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ÚSTAV ANGLOFONNÍCH LITERATUR A KULTUR
BRITISH BOOKTRADE AT THE TURN OF THE 18TH CENTURY
AND THE CAREER OF JAMES LACKINGTON
BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

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Abstract

This thesis describes the changes in the English book trade in the late 18th century. The life of the second-hand bookseller James Lackington provides a time frame for the thesis. The work takes up the economic terminology and applies it to the publishing process of the literature. The starting point for this is the individual and the effects his entrepreneurship effort can have on the trade. The thesis delves into the four main topics: the circulating libraries, the readership and the analysis of the increasing literacy, the overall picture of the bookselling of the period and finally the bookselling career of James Lackington. The chapter discussing the circulating libraries lists various subcategories of public libraries in general, goes through the history of commercial book lending in England and presents the methods which the circulating libraries were using for lending books. The chapter about the readership uncovers the issues surrounding the literacy and solving some of the possible myths around it. This chapter shows the concentration of the improvement in the literacy was in the middle classes. In addition it presents the purchasing power of the readers which delineates the limits of the late eighteenth-century readership. It was still limited to the middle classes. The third topic deals with some other booksellers of the time and the more general issues of the era such as the copyright, the other roles the booksellers were assuming alongside the bookselling business, and the sweeping changes the book trade was undergoing. The thesis observes the pattern of the outsiders entering the trade and changing it drastically. The fourth topic involves Lackington himself. The chapter dealing with him leans on his literary output where he was describing (among many other things) his business practices and even his commentary on the book trade in general. The thesis observes the radical changes Lackington introduced in his business and the hostile reaction which he was getting. Lackington's extraordinary career proves the tremendous opportunities which were there in the period even for a man of very modest means.

Keywords

Book trade, bookselling, eighteenth century, Great Britain, circulating libraries, middle class, readership, book culture, James Lackington

Abstrakt

Práce popisuje změny anglického knižního trhu pozdního osmnáctého století. Život antikvariáře Jamese Lackingtona dodává práci časové ukotvení. Práce přebírá ekonomickou terminologii a uplatňuje ji na procesu vydávání knih. Výchozím bodem práce je otázka jednotlivce a jeho možného vlivu na knižní trh. Práce se zabývá čtyřmi hlavními otázkami: komerční knihovny, čtenáři a rozbor zvyšující se gramotnosti, celkový přehled knižního prodeje v tomto období a nakonec životní dráhu Jamese Lackingtona. Kapitola, která se zabývá komerčními knihovnami, představuje různé druhy veřejných knihoven, zkoumá dějiny anglického komerčního půjčování knih a vypisuje metody, které byly používány při půjčování knih. Kapitola o čtenářích rozkrývá otázky, které se týkají gramotnosti, a řeší některé možné mýty okolo gramotnosti. Dále ukazuje, kde se nejvíce soustředilo zvětšení gramotnosti, totiž ve střední třídě. Navíc popisuje kupní sílu čtenářů, a tak vymezuje hranice čtenářstva pozdního osmnáctého století, které se omezilo na střední třídu. Třetí otázka se týká některých jiných knihkupců a všeobecných dobových otázek (autorská práva, další činnosti knihkupců a bouřlivé změny knižního trhu). Práce zjistila opakující se vzorec: lidé zvnějšku přicházejí do podnikání s knihami a dramaticky jej mění. Čtvrtá část zkoumá Jamese Lackingtona opírajíc se o jeho literární dílo, ve kterém (kromě mnoha dalších věcí) popisuje svoje podnikatelské způsoby a navíc poskytuje komentář o knižním trhu obecně. Práce konstatuje radikální změny, které byly Lackingtonem zavedeny, a pozoruje nepřátelskou reakci na tyto změny. Lackingtonova neuvěřitelná kariéra dokazuje skvělé příležitosti, které v této době existovaly i pro velmi chudého muže.

Klíčová slova

Knižní obchod, prodej knih, osmnácté století, Velká Británie, komerční knihovny, střední třída, knižní kultura, James Lackington

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Introduction

Subject

The purpose of this thesis is to present a glimpse into the situation of the English book trade at the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This era witnessed some of the most far-reaching changes in the structure of the readership and that of the booksellers, as this thesis will endeavour to show. These changes are of extraordinary and sometimes surprising nature. The surprising aspect of these changes will be documented by pointing to often paradoxical examples from the book trading practice. This will open a possibility of forming a fresh view of the era.

The focal point of this thesis is the character of the bookseller James Lackington, whose lifetime provides a time frame for the thesis. This man of a very humble origin came to an immense fortune through his success at the bookselling institution called the Temple of Muses. In addition to that he wrote two works of his own: *Memoirs of the Forty-five First Years of the Life of James Lackington, Bookseller* and *The Confessions of James Lackington, Late Bookseller at the Temple of Muses*. The thesis will try to provide an analysis of these two, though the greater focus will be on the former title. Lackington in his *Memoirs* offers some intriguing issues which were accompanying his occupation. His life provides an example of the tremendous social mobility at the time of his life. These issues which include the other booksellers and their practices, the phenomenon of the so-called circulating libraries and book clubs, or the composition of the readership will be discussed as well.

The central concept which the author of this thesis wants to put forward is the affordability of the literature and its impact on the individual participants of the book trade. It will be maintained that the decrease of the prices is good for everybody, not only for the readers, but for the authors as well as for the sellers of literary works. The reason for such a strong assumption is one of the basic economic axioms that states that the lower the price is the greater the demand for the product in question, in this case the works of literature. This phenomenon will appear multiple times during the course of this work. Furthermore, it leads to the refutation of some of the more consistent economic fallacies which encompass the belief that in order to have a great profit, one needs to keep the price as high as it is possible. Another type of the fallacy is the belief that the business practices generally are damaging to the cause of the literature itself. One example of such practices for which Lackington himself was notorious among his London bookselling fellows is remainder trade which

eventually meant that the prices of works of the individual authors were cut in order to make them attractive for customers. Another concept very foreign to the minds of the most literary men is that of the competition. Throughout the work very many instances of sometimes brutal and uncompromising competition will appear. On the other hand, the moments of a very surprising cooperation will be presented also. Tied to these two concepts is the idea of the innovation and its possible destabilising consequences.

These economic overtones lead us to another concept, that of the supply and demand. The thesis will try to break up the entire problem into several categories that will go along the lines of the supply and demand concept. Each category will be discussed in one chapter of this thesis.

John Feather in *A History of British Publishing* reproduces the Shannon-Weaver model of literary communication:

SOURCE → TRANSMITTER → RECIPIENT

And then he transfers it to fit into the patterns of the book trade:

AUTHOR → PUBLISHER → READER¹

However, this model is too simplistic, as Feather acknowledges even if he sees the simplicity in a different sphere than where it should be seen: “In practice, the process is, of course, far more complicated than this implies, and involves many different participants and functions.”² The simplicity lies in the one-way direction of the communication that it sees the author as a simple origin of the transmission and the publisher with the reader as the completely passive participants in the process. The signals in the literary communication travel in both directions. The economist Ludwig von Mises offers a much better version of the process, albeit not reducible to pretty diagrams:

The market is not a place, a thing, or a collective entity. The market is a process, actuated by the interplay of the actions of the various individuals cooperating under the division of labor. The forces determining the continually changing-state of the market are the value judgments of these individuals and their actions as directed by these value judgments.[...] The market process is the adjustment of the individual actions of the various members of the market society to the requirements of mutual cooperation ³

¹ John Feather, *A History of British Publishing*, second edition, (Abingdon, Oxfordshire: Routledge, 2006), 1.

² Feather, 1.

³ Ludwig von Mises, *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics*, (Auburn, Alabama: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 1998), 259-60, Date accessed 7.4.2017, <https://mises.org/library/human-action-0>.

The signals in question are not mechanical, they rely more on the anticipation of the participants in the literary communication. This gives ample space for experimentation because the source (the author) cannot easily access the information and is not able to predict the future tastes of his readers.

The middle man in the diagram – the publisher – faces more immediate pressure because of his closer proximity to the reader. To him Mises's pronouncements apply even more. The fact of his being the middle man makes him open to all kinds of criticism: from the authors who demand to be paid more, from the readers who demand to pay less and most viciously from the critics and the intellectuals who demand he be taken out of the process altogether on the account of his parasitical nature and most unashamed and supposedly inhuman lust for profit from the noble and pure sphere of the literature. Leaving aside the very interesting philosophical debate on the value and place of self-interest in human behaviour, it is indispensable to examine the publisher's condition on the market. He is not a dirty trickster making money of the poor authors, but he takes his own set of risks on himself. It is he who arranges for the printing of the literary works, it is he who provides the author with the subsistence fund, it is he who in most cases takes the burden of the risk away from the author by paying him at least part of the reward in advance and consequently he brings the risk upon himself. The transaction thus confers on the author the advantage of the ready present money while the publisher/bookseller can make a profit but only in the future. Mises writes with regard to time preference: "acting man does not appraise time periods merely with regard to their dimension. His choices regarding the removal of future uneasiness are directed by the categories *sooner* and *later*,"⁴ and "time preference manifests itself in the phenomenon of originary interest, i.e., the discount of future goods as against present goods."⁵ For our purposes suffice to say that the term originary interest covers not only the classically defined categories of interest, but the profits and even the rent as well.

The resulting relationship is a part of the wider division of labour in the economy which is both necessary and practical. The Pencil from the famous essay by Leonard Read can attest to the necessity of the division of labour: "Simple? Yet, *not a single person on the face of this earth knows how to make me.*"⁶ The same applies to books. The author is just

Also in Czech: Ludwig von Mises, *Lidské jednání: Pojednání o ekonomii*, trans. Josef Šíma et al., (Praha: Liberální Institut, 2006)

⁴ Mises, *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics*, 480

⁵ Mises, *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics*, 521

⁶ Leonard E. Read: *I, Pencil: My Family Tree as Told to Leonard E. Read, 50th Anniversary Edition*, (New York: Foundation for Economic Education, 2010), 4, Date accessed 7.11.2015, <https://fee.org/resources/i-pencil-audio-pdf-and-html/>

one, albeit vital, part of the production process. For the book to reach the audience and to fulfil its primary function countless other factors must come into play and these factors need to be paid.

