sup> We can see the sphere only by continuing to draw tangents.

For the past twenty years and more, you and many others have been doing just the sort of work Edwards and Alcott endorse, mapping those streams and tributaries, pushing us to where the streams finally unite, establishing more and more tangents to the

34. A. Bronson Alcott, *Concord Days* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1872): 73.

sphere that is the totality of American history. To quote David Hall one last time, you have been working toward nothing less than 'the history of the book as the history of culture and society,' and, I might now add, of experience itself. For the opportunity and support to carry out such priceless foundational work, we have AAS to thank.

I trust that you will appreciate that I have gotten pretty far in this lecture without falling into too many of Cotton Mather's admittedly lamentable bad habits. I have, for example, tried to eschew extraneous genealogies and overly baroque language, and have struggled to 'Be Brief,' and to keep my own ego from coloring this performance. But I ask your indulgence of one final Matherian moment, 'a short earnest prayer,' as he might have put it. Simply, it is this: 'Oh, let the prophetic vision of Isaiah Thomas and his intellectual progeny continue to flourish, as it has for two centuries, under this generous dome!'

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