

# Collecting and Researching in the History of Books

ROBERT DARNTON

WITH AN AFTERWORD BY STEPHEN FERGUSON

PROFESSORS and librarians normally go their separate ways: professors write books, librarians collect them. The division of labor makes sense. It requires a special variety of erudition to build up a great collection, and it takes a peculiar kind of fortitude to overcome the loneliness of the long-distance writer. There are notable exceptions, such as Paul Needham, the Scheide Librarian in Firestone Library, who is a renowned author of works on the history of printing, and James Billington, a Princeton professor who went on to become Librarian of Congress. But the two varieties of scholarship rarely mix.

Their separation seems strange, however, if you consider the subject and the object they have in common: the book, books in general, the printed and the manuscript word as a medium for storing and communicating knowledge. Now a new discipline, the history of books, promises to produce a new kind of collaboration between librarians and professors. Of course, scholars have studied paleography, printing, bibliography, and related subjects for centuries. But it was not until the 1960s that book history began to be investigated in a systematic way to address broad questions about how books became a force in history—how they penetrated the social order, how they were read, how they produced effects in the cultural and political life of entire populations.

This variety of scholarship first gathered momentum in France, where it became a crucial ingredient in the “*Annales* school” of history founded by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre in 1929. Febvre himself set the research agenda for “histoire du livre,” as it came to be known, in an influential book that he published in 1958 with Henri-Jean Martin, *L’Apparition du livre*. With Roger Chartier, Martin went on to co-edit a sweeping survey of the history of books in France, *Histoire de l’édition française* (4 vols., 1983–1986), which inspired a series of national histories that are now under way in Britain, the United

States, Canada, Germany, Australia, New Zealand, and several other countries. Newly established reviews, scholarly associations, monograph series, colloquia, fellowships, and activities of all sorts have made the history of the book the hottest subject in the humanities. Princeton participates actively in the field, thanks to its new Center for the Study of Books and Media. And Princeton is also making a contribution on a new front: the integration of research in book history with the development of special collections.

The collaboration extends across many fields, thanks to the combined efforts of professors like Nigel Smith in English and Anthony Grafton in history and librarians like Stephen Ferguson and Don Skemer in Firestone's Department of Rare Books and Special Collections. It also extends to teaching. Many seminars now meet in Special Collections, and Firestone staff—from the Scheide Library, Rare Books, Manuscripts, Graphic Arts, Preservation, Binding, and the printing shop at 185 Nassau Street—have co-taught my course, "The Book: From Gutenberg to the Internet."



One example of this kind of collaboration involves a project I developed with Steve Ferguson. It originated from my research in the archives of the Société typographique de Neuchâtel (STN), a Swiss publisher and wholesaler that played a major part in the market for French books between 1769 and 1789. The STN papers—50,000 letters and a nearly complete set of account books in the Bibliothèque publique et universitaire of Neuchâtel, Switzerland—contain a vast amount of information about the demand for contemporary literature, and especially the books that sold best: works that could not be marketed legally in France, owing to censorship, the book police, and the monopolistic practices of the booksellers guild. Dozens of other publishing houses scattered around France's borders operated in the same way as the STN. They were located along a huge arc that stretched from Amsterdam through the Rhineland to Geneva and Avignon (which then was papal territory). The books they printed circulated everywhere in France, thanks to an enormous network of underground distributors. It is impossible to make accurate estimates, but it seems likely that the foreign publishers produced about half of the works in contemporary literature that were sold in France during the last two decades of the ancien régime.

These publishers also operated as wholesalers, regularly swapping copies of their new editions among themselves. When the STN printed an edition at a typical press run of 1,000, it traded 100, 200, or 500 copies for an equivalent number, reckoned in sheets, from the stock of allied houses, like the Société typographique de Lausanne and the Société typographique de Berne. In this way it built up an enormous inventory of all kinds of books—"livres d'assortiment" in the terms of the trade—in addition to its basic stock—"livres de fonds"—of its own publications. If a customer desired a book not in stock, the STN easily procured it by arranging a swap with another publisher.

The customers, who were mainly retail booksellers located everywhere in France, restricted their orders to a small number of suppliers in order to save on shipping costs. It was much cheaper to place a large order with one supplier than to scatter many small orders among several suppliers. Moreover, the retailers rarely asked for more than a dozen copies per title. Returns did not exist in the eighteenth-century book trade, except in rare cases when a retailer would sell books as an agent—"en commission"—of a wholesaler. Retailers therefore limited their orders to the number of copies they felt confident of selling and often settled sales in advance with their customers before placing orders with their suppliers. Orders thus adhered closely to demand.