Theoretically, the author could take all the responsibilities of getting the work to the public on himself, but instead he chooses to trust the publisher. As a result the author has more time on his hands and is able to press home his comparative advantage. The same is true for the publisher who is comparatively better placed to sell books successfully to the reader and would not want to write books for himself and who is, fortunately for the reading public, well aware of his deficiencies in this department. He thus confirms Mises' observation that: "The fundamental facts that brought about cooperation, society, and civilization and transformed the animal man into a human being are the facts that work performed under the division of labor is more productive than isolated work and that man's reason is capable of recognizing this truth."⁷ The author wins, the publisher wins and most importantly the reader gets the books he wants. There were cases where the publisher decided he got the talent needed for the job. Characteristically, those brave individuals tended to appear in the nascent stages of the industry and quickly began employing specialised writers. Lackington himself wrote two biographies but only when he was an already established businessman.

The passage illustrates the possibility of the imperfect transmission of information, because the consumers, despite having the principal role in the process, is not directly controlling the production and delays in transmitting his preferences to the helmsman. Having said that this model is not reliant on the so-called homo oeconomicus (the ideal type of the human behaviour pursuing only the material gain, part of many theories in economics). Human motivations are more complex than that. Again Mises:

It pictures a being driven exclusively by "economic" motives, i.e., solely by the intention of making the greatest possible material or monetary profit. Such a being does not have and never did have a counterpart in reality; it is a phantom of a spurious armchair philosophy. No man is exclusively motivated by the desire to become as rich as possible; many are not at all influenced by this mean craving. It is vain to refer to such an illusory homunculus in dealing with life and history.⁸

⁷ Mises: *Human Action, A Treatise on Economics*, 144.

⁸ Mises, *Human Action, A Treatise on Economics*, 62.

The thesis attempts to argue that the free market economy provides the best conditions even for the high-brow art. The economist Tyler Cowen notes the understated importance of this particular set of institutions:

The capitalist market economy is a vital but underappreciated institutional framework for supporting a plurality of coexisting artistic visions, providing a steady stream of new and satisfying creations, helping consumers and artists refine their tastes, and paying homage to the eclipsed past by capturing, reproducing, and disseminating it.⁹

There is always the issue of the state intrusion into the voluntary sectors of the economy. It existed in the era in question in a surprisingly heavy fashion; no unregulated ravages of capitalism were happening, the state and its surrogates kept a heavy grip on freedom by various means of the restriction. The confusing thing in this respect is the way the era's regulations differed from the current regulatory regimes. The early modern state went about the business restriction in a rather different way. Bodies enforcing these regulations were of the completely different nature. The economic aspects of the regulations (leading merchants' interests and contemporaneous ruling economic ideology) were inextricably linked with the regulation of speech and the suppression of dissent which is not the public rationale for the current regulatory regime.

Time reference

As has been already said the thesis will focus on the last parts of the eighteenth century. However, possible overlap into the earlier parts of it cannot be ruled out, especially in the case of circulating libraries. James Lackington is thus able to provide the thesis with yet another anchor, since he was born in the year 1746, into a decade which allegedly saw the first use of the word circulating library, and he handed control of his business at the very beginning of the nineteenth century. The thesis does not proclaim itself to be an encompassing history of the book trade of the period; rather it will limit itself to the topics listed above.

Geographical location

In terms of the geography the thesis will focus mainly on London because Lackington himself established his business there. Throughout the British history London was the centre of the book trade and the London book traders even managed to secure a regional printing

⁹ Tyler Cowen, *In Praise of Commercial Culture*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2000), 1.

monopoly with the passage of the Printing Act (alternatively called the Licensing Act) of 1662. This piece of legislation prohibited the English printing only to London, the two universities and York (under the supervision of the local archbishop).¹⁰ However, London also drew from more natural sources to achieve its dominance. It was a capital city, a natural centre of trade in all manner of the commodities, but unlike Paris it was not a centre of the highest education; this being the domain of the two university cities for a long time.

Value of the research

Since the end of the 18th century the book trade has undergone significant changes. Many of the practices common in the era are now all but extinct. Libraries in particular became ossified large institution. A stark contrast to the dynamism of the eighteenth-century commercial libraries and to the enterprising and daring character of their owners. This contrast stems from the change from purely market nature of the erstwhile circulating libraries and on the contrary the purely statist nature of the current “public” libraries. On the other hand, the 18th century appears to originate book trade patterns which have survived to this day. Lackington’s Temple of the Muses seems to be one of the examples. The thesis will examine the validity of this claim.

Points of contention

To add to the commonly held myths mentioned above we need to raise a point about the supposedly bad effects of the commercial culture on the quality of the art. This is essential since it clarifies the a priori assumptions of the author of this thesis and clears away any doubts about methodology. There is no doubt that majority of the novels available in the circulating libraries suffered from a serious lack of artistic merit, however, it should not lead to the conclusion that the owners of these establishments were to blame. In a freedom-oriented environment the customers are the people who decide what is produced and consequently who reaps profits from serving the greatest number of people. Mises elaborates: “Those who satisfy the wants of a smaller number of people only collect fewer votes – dollars – than those who satisfy the wants of more people. In money-making the movie star outstrips the philosopher; the manufacturers of Pinkapinka outstrip the composer of symphonies.”¹¹

This emphasis on what the people want (in other words the consumer democracy and sovereignty) is deeply unpalatable for most people associated with the high-brow art of not

¹⁰ Feather, 46.

¹¹ Ludwig von Mises, *Anti-Capitalistic Mentality*, (Auburn, Alabama: The Ludwig von Mises Institute, 2008), 10, Date accessed 7.4.2017, <https://mises.org/library/anti-capitalistic-mentality>

only our day. This is undoubtedly true nowadays when the high-brow art strives to live in a vacuum decoupled from the voluntary means of financing. In response to the critics who decry a lack of discernment and on the other hand predict a lot of hardship for the aesthetically significant authors under the free-market capitalism Mises writes: “Many critics take pleasure in blaming capitalism for what they call the decay of literature. Perhaps they should rather inculcate their own inability to sift the chaff from the wheat.”¹² The literary process is much more complex to reduce it to the simple opposition such as the free-market capitalism = bad, the public funding = great. The basic dilemma of scarcity will always be present no matter what manner of funding is applied.

Note on currency and inflation

The thesis will reference the currency units when discussing the book trade. The appropriate unit for the period is of course the Pound Sterling, which was at the time divided into 20 shillings, one shilling further divided into twelve pennies. The appropriate abbreviations are: “£” for pound, “s.” for shilling, and “d.” for pence.

Another important warning which is obvious to the author of the thesis, but no so much to an author of a 1913 newspaper article about the London circulating libraries, is the inflation and the related issue of the erosion of the purchasing power. For purposes of this thesis the inflation shall be defined rather simplistically and inaccurately with the help of *The Macmillan Dictionary of Modern Economics* as: “a sustained rise in the general price level. The proportionate rate of increase in the general price level per unit of time.”¹³

The Times article expresses the surprise of its author that “the cost of subscription [in the 18th century] [is] much below that of anything in existence to-day for the same advantages.”¹⁴ *The Times* writer was very lucky to live in the period he did, because his consternation at the current prices of the book in the Great Britain could be fatal. On a more serious note it is crucial to do something for which the French have the beautiful expression “ôter des lunettes de son époque” and look at the monetary figures in context. This context must be provided in terms of wages of the general British population which will be given in due course. Only this can provide the appropriate background for evaluating the purchasing power and validating the claims regarding the affordability of the reading matter.

¹² Mises, *Anti-Capitalistic Mentality*, 52.

¹³ “Inflation,” *The Macmillan Dictionary of Modern Economics*, 1981

¹⁴ “London Circulating Libraries – Early Methods of Booklending,” *The Times*, 2. Sep 1913, 2.

Circulating libraries

Classification and terminology

The type of the library commonly known as the circulating library is one of many of the other types of what Paul Kaufman calls “a community lending library”.¹⁵ This term encompasses those establishments which allowed the withdrawal of book items. There existed many types of these establishments in addition to the circulating libraries. According to Kaufman, these are: the private subscription libraries (having members/owners/proprietors who collectively owned the books and generally paid the admission fee and then the regular annual fee, their function being similar to the book clubs and in many cases having arisen from the scientific and literary societies), the parochial libraries, the cathedral libraries, the university libraries, the libraries of scientific foundations and the public libraries (open to all without cost).¹⁶ To show the variety of the possible terminology, Hamlyn in her important article proposes the term “non-proprietary subscription library” for commercial circulating libraries and the term “library society” for private subscription libraries, though she returns to the traditional terms later.¹⁷

Another problem with the terminology stems from the fact that the reality denoted by the term had been in existence before the term “circulating library” appeared. The first mention of the collocation is dated back to the year 1742 on an advertisement for “a Public Circulating Library” by Samuel Fancourt, a man popularly credited with being at the helm of the first circulating library.¹⁸

The dictionary definition itself does not elucidate matters: “a library of which the books are circulated among subscribers.”¹⁹ No mention of the commercial intent so this definition might as well be used for the private subscription library/library society.

Although Kaufman does not name them in his introductory list, the research has also shown libraries adjoining the coffee houses which were very popular and numerous at the time. The coffee houses had major significance not only for the rental of books but for the book trade in general.²⁰ They were not of a minor significance; there are accounts of the

¹⁵ Paul Kaufman, “The Community Library: A Chapter in English Social History“, *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 57.7 (1967), 5, JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1006043?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents>, 12 Mar 2016.

¹⁶ Kaufman, 5.

¹⁷ Hilda M. Hamlyn, “Eighteenth-century Circulating Libraries in England”, *The Library*, 5.1 (1947) 197

¹⁸ “circulating, adj.” *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2017. Web. 4 April 2017.