For all these reasons—the importance of swapping at the wholesale level, the nature of ordering by retail book dealers, and the conservative character of the orders—the archives of the STN provide a full and detailed picture of the diffusion of literature, especially illegal literature, in France during the twenty years before the French Revolution. Clerks of the STN recorded every order in special registers ("livres de commission"). They entered every sale in account books (called both "journaux" and "brouillons"). They kept track of shipments and payments in other ledgers. And the directors of the STN maintained an enormous commercial correspondence. The letters from booksellers provide a running commentary on the market, because the retailers often accompanied their orders—long and eloquent lists of titles—with remarks about their sales.

Systematic sampling and compilation of the material in the STN archives therefore makes it possible to measure literary demand with a reasonable degree of accuracy—probably as much as reflected in best-seller lists today, which have their own drawbacks as indexes of the book market. Of course, one must allow for some bias in the

sources, because the STN sold a disproportionately large amount of books in a few genres, such as Protestant devotional works and travel literature. But one can compensate for that bias by consulting other documents. No other archives from French publishers exist, but it is possible to compile small runs of statistics from state papers, which include records of books confiscated in police raids and in the Paris customs.

Thanks to all this compiling and comparing, I was able to publish a list of the best-selling illegal books in *The Forbidden Best-Sellers of Pre-Revolutionary France* (1995) and to follow it up with detailed information on the diffusion of 720 works in *The Corpus of Clandestine Literature in France, 1769–1789* (1995). But what about the books themselves? Many of them were obscure works that sold well in the eighteenth century but have been forgotten since. Many never made it into libraries. Many more were never mentioned in histories of literature, because literary history favors a canon of classics, books judged to be important by critics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, rather than books that appealed to readers under the ancien régime.

At this point, Steve Ferguson saw an opportunity to develop a new kind of collection. Most rare book libraries feature first editions of famous works. They preserve books in superb bindings and in mint condition—sometimes with their pages still uncut because they have never been read. The value of such books often lies in their limited contemporary availability, which means that they represent the *least* widespread variety of literature.

Of course, strong arguments can be made for collecting examples of fine printing and first editions. Libraries have a mission to preserve the finest specimens of the printer's craft, and books that had a small circulation sometimes produced enormous effects. Few readers could make sense of Newton's *Principia* when it appeared in 1687, but the book contributed mightily to a transformation in humanity's understanding of the universe. Ferguson did not reject the rationale for rare book collecting in general. Rather, he undertook something new. Instead of buying rare works of great value, he set out to acquire the books on my best-seller list—that is, ordinary books that had appealed to ordinary readers.

They turned out to be not very rare at all, because they really had been diffused widely in the eighteenth century, and many copies were still available in antiquarian bookshops. They did not need to be first

editions. On the contrary, it was preferable to find works from the later, cheaper editions that had the greatest circulation. Nor did they need to be elegant. The physical qualities of the cheap contemporary reprints conveyed something of the experience of humble readers when they came into contact with literature in the eighteenth century. Crude paper, worn type, and cardboard wrappings have the flavor of down-market consumerism at a time when books were beginning to be bought on a mass scale. In some copies, threads embedded in the paper—remnants of shirts or petticoats gathered by ragpickers—remind modern readers of the basic raw materials for literature in the eighteenth century. In short, the cheaper the book, the better. It was a buying strategy that began from a principle completely at odds with the collecting that prevails in most rare book libraries.

To state the principle another way, the collecting was driven by the research, not by the taste of a collector. The purpose was to assemble physical artifacts from literature as it was actually experienced by the great majority of readers two centuries ago. But this kind of collection can also stimulate further research. By reading their way through eighteenth-century editions of eighteenth-century best-sellers, students can enter imaginatively into the mental universe of eighteenth-century readers. Not that such an enterprise is easy. Rare book rooms are not time machines, and readers in them cannot slip effortlessly into a premodern frame of mind. Too many barriers separate us from the world inhabited by people who experienced the Enlightenment and the French Revolution firsthand. But we can make contact with that world. Underlining, margin notes, keys to *romans à clé*, the texture of the paper, the feel of the volume in the hand, all suggest something of what it was like to read a book centuries ago. And most important, we can reconstruct general patterns of reading, so that we can put ourselves on the same literary diet that nourished the contemporaries of Voltaire and Rousseau.

Did Voltaire and Rousseau dominate the best-seller lists of their time? That is but one of many questions that can be put to the material now collected in Firestone Library. Instead of attempting to answer it here, I direct readers to the following list of the thirty-five top best-sellers.

THE THIRTY-FIVE FORBIDDEN BOOKS DIFFUSED MOST  
WIDELY IN FRANCE, 1769–1789

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <p>1. <i>L'An 2440</i>, Louis-Sébastien Mercier</p> <p>2. <i>Anecdotes sur Mme la comtesse du Barry</i>, Mathieu François Pidansat de Mairobert</p> <p>3. <i>Système de la nature</i>, Paul Henri Thiry, Baron d'Holbach</p> <p>4. <i>Tableau de Paris</i>, Louis-Sébastien Mercier</p> <p>5. <i>Histoire philosophique</i>, Guillaume Thomas Raynal</p> <p>6. <i>Journal historique ... par M. de Maupeou</i>, Mathieu François Pidansat de Mairobert and Mouffle d'Angerville</p> <p>7. <i>L'Arétin</i>, Henri Joseph Du Laurens</p> <p>8. <i>Lettre philosophique</i>, anonymous</p> <p>9. <i>Mémoires de l'abbé Terrai</i>, Jean-Baptiste-Louis Coquereau</p> <p>10. <i>La Pucelle d'Orléans</i>, Voltaire</p> <p>11. <i>Questions sur l'Encyclopédie</i>, Voltaire</p> <p>12. <i>Mémoires de Louis XV</i>, anonymous</p> <p>13. <i>L'Observateur anglois</i>, Mathieu François Pidansat de Mairobert</p> <p>14. <i>La Fille de joie</i>, John Cleland, translation attributed to Lambert ("fils d'un banquier de Paris") or Louis Charles Fougere de Monbon</p> <p>15. <i>Thérèse philosophe</i>, attributed to Arles de Montigny or Jean-Baptiste de Boyer, marquis d'Argens</p> <p>16. <i>Recueil de comédies et de quelques chansons gaillardes</i>, anonymous</p> <p>17. <i>Essai philosophique sur le monachisme</i>, Simon Nicolas Henri Linguet</p> | <p>18. <i>Histoire critique de Jésus Christ</i>, Paul Henri Thiry, Baron d'Holbach</p> <p>19. <i>Les Plus Secrets mystères ... de la maçonnerie</i>, "Bérage"</p> <p>20. <i>Requête au conseil du roi</i>, Simon Nicolas Henri Linguet</p> <p>21. <i>La Putain errante</i>, attributed to Pietro Aretino or Niccolò Franco</p> <p>22. <i>Le Christianisme dévoilé</i>, Paul Henri Thiry, Baron d'Holbach</p> <p>23. <i>Oeuvres</i>, Jean-Jacques Rousseau</p> <p>24. <i>Le Paysan perverti</i>, Nicolas Restif de la Bretonne</p> <p>25. <i>L'Ecole des filles</i>, Michel Millot</p> <p>26. <i>Le Bon-Sens</i>, Paul Henri Thiry, Baron d'Holbach</p> <p>27. <i>Lettre de M. Linguet à M. le comte de Vergennes</i>, Simon Nicolas Henri Linguet</p> <p>28. <i>De l'Homme</i>, Helvétius</p> <p>29. <i>Système social</i>, Paul Henri Thiry, Baron d'Holbach</p> <p>30. <i>Le Monarque accompli</i>, Joseph de Lanjuinais</p> <p>31. <i>Dictionnaire philosophique portatif</i>, Voltaire</p> <p>32. <i>Vie privée de Louis XV</i>, attributed to Mouffle d'Angerville</p> <p>33. <i>La Lyre gaillarde</i>, anonymous</p> <p>34. <i>Les Lauriers ecclésiastiques</i>, C.-J.-L.-A. Rochette la Morlière</p> <p>35. <i>Histoire de Dom B***, portier des Chartreux</i>, attributed to Jacques Charles Gervaise de La Touche</p> |
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L.S. Mercier

L'AN

DEUX MILLE

QUATRE CENT QUARANTE.