¹⁹ “circulating, adj.” *OED Online*.

²⁰ Kaufman, 7.

coffee houses having relatively large libraries. To show the great significance of the coffee houses Kaufman states that “the ubiquitous coffee houses which began to spread during the Restoration until by 1700 they totalled over 2000 in London alone.”²¹ The conversation and reading of books were frequent companions as the separate circulating libraries themselves served as a place for conversation; the depictions (used often for advertising purposes) of the libraries show this.²²

The focus of this chapter will be mostly on the commercial circulating libraries only with a passing mention of the private subscription libraries. The terminology used by Kaufman will be retained for the purposes of clarity even though in other sources the terminology may differ. Raven for example further divides the private subscription library into subscription library which was financed by annual subscription and proprietary library which, as Raven states, “depended in addition upon joint-stock enterprises in which members purchased a share in a property (as gentlemen might support an overseas commercial venture or a local project for an improved navigation or new mineral extraction).”²³ The part of the quotation in parentheses helps to shed light on the difference between the circulating libraries and the private subscription libraries: the former functioned on the basis of profit while the latter were driven by philanthropical motivations. Those cases where the terminology used in the quoted material differs from Kaufman’s will be remarked upon; attention will be drawn to them and Kaufman’s terminology will be applied.

There is an additional danger in using the term “private subscription library” for what was effectively a joint stock company since the commercial circulating libraries in order to function also relied on the subscription and regular, in most cases, quarterly or yearly subscription fees even taking into account the aforementioned distinction. Nonetheless, the term does not say anything about a profit motive. The term therefore could cause confusion, because either adjective could be as well applied to the standard circulating library which was privately owned and as has been already mentioned used a subscription model of business. Alternatively, the term “proprietary libraries” – in addition to Raven’s division – is used in literature to denote the private subscription library²⁴, but the similar confusion is likely to arise since the attribute does not describe much.

²¹ Kaufman, 7.

²² Edward H. Jacobs, “Buying into Classes: The Practice of Book Selection in Eighteenth-Century Britain“, *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 33.1 (1999), 56-8, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/30053314>>, 28 Mar 2016.

²³ James Raven, “Libraries for sociability: the advance of the subscription library,” *Cambridge History of Libraries in Britain and Ireland, Volume II: 1640-1850*, ed. Giles Mandelbrote and K. A. Manley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) 246.

²⁴ Hamlyn, 197.

The reason that the circulating libraries are studied in this thesis while the other types are not lies in the fact that they are the venue for the most exciting developments in the English literature of the time. Patterns in retailing were also affected, because of the close connection between retailers and circulating library owners and because the circulating libraries became prominent buyers on the book market. Their influence can be found in the emergence of the new writers or the form in which books were published. Moreover, they were far superior in number. Kaufman claims that in comparison with the private subscription libraries “naturally and inevitably, the ratio was more than ten to one in favour of the commercial [circulating library].”²⁵

The subject of circulating libraries ties directly into the central thesis of this work (the beneficial connections between the business and the literature). The consequences of the commercial practices were beneficial not only for the customers, but also for the people who do research nowadays profit from these as well. To give an example: surviving catalogues of circulating libraries enable the researchers to study the obvious issues such as genres, formats and their proportions as well as the composition of the audience and their financial background.²⁶ Some pieces of the advertisement placed directly in the books which were published by the circulating library owners themselves have even resulted in the conservation of the owners’ names to history and in preserving library conditions and fees.²⁷ Even such an insignificant piece of evidence is important because surviving library catalogues are hard to come by which is confirmed by the fact that only four catalogues of large Lowndes’ circulating library from the period between the years 1756-1784 (the year of Lowndes’s death) survived.²⁸ Not to mention the fact that Lowndes could have published his catalogues in a higher than annual frequency. In such circumstances, every shred of the evidence is valuable.

Origins and development

Although the credit for being the first to come up with the designation “circulating library” goes to Samuel Fancourt mentioned above, the practice of lending books for profit is much older. It is crucial to emphasise the profit motive and the professionalism of (meaning

²⁵ Kaufman, 25.

²⁶ Norbert Schürer, “Four Catalogues of the Lowndes Circulating Library, 1755–66”, *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 101.3 (2007), 331, <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/24293712>>, 1 Mar 2017.

²⁷ Edward Jacobs, “A Previously Unremarked Circulating Library: John Roson and the Role of Circulating-Library Proprietors as Publishers in Eighteenth-Century Britain”, *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 89.1 (1995), 62-3, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24304635?seq=1&cid=pdf-reference#references_tab_contents>, 1 Mar 2017.

²⁸ Schürer, 336.

the financial dependence and interest on the undertaking) the personnel engaged in these enterprises. There is concrete but sporadic evidence (again by way of advertisement) that shows lenders of books were known to exist during the Restoration period. Alan McKillop quotes a Restoration author: “I likewise hired several books of a stationer, for which I gave him so much *per* week. These being chiefly knight-errantry and romances, I took much pleasure therein.”²⁹ The quotation establishes two familiar patterns. Firstly, this particular author borrowed the type of books later to be chiefly associated with the circulating libraries, i. e. books “with low marginal utility of rereading them,”³⁰ the books of lighter type. In the 18th century these would be novels. Secondly, the quote provides a clue in the word “stationer” who in addition to selling stationery traditionally sold books.³¹ The lending business thus develops out of bookselling. The similar pattern will be seen in the 1740s London during the era of the rapid development of the circulating libraries.

Somewhat surprisingly the wave of the circulating libraries appears to have spread from the provinces to London rather than the other way around. Seasonal spas were an especially fertile ground for them. McKillop writes: “In general, such establishments were first to be found at the watering-places, where fashionable idlers sought fresh supplies of light reading.”³² Reasons for this development are logical. People who were going to spas did not find reasonable to carry their own books with them nor to buy books there only to take them back home. People in spas are also always in need of a meeting place and the library can provide just that, as Raven shows: “Library members and users [...] held notions of library usage that might not include reading or coming into much contact with the collections.”³³ To bolster this assertion Raven quotes a poem “The country book club”: “Thus meeting to dispute, to fight, to plead / To smoke, to drink – do anything but read.”³⁴ London booksellers could use postal services – and they subsequently would – but transport on a such a large scale would have been uneconomical not to mention the fact that the seasonal spas were too distant from London (London circulating library owners would usually limit the distance to which they were willing to send borrowed books). Close link between the social role of the seasonal spas and the circulating libraries is reinforced further by the libraries closing their doors after season’s end.

²⁹ Alan Dugald McKillop, “English Circulating Libraries 1725-50”, *The Library* 14.4 (1934), 477.

³⁰ Lee Erickson, “The Economy of Novel Reading: Jane Austen and the Circulating Library”, *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 30.4 (1990), 578.

³¹ The role of stationers in the English book trade will be discussed with greater detail in chapter 3 of this thesis.

³² McKillop, “English Circulating Libraries 1725-50”, 478.

³³ Raven, “Libraries for sociability”, 253.

³⁴ Raven, “Libraries for sociability”, 253.

Though it seems that the provinces were key in the origin of the circulating libraries, London booksellers were not excluded from the process. Partnership of the two London booksellers Caesar Ward and Richard Chandler opened a branch of their company in Scarborough on the north coast of England. The branch allowed to lend books, organised raffles (drawings in which books are won) for books and made newspapers available as well.³⁵ The raffles are an interesting method of how to sell books. Very little is written about them in literature. Swift complained at one point about winning books which he did not like. For such unhappy customers Ward and Chandler's establishment was prepared as McKillop found: "if the Persons who win, do not like their books, they have the Choice of any others of the same Value."³⁶

The connection between bookselling and book lending was natural; booksellers just made parts of their stock lendable. Virtually all the circulating library owners mentioned in the literature sold books as their first and main venture with book lending growing naturally out of it. One circulating library in Bath was in addition a hotel and a coffee house.³⁷ The bookselling inclination was not at all forgotten even in the library departments of their shops. Almost regularly book prices were added to entries in the catalogues with the obvious possibility of selling them.³⁸

The direction of the change from provinces to London might seem surprising at first but it should not be so. As it will be seen in following chapters the provinces were the most exciting venues for profit with many potential customers waiting for new reading possibilities. In addition, many of the greatest innovators in the book trade came from outside of London, Lackington foremost among them. Other such outsiders were Edward Cave, publisher of *Gentleman's Magazine* whose enormous success was built on the provinces and the insights Cave gained living in them, and Thomas Newberry, who is now remembered as the first publisher of children's books.

The merit of being the first London circulating library owner is now hardly possible to estimate. Traditionally it goes to Samuel Fancourt, a dissenting minister who – by McKillop's account – had first opened in 1735 an establishment in Salisbury with the action radius of 60 miles or even more "wherever there is a weekly Conveyance to and from that

³⁵ McKillop, 479-80.

³⁶ McKillop, 479.

³⁷ Raven, "Libraries for sociability", 253.

³⁸ Schürer, 348.

City.”³⁹ He then moved his company to London and doubled the subscription fee (from half a guinea to a pound). In 1742 he published *Proposals for erecting a public circulating library* which marked the first known use of the term. Kaufman is quick to put an emphasis on “known”: “because of the mischievous tyranny that the reputed first occurrence has over some minds.”⁴⁰

Even in such an early phase of the development of the circulating libraries there was a backlash against this novelty published in the *Champion*: “the Project lately set on Foot for a *Universal Circulating Library*, which, as it is a new, so it will if countenanced, be always a very great Obstruction to the Studies and Discoveries of the Ingenious.”⁴¹ This backlash did not limit itself to journalists, but was present among Fancourt’s colleagues as well.⁴² However, Fancourt did not establish a precept which would then be blindly followed, because his library differed from the later ones. He did not appear to have a stable idea how to conduct his business and thus changed the conditions radically and frequently at one point even trying his luck at a private subscription library where the books were owned by proprietors, at another point he wanted to sell his books by a lottery.

Another aspect in which Fancourt differed from his successors is the composition of his stock. His incursion into the private subscription library might suggest (these libraries were in general more focused on a technical kind of literature⁴³) that his stock offered more to the expert reader than to a light reader.⁴⁴ McKillop concludes that “the commercial circulating library can hardly be said to have developed from the intrusion of popular elements into such a scheme as this.”⁴⁵

The article from *The Times* provides a snappy characterization of Fancourt: “a poor Nonconformist minister, who failed in everything he undertook.” Fancourt’s business also goes against the grain in being a specialised commercial library while his contemporaries developed the book lending side of their business out of book selling; another distinguishing feature needs to be added that is the borderline between a bookseller with part of his stock available to be lent and a bookseller *and* circulating library owner with separate stock to sell and stock to lend. The individual instances of book lending before the massive development in the 1740s must be understood in this light – they only made part of the saleable stock

³⁹ McKillop, 480.

⁴⁰ Kaufman, 10.

⁴¹ McKillop, 480.

⁴² “London Circulating Libraries – Early Methods of Booklending”, 1.

⁴³ Raven, “Libraries for sociability”, 248.

⁴⁴ McKillop, 481.

⁴⁵ McKillop, 481.

available for lending. First commercial circulating library owners in the true sense of the word had a part of their stock always available for lending while the stock for purchase was no longer borrowed by customers.

Fancourt might have at one point during his turbulent business practice used a method for commercial lending of books but with a different audience in mind and independently of any other commercial activity. *The Times* author's conclusion that "as in cases of other pioneers, others reaped where Fancourt had sown"⁴⁶ seems a bit premature. Commercial circulating libraries were to go a different path. At least in terms of their success.

Growth

From the 1740s onwards the commercial circulating libraries enjoyed a rapid development both in terms of their number and in terms of stock quantity. On the level of individual libraries, it is astounding to see just by how much those libraries were able to grow in a relatively short period of time. It is difficult to come up with figures for the early period, the records being very sketchy. However, some thirty years later John Bell's circulating library managed to produce substantial growth in a short time span as the following figures demonstrate: in 1771 the library had over 10 000 volumes and in 1778 it had over 50 000 volumes and in 1787 the library boasted over 100 000.⁴⁷

As far as the quantity of these establishments is concerned Kaufman in an appendix to his article assembled names of circulating libraries and their owners and states finishing with the year 1800: "To summarize this check list: we have been able to identify 112 enterprises in London and 268 in provinces; these latter distributed among 119 locations in 37 counties."⁴⁸ However, these numbers can underscore the true total of circulating libraries for the following reasons: the evidence is in most cases based on the catalogues few of which have survived to this day, not all of the owners advertised their circulating libraries as such, therefore it is in some cases impossible to classify them correctly and the coffee houses also provided their customers with lending services probably for a separate fee (not as a bonus to their orders). As to dynamism of the market Kaufman asserts: "In any event, from all still scanty evidence, it is obvious that the fifth decade saw a rapid increase in the number of circulating establishments both in London and throughout England; and from then on through the century the number steadily mounted," and "From reasonable projection of the

⁴⁶ "London Circulating Libraries – Early Method of Booklending", 1.

⁴⁷ Hamlyn, 200.

⁴⁸ Kaufman, 10.

evidence there is no improbability in the assertion in the *Monthly Magazine* of April, 1801, that the total in 1800 was “not less than one thousand”.⁴⁹

In assessing these figures one must consider not only the scarcity of the evidence, but also the size of these establishments. It is one thing to have two thousand libraries each serving only twenty customers and quite another forty libraries each serving two thousand customers. Even if the figures showed a decline in the numbers of the circulating libraries this decline would not say much – it could very well be a result of consolidation and/or the emergence of a particularly successful class of businessmen whose establishments attract the preponderance of the demand. Even this trend of concentration does not have to be especially harmful if it is a result of the free competition and not of privilege and the firm in question does not seek to entrench its position on the market by violence (state). Even a potential yet non-existent competitor prevents the existent entities from abusing their market power just by virtue of its possible entry into the market.

It is now necessary to see how the commercial circulating libraries were run. As has been mentioned the libraries grew out of the bookshops and shared rooms with them. This became unsustainable as the libraries grew in popularity; new rooms had to be provided.⁵⁰ The premises themselves did not differ from the today’s libraries – they were equipped with open shelves. The books were ordered at first by their format, later the ordering by genre developed. Jacobs in his article states that the big folios were placed higher up on the shelves and smaller formats down. Furthermore, he claims that this was due to the elite status of the folios and thus restricted them from lower segments of the reading public.⁵¹ The practicality of placing the larger, less frequently borrowed folios higher up and more popular formats down is probably a better explanation.

The open shelves of course were not the only storage place for books, but they gave the opportunity of exploring the books on offer and even a possibility of socialising with other patrons. Some owners used this to their advantage and advertised their libraries as places where one could meet people from higher social classes. Kaufman even goes as far as to suggest that the circulating libraries replaced coffee houses as the social centres of towns.⁵²

⁴⁹ Kaufman, 10.

⁵⁰ Hamlyn, 209.

⁵¹ Jacobs, “Buying into Classes” 55-7.

⁵² Kaufman, 25.

To borrow books customers had to buy the subscription which was available for a year, a half-year and a quarter of the year. The rates generally ranged between 10s. and 15s. with the tendency to rise towards the latter during the latter part of the 18th century.⁵³ This meant that the membership of a circulating library was still financially unavailable to the poor and even the middle classes had to think carefully before signing on.⁵⁴

The customers then could choose books from the catalogue and borrow them, usually one at a time, for, from today's perspective, a short period of time. In one catalogue the borrowing period was six days for new books (and one new book at a time) and one month for older books.⁵⁵ The catalogues were available for sale, customers were from time to time reimbursed after subscribing. After returning the book they could borrow another. Fines for breaking the rules were strict: "Fines were payable if books were retained above the stated time. Subscribers had to pay the price of a new copy – this was marked in the catalogue – and retain the old copy. They were deemed subscribers, liable for renewal of their quarterly and annual payments, so long as they retained books."⁵⁶

The catalogues are a crucial source for research, because they contained not only the book lists, but the rules as well.⁵⁷ The books had numbers by which they could be found. As a funny example of how this system could be used Lane, owner of a big and famous circulating library, skipped numbers to make his stock look bigger.⁵⁸ Additionally, the catalogues contained information about the format of the books and were divided into genres. This genre classification and their contemporaneous perceptions could provide us with a topic of its own.

Greater distance from a circulating library did not limit the ability of patrons to borrow. The owners made special arrangements for them. The distant customers were to send the list of several books they wished to borrow in case some of them were not present in the library. The strict requirement of one book at a time was relaxed for them. They paid the same rate, but had to provide for the postage. The owners imposed a maximum distance for being a member.

⁵³ Hamlyn, 210-211,

⁵⁴ Raven: "Libraries for sociability", 253.

⁵⁵ Schürer, 347.

⁵⁶ Hamlyn, 214.

⁵⁷ Hamlyn, 212-214.

⁵⁸ Hamlyn, 213.

To increase the velocity of circulation, the circulating libraries insisted on buying novels in three volumes, the so-called triple-deckers.⁵⁹ They were able to do that because of their sheer market power, Raven writes: “[T]he circulating libraries claimed a major stake in the publication of the popular, usually ephemeral novel in which as many as 400 of a 1,000 copy edition were sold to circulating libraries.”⁶⁰ More customers could then read one novel at a time. This practice remained in existence well into the 19th century.

The preceding paragraph shows the enormous influence the circulating libraries held on the market. This could lead to the complaint that these institutions robbed publishers of their profits because people who would have bought the books were instead borrowing them from the libraries. However, this is not justifiable for following reasons: the most popular genres in the circulating libraries were novels and pamphlets that is what Erickson calls works “with low marginal utility of rereading them”⁶¹ In this line of reasoning the libraries helped the publishers impact readers who would otherwise be able to buy only a tiny fraction of what they borrowed from the libraries. This provided the publishers with at least some profit instead of none had the circulating libraries not existed. James Lackington was one of a few observers who realised the benefits to the booksellers:

I have been informed, that when circulating libraries were first opened, the booksellers were much alarmed, and their rapid increase added to their fears, and led them to think that the sale of books would be much diminished by such libraries. But experience has proved that the sale of books, so far from being diminished by them, has been greatly promoted, as from those repositories many thousand families have been cheaply supplied with books, by which the taste for reading has become much more general, and thousands of books are purchased every year by such as have first borrowed at those libraries, and after reading, approving of them, become purchasers.⁶²

This not only puts him among a few voices defending the circulating libraries from this reproach, but also among few voices defending them more generally. Overall, the reaction to the libraries was hostile. Perhaps the most notorious criticism of them is the phrase “evergreen tree of diabolical knowledge” from Sheridan’s *The Rivals*. Another author

⁵⁹ Raven: “Libraries for sociability”, 256.

⁶⁰ Raven: “Libraries for sociability”, 254.

⁶¹ Ericson, 578.

⁶² Lackington, 247.

expresses his dislike very vehemently: “Turnpike roads and circulating libraries are the great inlets of vice and debauchery.”⁶³

Women constituted a very important segment of the target audience as Lackington acknowledges: “Circulating libraries have also greatly contributed towards the amusement and cultivation of the other sex; by far the greatest part of ladies have now a taste for books.”⁶⁴ He sees this as a positive thing: “[..] as yet I have never seen any solid reason advanced why ladies should not polish their understandings, and render themselves fit companions for men of sense. And I have often thought that one great reason why some gentlemen spend all their leisure hours abroad is for want of rational companions at home.”⁶⁵ It should be noted that Lackington had a self-interest in expanding the size of his consumer base and so once again selfishness and capitalist greed led to an evil, this time of women being able to read what they want.

⁶³ Kaufman, 22.

⁶⁴ Lackington, 247.