*Rève s'il en fût jamais*

NOUVELLE EDITION,

*Revue & corrigée par l'Auteur, qui a jugé à  
propos de refondre le Chapitre de la Bibliothèque  
du Roi.*

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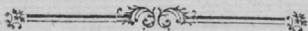
Le tems présent est gros de l'avenir...

LEIBNITZ.

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A LONDRES



M. DCC. LXXVI

The number 1 forbidden best-seller in pre-Revolutionary France. Title page of Louis-Sébastien Mercier, *L'an deux mille quatre cent quatre-vingt*, new ed. (Londres, 1776). Rare Books Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library. Bookplate of Percy A. Chapman, professor in Princeton's Department of Modern Languages in the 1920s.

AFTERWORD, BY STEPHEN FERGUSON

The wealth of a library is not the sum total of all the volumes it holds. Rather, it is the cumulation of all productive activities, past and present, of authors, printers, binders, publishers, booksellers, collectors, librarians, funders, and readers. It's easy for a curator at a well-endowed library like Princeton's to overlook this principle, but to ignore it means missing out on what money can't buy: the imagination of researchers using the books.

In early 1986, Robert Darnton's research assistant, Cynthia Gessele, was in our reading room working on the checklist of "720 Forbidden Books," eventually published in his *Corpus of Clandestine Literature in France*. It was not an easy task. Bob's work in the archives of the Société typographique de Neuchâtel as well as in police records had yielded contemporary lists of "under the cloak" books. Publishers in the clandestine trade and the police officials rendered the titles of these books in a very condensed form, probably because, in both cases, only a few words were needed to signal the book to either a client or an agent already in the know. Cynthia's job was to take a standard skeleton entry, such as "Traité de la morale des pères de l'Eglise," and give it full bibliographical form, complete with author, proper title, and imprint.

This was not an effortless task in the years before the large-scale conversion of the card catalogs of major research libraries allowed users to search them by keywords. However, one computer source to which I directed Cynthia could answer queries about titles and places of printing. This ability was relevant to her searches because clandestine publishers often substituted real place-names—Berlin, Amsterdam, London (Londres)—for the actual place of publication in their imprints. Fortunately, the online Eighteenth Century Short-Title Catalogue (now the English Short-Title Catalogue, ESTC), a database that includes chiefly books published in English, also lists books for which an English-speaking city was given in the imprint. Works by Voltaire, Helvétius, and other *philosophes*, for example, all carry Londres imprints. Searching the ESTC did provide a few answers for otherwise mysterious short entries, such as *Le Militaire philosophe*, because editions of this work by Baron d'Holbach have a London imprint. For the most part, however, Cynthia had to hunt down bibliographic information the old-fashioned way, by searching title entries in card catalogs at major libraries. Even when she found a matching

card, it was important to consult the book itself to check the exact wording of the title and to look for internal clues that might reveal who the author or publisher was.

Cynthia's project was a wonderful way to make new use of books at Princeton that had been collected in the past for reasons different from those that brought her to Firestone. In some cases, books on the "forbidden" list, like Cornelius Pauw's *Recherches philosophiques sur les Américains* (Berlin, 1768–1769, and at least thirteen editions thereafter), had first come to Princeton as "Americana"—books that document the European settlement of the Americas. Books in this category that were intended particularly for French readers are called "Franco-Americana." This topic was a collecting interest of Princeton professor Gilbert Chinard, whose personal library came to Firestone after his death in 1972. In other cases, books like Simon Tyssot de Patot's *Voyages et aventures de Jacques Massé* (Bordeaux, 1710, and several editions thereafter) were gathered because they were part of established collecting genres, including "Imaginary Voyages" and "Utopiana," both popular in the early part of the twentieth century.

As I conversed with Cynthia about the checklist, I began to see a way to augment the collections gathered by Chinard and others. Thanks to Bob's work, these books could now be repositioned in a wider context as the stock of books circulating in the eighteenth century as *livres philosophiques*. Moreover, these books were a counterfoil to the "national literatures" collecting that had long dominated university rare book collections. The trend for collecting standard, recognized works of national literatures began in the 1870s, when Yale, Harvard, and Princeton purchased books on Anglo-Saxon topics from the private library of William Medlicott, a Connecticut textile mill owner. It accelerated as the century came to an end, especially in the field of English literature. (Lehigh was the first American university to purchase a First Folio of Shakespeare, in 1887.) When Yale purchased the William A. Speck Collection of Classical German Literature in 1913 and Archibald Cary Coolidge established an intensive program of collecting national literatures at Harvard after he became librarian in 1910, the endeavor entered an intense phase that endured for the next several decades. Texas, new to the collection-building game, boasted in 1918 that its purchase of the library of English literature formed by Harold Wrenn of Chicago made its holdings the equal of Harvard's and Yale's. (Wrenn's collection was later found to be laced with forgeries made by Thomas J. Wise.)