⁶⁵ Lackington, 247-8

Readership

Before embarking upon the career of James Lackington it is crucial to establish the demand side of the book trade. The reason for this clarification arises mainly because of the time sequencing issues. Despite the tremendous development on the supply side and the better availability of the reading material the target audience was still limited. The middle class was the main beneficiary of this development, the low-income classes had to wait for the Victorian era.⁶⁶ The book trade had still been operating with basically the same machinery for three centuries. Plant puts it bluntly: “[...] Caxton would have found little to surprise him in his own trade. The screw press was still turning out its few hundred sheets a day.”⁶⁷ Profound developments and the resulting increases in productivity would have to wait for the 19th century. As a consequence, only then the book prices could come down.

Yet the middle class was still limited in terms of their purchasing power. Altick quotes some numbers which give reasonable glimpse into wage conditions

Shopmen out of their apprenticeship earned from 4s. to 16s. a week, plus board; the average wage was around 8s. Clerks in merchants' offices earned about £ 1 a week. Ushers in schools received 4s. to 8s. a week and board, London journeymen from 15s. to 20s. In the country, wages varied, as always, with the region, but they were uniformly below those prevailing in London. Craftworkers earned 10s. or 12s. a week in the west and north, only 6s.6d. in the east.⁶⁸

The information regarding the purchasing power is much more useful, Altick demonstrates how much in terms of other commodities the individual genres cost:

If a man in the lower bracket of the white-neckcloth class [...] had a taste for owning books, he would have had to choose between buying a newly published quarto volume and a good pair of breeches (each cost from 10s. to 12s.), or between a volume of essays and a month's supply of tea and sugar for his family of six. If a man bought a shilling pamphlet he sacrificed a month's supply of candles.⁶⁹

With regard literacy it is very difficult to approximate an exact number on the people who had the ability to read. No official statistics were compiled at the time and thus the

⁶⁶ Richard A. Altick, *The English Common Reader, A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800-1900*, (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1998) 65.

⁶⁷ Marjorie Plant, *The English Book Trade: An Economic History of the Making and Sale of Books*, (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1974) 269.

⁶⁸ Altick, 51.

⁶⁹ Altick, 51-2.

research had to rely on a more indirect means of obtaining them (the wedding registries, volumes per book edition, anecdotal contemporaneous accounts). This is the methodology employed by Ian Watt in his work on the eighteenth-century novel.⁷⁰ One aspect further complicates matters – even though there are concrete figures of individual editions, the reader impact must have been more profound because of the circulating libraries and the coffee houses. This chapter will present only several general trends regarding literacy without delving into specific numbers and speculations.

The eighteenth century was the century of the middle class reading.⁷¹ As a result of the trade development the tradesmen were required to keep abreast of the current affairs.⁷² However, reading was not confined to the mercantile purposes. Women readers in particular rose as an important demographic, indeed a crucial demographic for the development of the novel, as has been shown in the preceding chapter.

The poor were not the beneficiaries of the increased literacy, Watt even goes as far as to say that in some regions, especially the new manufacturing towns, the literacy rates likely went down.⁷³ Furthermore many poor parents made an economic choice and did not send their children to school.⁷⁴

Aside from the women another important demographic were the followers of the Methodist John Wesley. There James Lackington appears again; he was a staunch Methodist in his youth and was led to reading by his fellow believers. Altick says that “[a]ll Wesleyans were expected to read as much as their leisure allowed.”⁷⁵ Needless to say Wesley himself earned a lot of money from selling books to his followers as a result.

⁷⁰ Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1957), 36-7.

⁷¹ Altick, 41.

⁷² Altick, 46.

⁷³ Watt, 39.

⁷⁴ Altick, 35.

⁷⁵ Altick, 35.

Context of bookselling in the late eighteenth century

Bookseller, publisher, stationer, printer

To begin a discussion of the eighteenth-century bookselling one must once again begin with the delineation of the terminology and a brief description of the semantic history of various terms. The word “bookseller”, which is nowadays used solely for a person who sells books, encompassed the function of the modern-day publishers that is those people, “whose business revolved around the financing of the production of books and their subsequent sale.”⁷⁶ The bookseller thus takes care of the negotiation with the authors as well as selling the books directly to the customers. However, unlike Caxton these booksellers were not printers anymore; as Feather remarks: “the printers became what they have essentially remained ever since, the paid agents of those who owned the rights to print books.”⁷⁷ The end of the eighteenth century proves particularly crucial for the differentiation between the booksellers and the publishers since the publisher emerges as someone who is focused purely on the book publishing and is not burdened by worries about the retailing.⁷⁸ In the European context the English book market was the first where such separation appeared.⁷⁹ John Brewer and Iain McCalman note: “By 1785 the publishing industry was so diverse, complex, and dispersed that the bookseller John Pendred (c. 1742-93) brought out the first guide to the English publishing, *The London and Country Printers, Booksellers and Stationers Vade Mecum* (1785).”⁸⁰

Another term used to describe the activity on which this thesis is focused is the word “stationer”. Once again, this word underwent a shift in meaning; while nowadays it denotes somebody who sells only writing and office materials, in the eighteenth century in addition to selling the above mentioned utensils the stationers were active in the publishing as well as in the retail. The importance of these stationers was reflected in the name of the guild that organised printers and booksellers: the Stationers’ Company.

Before proceeding forward, it is beneficial to remark a general characteristic of the booksellers’ relationships. The book trade was in general cooperative with the booksellers cooperating with each other. They relied on the established rules and customs. Thus, the

⁷⁶ Feather, 4.

⁷⁷ Feather, 40.

⁷⁸ Feather, 3.

⁷⁹ David Finkelstein and Alistair Meleery, *An Introduction to Book History*, (New York: Routledge, 2005), 86.

⁸⁰ John Brewer and Iain McCalman, “Publishing”, *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age, British Culture 1776-1832*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 198.

entrance of the disruptive individuals such as Lackington provoked a vitriolic response from the established businesses. Feather aptly summarizes the great changes of the late eighteenth century: “There were those in the London book trade in 1800 to whom change was welcome: that was perhaps the most revolutionary change of all.”⁸¹

This mix of various roles the booksellers practised results in the need to delve into the publishing side of the business and the issue of the copyright associated with it. The copyright might have been the most important problem of the 18th century. Its development heralded the unprecedented rise in the importance of the authors and impacted and benefited the men of letters such as Pope, Richardson and Fielding.⁸² Plant writes: “The author was now in a better position than ever before.”⁸³ Pope especially was very skilful in negotiating about his copyright and later even invested in several booksellers.⁸⁴ Despite the overwhelming complexity of the copyright law and the matter of the competing law systems in the United Kingdom (England, Scotland and Ireland) the issue is important for understanding the book trade due to the close proximity of publishing and selling.

For the development of the copyright in the eighteenth century there are two important dates: 1709 and 1774. The first date marks the passage of the Copyright Act of 1709 which set the tone for the further development. The act was called “An Act for the Encouragement of Learning by vesting the Copies of printed Books in the Authors or Purchasers of such Copies during the Times therein mentioned”.⁸⁵ Plant lists the main features of the act: “By the main provisions of the Act the copyright of works already published was secured to their present owners (whether authors or booksellers) for a further twenty-one years from April I, 1710. The authors of books not yet printed were to have the sole printing rights [...] for fourteen years [...]”⁸⁶ The act provided for the seizure of the illegally printed books and for the fine depending upon the number of sheets. The publishers who were at the origin of the act had hoped for the perpetual copyright, but the act did not conform to their wishes.⁸⁷ However, this did not stop the publishers from asserting that the perpetual copyright applied under the common law. Indeed, according to the publishers’ view the act was supposed to even reinforce the protection, as Raven states: “[...] the

⁸¹ Feather, 84.

⁸² James Raven, *The Business of Books: Booksellers and the English Book Trade, 1450-1850*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 222-3.

⁸³ Plant, 118.

⁸⁴ Feather, 55-6.

⁸⁵ Plant, 118.

⁸⁶ Plant, 118.

⁸⁷ Plant, 118.

booksellers' associations also seemed successful in arguing that the Act's spirit sanctioned the perpetual copyright under the common law."⁸⁸ The arguments about the common law proved to be the critical issue for most of the century.

The issue of the different sovereignties is of a crucial importance. Although Scotland had already been under the jurisdiction of the parliament in Westminster, it retained its court system; Ireland on the other hand became a part of the Union only in 1800. Thus, it was legal to print the works already under copyright in the Union, though the export to England and Scotland was forbidden.⁸⁹ Needless to say, the Irish used this loophole to their fullest advantage.

The problem of the Irish imports caused a great worry for the English booksellers with some of the works appearing even before the first editions of the English copyholders. This practice must have entailed having collaborators inside the London publishing houses who then smuggled the type to Ireland. Samuel Richardson was particularly ingenious in protecting *The History of Sir Charles Grandison* (1753); he split the work between three printing houses so that nobody could copy the whole work. It did not work. The Dublin edition appeared even before his own edition. Plant adds: "How it was done is not known, but an Irish bookseller had boasted to him some years before that he could procure sheets of any book being printed in London before publication."⁹⁰ These Irish prints benefited from low prices, but suffered from the generally low quality. Though it would seem that the Irish for all these reasons posed an existential threat to the London publishers it was not so. One of the possible rationales behind this was the close-knit community of the London booksellers and some inducements which the London booksellers came up with. As a consequence of the connection between publishing and retail, the retailers were not motivated to game the system. Among these inducements was the copyright shares. This meant that the copyright was partitioned into shares and sold by auction in the coffee houses. Potential renegade booksellers could be brought around and therefore their financial interest laid in the success of the official copyrighted edition. This system of organization entered the history under the name "conger"⁹¹

⁸⁸ James Raven. "Booksellers in Court: Approaches to the Legal History of Copyright in England before 1842", *Law Library Journal* 104.1 (2012-13), 127.

⁸⁹ Feather, 63.

⁹⁰ Plant, 120.

⁹¹ For a closer look at the history of the term see: Gilbert D. McEwan, "What is a Conger?: John Dunton and Scottish Booksellers", *Studies in Scottish Literature* 1.2 (1963), 133-135.

Aside from diminishing the danger of the potential copyright pirates by integrating them into the conger arrangement and making them financially dependent on the success of the duly sanctioned edition, the congers served as an important tool for managing booksellers' cash flow. It provided them with a part of the cost up front.

More serious challenge to the London dominance and the perpetual copyright came from Scotland and from one particularly stubborn Edinburgh bookseller. In brief, the argument centred around cheap reprints of old popular works. The judicial proceedings bumped around the courts both in England and Scotland with the Scottish courts enthusiastically supporting the Scottish bookseller. The case ended before the House of Lords in 1774 under Lord Chief Justice of the King's Bench Lord Mansfield which decided in Donaldson's favour. Feather in this regard highlights the stubbornness of the bookseller Donaldson, because various developments "seemed likely to lead to a natural atrophy of the whole problem of the illegal imports of reprints. That this did not happen was almost entirely the result of the persistence of one man, the Edinburgh bookseller, Alexander Donaldson."⁹²

An interesting thing to note is that the challenge to the status quo arose as a result of the market initiative rather than the court cases. Raven confirms this by saying: "Rather, the history of all challenges—successful and unsuccessful—is evidence of the mounting, market-led pressure against property-holding syndicates."⁹³ This is in line with the earlier observation about the people on the outside changing the nature of the trade.

The ruling and the end of the perpetual copyright created a strong demand for the new works which then would be protected by copyright. Those booksellers who would rely solely on the reprints of old popular works would struggle to survive. This logically created an enormous opportunity for new authors. The booksellers would be looking for the new great thing. Feather sums it up:

If copies were to be protected, at best, for twenty-eight years, then it was necessary to generate new and protected copies. In turn, this meant that the booksellers needed authors to write books for them, advertisements to publicise the books when they were published, and a wholesale and retail supply chain to get them to the public.⁹⁴

⁹² Feather, 66.

⁹³ Raven, "Booksellers in court: Approaches to the Legal History of Copyright in England before 1842", 127.

⁹⁴ Feather, 74.

The Irish and Scottish cheap reprints made their way to the provinces where they found a lucrative outlet.⁹⁵ The importers avoided incentives posed by London booksellers and their networks of copyright shares. The London booksellers reacted by legal action, but more importantly by commercial action.⁹⁶ They put a greater emphasis on developing commercial ties to provincial retailers. Significant development of the distribution network which led to the better delivery of various newspapers and magazines. London booksellers used this opportunity for advertising their services.⁹⁷

Advertising is one of the key components of the London book trade in the eighteenth century. It took multiple different forms from the obvious ones such as the advertisements in newspapers to the so-called “puffing”. Puffing consisted in praising the books in the review magazines, often owned by the same publisher.⁹⁸ Lackington’s *Memoirs* are another great example of the unconventional method of advertising. Donaldson’s battle with the copyright holders and his carefully constructed image may be another, albeit unorthodox, example of advertising. Feather says: “His motives were primarily commercial, although there is some truth in his presentation of himself as a man of principle, a free-trader and a Scottish patriot.”⁹⁹

Somewhat surprisingly the advertising was one of the main components of the final price. This was not a result of the lack of space in the papers which would be pushing price upwards, but of the government’s policy. Advertisements were one of the most heavily taxed items in Britain. Collet Doson Collet writes: “The 10 Anne, cap. 19 [...] and above all, it taxed printed papers, pamphlets, and advertisements, and required a stamp to be placed on every paper that it chose to call a newspaper.”¹⁰⁰ The question arises as to why the booksellers placed such a financial emphasis on the advertisement despite the previously perceived lack of capital investment in the other areas of the publishing process. It is likely that the publishers did not have any choice in the matter – they were not printers and they did not find it profitable enough to involve themselves in printing. Nevertheless, they still carried the main risk and stood to lose a lot of money if the book had not sold well, as Raven writes: “[that there were] financial and commercial publishing considerations of high capital

⁹⁵ Feather, 64.

⁹⁶ Feather, 64.

⁹⁷ Feather, 64.

⁹⁸ William St. Clair, *The Reading Nation in the Romantic Period*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 188.

⁹⁹ Feather, 66.

¹⁰⁰ Collet Doson Collet: *History of the Taxes on Knowledge, Their Origin and Repeal*, (London: Watts & Co., 1933), <https://archive.org/details/historyofthetaxe035181mbp>, 5.

costs, lengthy investment before return on publication [...].”¹⁰¹ Therefore, they chose to invest further and placed advertisements in the newspapers.

The growing importance of the provincial bookselling which naturally depended on the London wholesaler book trade leads to the confirmation of Feather’s thesis that the wholesale underwent more radical change than the retail.¹⁰² The advertisements were not directed solely at the final customers, but provincial booksellers and the circulating libraries formed the intended target audience as well.¹⁰³

The preceding passage has described more official means of distribution. More unofficial or underground means of distribution existed. Naturally, its evidence is not as readily available. What is specifically alluded to here is the role of the so-called pedlars. These people did not confine themselves to selling books only, but they were selling other items as well. Lackington himself remembers them in his *Memoirs* when he describes him buying books at a local fair: “One day, as my friend Jones and I were strolling about the fair that is annually held in and near St. James’s church-yard, we saw a stall of books, and in looking over the title pages, I met with Hobbes’s Translation of Homer’s Iliad and Odyssey.”¹⁰⁴

The booksellers in their retail capacity did not sell books only published by them, but offered books by other publishers as well. They achieved this by exchanging books with other booksellers or simply by participating in copyright shares auction where they were entitled to a portion of an edition. Plant points out that “in the records of the Stationers’ Company a column was ruled off and headed “Shares,” being divided into halves, quarters, sixteenths, twenty-fourths, and so on.”¹⁰⁵ The era under research offered new opportunities for the booksellers. For instance, George Robinson owned a single wholesale house.¹⁰⁶ This gives an image of the increasing competition and innovation in the late 18th century.

The book trade was not isolated from the developments in other areas of the economy. The development of banking and other financial services had a great influence on the book trade. John Murray observed that “many blockheads in the trade are making a fortune”¹⁰⁷, he brought in the bank capital and became a very successful bookseller. These

¹⁰¹ Raven, *The Business of Books*, 227.

¹⁰² Feather, 81.

¹⁰³ St. Clair, 189.

¹⁰⁴ James Lackington, *The Memoirs of the Forty-five First Years of the Life of James Lackington, Bookseller* (London: Hunt and Clarke, 1827) 93.

¹⁰⁵ Plant, 226.

¹⁰⁶ Feather, 80.

¹⁰⁷ Feather, 77.

capital tools enabled even men of very modest means to become extremely successful. Coincidentally James Lackington also founded his business after he was lent basic capital.

The commercial revolution manifested itself in the increasing specialisation of the booksellers. Rise of the novel attests to that.¹⁰⁸ This enabled many smaller booksellers to diversify their activities and survive as a result. One of the great examples of this phenomenon is John Newberry. His career followed the already observed pattern of the outsider changing the market conditions. Newberry's innovation consisted of the interest in the children literature. He was the first to devote himself exclusively to publishing children's books. His advertising methods reflected his target audience: he provided various benefits aimed to entice children's interest: "With some of his books he offered small presents, such as balls and pincushions."¹⁰⁹ Moreover, his advertisements adopted children language. The books for children had been appearing before, but their aim had been to educate not to entertain. Newberry began to publish books which were meant to be entertaining children. However, later in his career he moved on to publish the serious literature, among the authors he published were Tobias Smollett, Oliver Goldsmith, even Samuel Johnson.¹¹⁰

Additionally, Newberry embodies another aspect of the English bookselling – that is of selling the other items alongside books. St. Clair states: "Almost all of the shops seem only to have sold books as part of a wider business including stationery, patent medicines and perfumery."¹¹¹ It is extremely ironic that Newberry's main source of income and possibly of fame was selling Dr. James' Fever Powder. This concoction was on sale well until the 20th century. Newberry was not alone in this, other booksellers were selling patent medicines. The bookseller H. Jackson was selling his "incomparable water for the eye" which was "of the same efficacy for Horses and Dogs."¹¹² Newberry's experience with selling the medicine provided him with valuable insights which enriched the bookselling side of the business. He began to publish his books in uniform packaging. The patent medicines were manufactured and sold in a structurally similar fashion: manufactured centrally and sold locally.

The form in which books were sold differed greatly from that of nowadays. Paperbacks did not yet exist, this had to wait for the American invention of 1840s. In

¹⁰⁸ Raven, *The Business of Books*, 225.

¹⁰⁹ Plant, 252.

¹¹⁰ Feather, 74.

¹¹¹ St. Clair, 191.

¹¹² Raven, *The Business of Books*, 241.

addition, the books were sold unbound; the customers were expected to have them bound. This pattern started to change in the late 18th century with the publishers employing their own binders. St. Clair adds: “It was low tone for a gentleman to have unbound books on his shelves - like putting milk bottles on the breakfast table.”¹¹³ It is a paradox that the unbound volumes are highly prized.

A very important contextual point for Lackington’s activities is the price of paper. In the era in question the paper as a commodity was very expensive. It was still made in the old-fashioned way – out of the old cloth. This was a very labour-demanding and therefore expensive activity. There is even a claim that the price of procuring paper surpassed that of the printing itself. This created a great incentive to recycle the paper. The unwanted books could fetch a reasonable price as waste paper.

From 1780 onwards the prices of books were rising rather dramatically.¹¹⁴ This is not a place for speculation about the reasons behind this, but suffice to say that the wars with the revolutionary France from 1790s contributed to this rise. This tendency contributed to the success of Lackington’s business and its lower prices relative to its competitors. The commercial circulating libraries benefited from this rise as well.

To conclude the chapter the most profound changes will be revisited. The early eighteenth-century book trade was concentrated in a few hands. These positions were usually hereditary due to the necessity of registering with the Stationers’ Company. At the end of the 18th century the trade was much more open. Despite the rise in prices from 1780 onwards the commercial revolution took place. The technological revolution and the spread of reading to the lower classes had to wait for the era after the Napoleonic wars.