Even though Bob Darnton's "forbidden books" were most often defined by what they were not—part of the canon of a national literature—the question still remained: What exactly were *livres philosophiques*? Certainly, not all French books with Londres as their place of publication and no publisher's name in the imprint could be automatically ruled "philosophical." There are always exceptions to this kind of generalization, such as French translations of Laurence Sterne or a pamphlet on the Quakers by the Catholic priest and naturalist John Turberville Needham. The problem was one of identification. For me, the answer was found in the *documentation* of philosophical books provided by Darnton's researches. His evidence established a guide to the clandestine imprints known to have been regarded as "philosophical" by their contemporaries. Unlike classic national literature, which had been identified by academies, publishers, clergy, professors, and collectors, here was a literature recovered from the actual transactions of booksellers and book buyers in the eighteenth century.

For an institutional curator, it was exciting to be collecting at the frontier of an actual recovered past, rather than being at the receiving end of a tradition bequeathed by men of the nineteenth century who imposed their values on old books. Moreover, I knew that other institutional collectors would also find such a list exciting. I sensed an opportunity to add books with a new interpretative story to the Library's existing stock. In addition, I saw a chance to bring books into the Library that would be immediately useful for research in progress. Further, because the unpublished list was not known to the wider world, I could purchase books not yet commercially inflated in price due to their appearance in an important interpretive work by a major historian. I asked for Cynthia's list.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Cynthia had compiled the list in a word-processing program, so we all hoped that it might be an easy migration of data from her computer to mine. However, the early 1980s were the Wild West days of word processing, and the transfer eventually proved impossible. Furthermore, at this point in the project, Bob had two major lists in progress: one based on publishers' records and the other based on police records of confiscated books. To get the data in a form usable to me, I had students rekeyboard both lists and combine them. I then had the full register of "forbidden books" and could add myriad details resulting from my planned, multiyear process of tracking, finding, and purchasing them. My list served as a journalized version of Bob's lists, recording copies seen in the market, their offering prices, and details of purchases.

The idea of collecting the 720 forbidden books all at once was obviously impractical. Choices would have to be made, but the decision regarding where to start was straightforward: follow Bob's lead and concentrate on what he called the "best-sellers," those books for which suppliers received the greatest number of orders. As published in his *Corpus* (pp. 194–97), there are 74 such champions, ranging from Louis-Sébastien Mercier's utopian novel *L'An 2440* at the top, down to a work on Freemasonry.

The best-sellers came to Princeton from many and varied sources: young dealers such as Bennett Gilbert in Los Angeles; older established firms such as Clavreuil in Paris. And they came in a variety of prices, from as little as £25 to as much as, so my notes tell me, recording a bit of bargaining for a lot price, "\$1,300 the two." Bob described some of the early purchases as "very appetizing." In the first full year of the program, the Library acquired twelve of his forbidden books, and the average in the following years has been about ten per year. The work continues down to this day. Our most recent count shows that of the 74 best-sellers, Princeton has 59 (79 percent) in first or otherwise early editions. Ten of the remaining 15 can be consulted in the Library as reprints or microforms. But what about the larger target: the full list of 720 forbidden bestsellers? Currently, the Library has more than half of them in original or early editions. The most recent addition is Guillaume Imbert de Bourdeaux's *Chronique scandaleuse*, number 93 on the full list.

Now that the books are here, it is reasonable to ask who uses them. Certainly Bob's students, both graduate and undergraduate, enrolled in such courses as "The Social History of Ideas in Pre-Revolutionary France" (1987) or his more recent "Printing and Publishing in Early Modern Europe" (2003). But there are others, and the collecting of these *livres philosophiques* has provoked questions for other library curators. For example, Roger Stoddard, retired Curator of Rare Books at the Houghton Library, noticed the frequency of the word *libelle* in the titles of philosophical books and asked: "Just what is a libelle"? If that question can be answered—and Bob Darnton is working on it as this issue goes to press—another frontier for collecting will open up, augmenting the territory now well defined as forbidden books of the ancien régime. The cycle of collecting will begin again.