¹¹³ St. Clair, 192.

¹¹⁴ Altick, 52.

James Lackington

Sources

Bookseller James Lackington was born on 31 August 1746 and died on 22 November 1815. His life dates mirror almost exactly those of William Lane, the founder of the Minerva Printing Press and the owner of a famous circulating library. What distinguishes Lackington from other booksellers of his era is his literary output which consists of the two autobiographical works published during his lifetime: *The Memoirs of the Forty-five First Years of the Life of James Lackington, Bookseller* and *The Confessions of J. Lackington* (1791), *Late Bookseller at the Temple of the Muses* (1804). There were other examples of booksellers publishing their memoirs, as Lackington himself points out in the *Memoirs*: “John Dunton, a brother *bibliopole*, long since exhibited a whole volume of dullness, which he called his “Life and *Errors*” [Lackington’s emphasis].”¹¹⁵

The focal point of this chapter will be Lackington’s *Memoirs* because of their focus on the actual mechanics of the book trade. His *Confessions* are interesting for Lackington’s life but not so much for the observations about the book trade itself though still retaining Lackington’s business mindset in several passages. As a result, not much attention will be paid to them. Suffice to say the only point worth picking up now is that Lackington’s relationship with Methodists whom he bitterly attacked in the *Memoirs* is mended by the *Confessions*. Nevertheless, Lackington did not change the controversial passages from the *Memoirs* which lends some credit to Raven’s assertion that the *Confessions* were meant to support the sale of the *Memoirs*.¹¹⁶

There are several caveats pertaining to leaning on the *Memoirs* as a source. Firstly, Lackington was writing about himself, so this entails the possibility of him colouring the events to suit his narrative aim. One concrete example might be his tendency to see his business aptitudes and activities throughout the course of his life. Thus, he mentions that he was selling pies and was very successful.¹¹⁷ Secondly, when the *Memoirs* were published Lackington was still in business and had an obvious commercial interest in putting his shop in a good light. However, despite these caveats, the *Memoirs* are a treasure trove of useful

¹¹⁵ Lackington, *Memoirs*, 29.

¹¹⁶ Raven, *The Business of Books*, 291

¹¹⁷ Lackington, *Memoirs*, 37.

information and fascinating insights. Raven adds that: “Lackington’s *Memoirs* have been ransacked for details of the London book trade of this period [...]”¹¹⁸

Lackington’s *Memoirs* were very successful which is confirmed by eight editions within the first three years.¹¹⁹ This thesis bases its research on the edition from 1827. The point is that Lackington was changing the text in the editions. Raven develops this point further: “Differences between editions of the *Memoirs*, however, are often significant, with Lackington’s revisions charting changes in commercial understanding.”¹²⁰ Raven offers some examples of these changes – circulating libraries and the issue of small change.¹²¹

The *Memoirs* are a curious motley of genres. Like the *Confessions*, the *Memoirs* are written in a series of letters to a “dear friend”. The letters themselves are introduced by quotes from poems which are always referenced. The contents of the letters vary – from the description of his business methods and life events to the discussions of religious controversies and what might be called “short stories” ranging almost on gothic themes. Charles Knight in his book *Shadows of the Old Booksellers* calls the *Memoirs* “that farrago of sense and absurdity.”¹²² In addition, the apologetic aspect permeates the whole book. In the first letter Lackington remembers reading a portrait of himself in a periodical publication and not being content with it he writes: “This at once determined my wavering resolution, and I am now fully resolved to minute down such particulars of my passage through life, as, though not adorned with an elegance of style, will, I assure you, possess what to you, I flatter myself, will a great recommendation, viz. a strict adherence to truth.”¹²³ The various accounts of his business practices serve a similar purpose.

On the title page for the 1792 edition it says that “[the] new edition [is] corrected, and much enlarged; interspersed with many original humorous Stories, and droll Anecdotes.”¹²⁴ Even in the construction of his audience there is the reflection of the multiplicity of the books’ message. Lackington wrote the three dedications: the first to the public, the second to the respectable booksellers and the third to the sordid booksellers.¹²⁵

¹¹⁸ Raven, *The Business of Books*, 290.

¹¹⁹ Frances M. Honour, “James Lackington, Proprietor, Temple of the Muses”, *The Journal of Library History* 2.3 (1967), 211.

¹²⁰ Raven, *The Business of Books*, 290.

¹²¹ Raven, *The Business of Books*, 290-1.

¹²² Charles Knight, *Shadows of the Old Booksellers*, (London: Bell and Daldy, 1865), 285.

¹²³ Lackington, *Memoirs*, 28-9

¹²⁴ Lackington, *Memoirs of the First Forty-Five Years of the Life of James Lackington*, (London: Printed for the Author, 1792)

¹²⁵ Lackington, *Memoirs 1792*

Closely linked with the defensive purpose of the *Memoirs* is the author's emphasis on showing the advantages of his establishment. A funny instance of this is found in the preface where Lackington says:

If unfortunately any of my kind readers should find the book so horrid dull and stupid that they cannot get through it, or if they do, and wish not to travel the same road again, I here declare my perfect readiness to supply them with abundance of books, much more witty, much more — whatever they please. They never shall want books while L. is able to assist them [...].¹²⁶

These instances of advertising are repeated throughout the book. Even the descriptions of his business practices serve to convey information and to entice potential customers, buyers as well as sellers, to do business with him.

History of Lackington's business

The mention of the sellers in the preceding paragraph results in the important point of Lackington being a retailer mainly in second-hand or remaindered books.¹²⁷ However, Lackington's start in the bookselling business was rather mundane. In 1774 he opened a small bookshop with circulating library services that certainly did not distinguish itself by low prices.¹²⁸ This was a rather standard, non-ground-breaking enterprise which would most assuredly not be a pattern Lackington would adopt in the future. Lackington started from scratch; he did not even have much starting capital. He used his savings and bought some old books. In addition, his Methodist friends had to lend him £5. The help from the Methodists is fully in keeping with their reputation as the supporters of reading. Lackington acknowledges the Methodist support in the *Memoirs* even though, as mentioned before, he criticises them severely in other passages:

At that time Mr. Wesley's people had a sum of money which was kept on purpose to lend out, for three months, without interest, to such of their society whose characters were good, and who wanted a temporary relief. To increase my little stock, I borrowed five pounds out of this fund, which was of great service to me.¹²⁹

From such humble beginnings Lackington managed to build up his stock and in a relatively short time he had so many books on offer that he built the Temple of Muses in

¹²⁶ Lackington: *Memoirs*, xv.

¹²⁷ St. Clair, 199.

¹²⁸ Raven, *The Business of Books*, 288.

¹²⁹ Lackington, *Memoirs*, 133.

1793. He proclaimed this building to be the biggest bookshop in the world at the time of the opening. Lackington retired and left the shop in the hands of his cousin and of his business partner Allen. His business was growing even after his retirement.¹³⁰ He then lived comfortably building churches and preaching. He died in 1814.

Lackington's life story shows remarkable openness of the economy and the opportunities for moving up the economic ladder. In other times he might not have been so fortunate. To demonstrate: in 1829 London publishers introduced minimum capital requirements. Although this could not have concerned Lackington, who had died fifteen years before, these types of restrictive practices, though usually covered by good intentions, result in limiting competition and protecting the established players in the market. Lackington himself, in his writing at least, did not suffer from this vice. He wants his autobiography to motivate other hard-working tradesmen: "To such a one I ever have and ever shall wish every possible success, as it has universally been my opinion, that whatever is thus acquired is more honourable to the parties than the possession of wealth obtained without any intrinsic merit or exertion [...]." ¹³¹ One may object to the Smithsonian emphasis on the hard work being the basis of value, but the basis of healthy economic reasoning is there. Nevertheless, Lackington does not seem to be one to have fallen into the Marxist trap of the labour value theory by pointing out the benefit such an individual can bring to the community.¹³²

Lackington's business methods

The enormous growth of Lackington's business did not come about by mere chance and senseless toil on his part. Lackington came up with several brilliant ideas and through sheer determination and stubbornness succeeded. The emphasis on the stubbornness is relevant here, Lackington's path had many detractors, as he admits: "When I communicated my ideas on this subject to some of my acquaintances, I was much laughed at and ridiculed; and it was thought that I might as well attempt to rebuild the tower of Babel, as to establish a large business without giving credit."¹³³ Richard Altick in *The English Common Reader* says: "The great exception was Lackington, who, by cheerfully violating all the traditions of the trade, set an example of aggressive enterprise which was destined to benefit the common

¹³⁰ Raven, *The Business of Books*, 290.

¹³¹ Lackington, *Memoirs*, xv.

¹³² Lackington, *Memoirs*, xv.

¹³³ Lackington, *Memoirs*, 214.

reader of future generations as well as his own.”¹³⁴ Lackington started to refuse to sell on credit, in his own words, “some time in the year seventeen hundred and eighty.”¹³⁵

Yet this particular measure of refusing to sell on credit proved successful. Its success resulted from the multiple reasons. First of these was the difficulty of making customers pay on time. This was encumbering for several reasons: firstly, it added another layer of uncertainty to the business – the booksellers had already dispatched the book in question, yet were not paid. The result was the bigger price tag for everyone to account for the uncertainty. Lackington went so far in his scheme that he refused to give credit even to his friends and, what could have been even more damaging to his business, to nobility: “[...] I was also under a necessity of refusing it to the most respectable characters, as no exception was or now is made, not even in favour of nobility.”¹³⁶

The threat of unpaying debtors was not a mere paper tiger, because as Lackington says: “[...] that where credit was given, most bills were never not paid within six months, many not within a twelve-month, and some not within two years.”¹³⁷ In addition to the possible losses, one must also add the opportunity costs of the personnel. The owners of the shops could have used their time as well as the time of their employees in a more productive manner instead of endlessly chasing the unreliable debtors.

The lower prices in Lackington’s shop led to the more rapid turnover which enabled Lackington to save on the warehousing and the insurance cost associated with warehouses.¹³⁸ This rapid turnover was thus achieved by lower prices. The scheme overall enjoyed a massive success. Lackington not only retained his former customers, but added some new ones as well.¹³⁹ In all likelihood he was not the first bookseller to do that, but he was probably the first to do it on a such massive scale and so meticulously.

Despite the successes the scheme had some curious drawbacks. The bookshop was selling books to the provinces and sending them by post. The requirement to pay in ready money applied to the provincial customers as well. This entailed sending money before receiving the actual books. Late eighteenth-century customers were understandably reluctant to do that. The unusually low prices led some of them to believe that this was all a scam.

¹³⁴ Altick, 57.

¹³⁵ Lackington, *Memoirs*, 214.

¹³⁶ Lackington, *Memoirs*, 215.

¹³⁷ Lackington, *Memoirs*, 214.

¹³⁸ Raven, *The Business of Books*, 290.

¹³⁹ Lackington, *Memoirs*, 215.

Those who overcame the apprehension (and those who went to the bookshop in person) were faced with yet another problem – the lack of small change. Since Lackington slashed the prices somewhat the small change became important. Lackington and other booksellers came up with a solution: they began issuing tokens. This not only solved the issue to some extent, but had an additional advantage: that is of motivating customers to stay faithful to the shop. The book trade tokens proved to be such an interesting article that in the early 20th century a catalogue was published dedicated solely to the tokens of the eighteenth-century.¹⁴⁰ In a truly Lackingtonian fashion his head was on the token with the pound value on the tails.

In becoming arguably the biggest bookseller Lackington did not limit himself to the refusal to sell on credit. Another component of Lackington's success was his manoeuvring around remaindering. As has been mentioned previously the unsold books had their use for the waste paper. In his *Memoirs* Lackington mentions that the booksellers were rather selling the unsold books for waste paper than letting the prices go down.

The refusal to give credit led to the growth which put Lackington on the map. Therefore, he was invited to the auctions in coffee houses. There he at first complied with the traditional practice of destroying the large parts of the books which they sold and not selling the books under the publication price. The reason for this initial compliance on Lackington's side was that he wanted to retain the remaining part at least. Lackington's entrepreneurial drive finally got the better of him:

For a short time I cautiously complied with this custom; but soon I began to reflect that many of these books so destroyed possessed much merit, and only wanted to be better known; and that if others were not worth six shillings they were worth three, or two, and so in proportion, for higher or lower priced books.¹⁴¹

Lackington began selling remaindered books under their publication prices in large quantities. He says: "From that time I resolved not to destroy any books that were worth saving, but to sell them off at half, or a quarter, of the publication prices. By selling them in this cheap manner I have disposed of many hundred thousand volumes, many thousands of which have been intrinsically worth their original prices."¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ William Longman, *Tokens of the Eighteenth Century Connected with Booksellers and Bookmakers*, (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1916).

¹⁴¹ Lackington, *Memoirs*, 221.

¹⁴² Lackington, *Memoirs*, 221.

This practice provoked an outrage among his fellow booksellers. It did not mesh well with their tendency to smooth out their differences at the coffeehouse auctions. Lackington with his highly individualistic nature broke all the customs and was not willing to quit. Lackington states: “This part of my conduct, though evidently highly beneficial to the community, and even to booksellers, created me many enemies among the trade; some of the meaner part of whom, instead of employing their time and abilities in attending to the increase of their own business aimed at reducing mine.”¹⁴³ Lackington’s practice left many bitter people in its wake even long after he started it, so when Lackington’s *Memoirs* came out they refused to sell them in their shops.

Lackington faced an immense danger with his attitude on remaindering. He could have been excluded from the auctions. Yet he managed to stay in them. Nevertheless, he had to find other sources of the book supply. In the *Memoirs* Lackington lists the other sources of the book supply. He was buying entire editions of many thousand books. Not only that he found yet more sources, as he says: “In addition to these I purchased very large numbers of many thousand different articles at trade sales of all sorts, as bankrupt sales, sales of such as had retired from business, others caused by the death of booksellers, sales to reduce large stocks, annual sales, &c.”¹⁴⁴ To that he added: “Not to mention those purchased of authors, and town and country booksellers, by private contract, &c., to a very considerable extent.”¹⁴⁵

Lackington was well aware of the possibilities resulting the decrease in prices. He knew that many customers, even though they had liked the books when reading them, did not like them enough to justify the high price: “[...] great numbers of persons were very desirous of possessing some particular books, for which however (from various motives) they were not inclined to pay the original price [...]”¹⁴⁶ He then lists several potential customers and their situations. The emphasis on the customers is crucial – it shows that Lackington understood full well why he was as successful as he was.

Lackington realized that what was needed was the effort on the bookseller’s side to better advertise their products. The tokens were one part of that, his catalogues another part. He began to issue the catalogues in 1779. He was not very happy with the first one, because there were a lot of inaccuracies or outright mistakes. He put the blame on his business partner

¹⁴³ Lackington, *Memoirs*, 221.

¹⁴⁴ Lackington, *Memoirs*, 229.

¹⁴⁵ Lackington, *Memoirs*, 229-30.

¹⁴⁶ Lackington, *Memoirs*, 221.

Mr. Dennis. In the following catalogues Lackington exercised more care. His catalogues were available in the provinces as well.¹⁴⁷

The catalogue that is available on the internet is from the year 1796. The Temple of the Muses had already been built. The catalogue itself is over six-hundred-page-long and was available at the shop and at the shops of other booksellers in the provinces. After the introductory instructions that directs long-distance customers as to how to properly order the books, the catalogue contained the warning about Lackington's signature policy: "Not an HOUR'S CREDIT will be given to any Person nor any Books Exported, or sent into the Country before they are Paid for."¹⁴⁸ This proves Lackington's understanding of his success. He had to continue and build on his success. This is what Lackington himself realised full well: "But as the first king of Bohemia kept his shoes by him, to remind him from whence he was taken, I have put a motto on the doors of my carriage, constantly to remind me to what I am indebted for my prosperity, viz. 'Small profits do great things'."¹⁴⁹

The classification of the catalogue merges two systems common in the late 18th century: the older one which classified the books by their format (duodecimo, folio, quarto, octavo and even manuscripts); and the newer one which classified the books by genre. The books were first classified by genres with the books under each genre heading only then listed according to their genres.¹⁵⁰

At the end of the catalogue there is an offer for prospective circulating library owners. Lackington was offering books to them. The books could be bought individually or the prospective buyers could buy the entire library of five thousand volumes. In addition, Lackington was ready to advise: "Such as are in want of instructions relative to establishing and conducting of Circulating Libraries, are welcome to the best that Lackington, Allen, and Co. can give them [...]."¹⁵¹ All of this mirrored the approach of the other famous booksellers – Nobles who were also offering the entire circulating libraries to dispatch.¹⁵²

As a retailer in second-hand books Lackington had to take care of buying the books and finding the sources for them. There he met some interesting challenges. Since he was selling the books for the low prices he had to assure the sellers of the books that he could provide them with a good deal. The rapid turnover allowed him to do just that. In the

¹⁴⁷ Raven, *The Business of Books*, 289-90.

¹⁴⁸ *Lackington, Allen, & Co's. Catalogue*, (London, 1796), 2.

¹⁴⁹ *Lackington, Memoirs*, 231.

¹⁵⁰ Edward H. Jacobs, "Buying into Classes", 50.

¹⁵¹ *Lackington, Allen, & Co's. Catalogue*, 645.

¹⁵² Raven, *Libraries for sociability*, 255.

Memoirs Lackington attributed this to the fact that he was able to sell the books quickly, thereby having the money on hand more quickly than his competitors and as a result giving his customers more money.

Lackington's unconventional business methods covered this side of his business as well. He began to charge five-cent charge for the inspection of the books offered to him.¹⁵³ This charge was returned back to the customer if he decided to sell the book to Lackington. Again, this removed some uncertainty from the business and paradoxically reduced prices for the buyers, because Lackington did not have to factor in the price of the time his employees put into the assessment of the potential books. Moreover, this had an advantage of enticing the customers to sell the books to him after they had given him the assessment charge. Lackington again praises the success of this policy: "This equitable mode I have the pleasure to find has given the public the utmost satisfaction."¹⁵⁴

In 1793 Lackington and his new partner George Allen opened the new premises for his business, which helped to enter Lackington into the history of literature. It was called the Temple of the Muses in Finsbury Square. It was designed to impress and attract. Lackington knew very well what had brought him to this point and inscribed his motto "Small profits do great things" on his carriage as has been mentioned in a previous quotation. The word great describes the Temple neatly. Lackington proudly said that he could drive his four-horse carriage through the main hall.

Charles Knight remembers the structural disposition of the Temple:

We ascend a broad staircase, which leads to "The Lounging Rooms," and to the first of a series of circular galleries, lighted from the lantern of the dome, which also lights the ground floor. Hundreds, even thousands, of volumes are displayed on the shelves running round their walls. As we mount higher and higher, we find commoner books, in shabbier bindings; but there is still the same order preserved, each book being numbered according to a printed catalogue.¹⁵⁵

Lackington's sumptuous lifestyle was supposed to give the impression that he was credit worthy.¹⁵⁶ He certainly did not mind that he should be giving this impression. This is linked to another point – Lackington's unabashed attitude to his own success. In the *Memoirs*

¹⁵³ Lackington, *Memoirs*, 219.

¹⁵⁴ Lackington, *Memoirs*, 219.

¹⁵⁵ Knight, 283.

¹⁵⁶ St. Clair, 171.

Lackington attributes the vast majority of his success to himself: “[...] you cannot conceive what agreeable sensations I enjoy, on reflecting on my having contributed so much towards the pleasures of others, in diffusing through the world such an immense number of books, by which many have been enlightened and taught to think, and from mere animals have become rational beings.”¹⁵⁷

At the very end of the eighteenth century Lackington retired from the business and left it to his partner Allen and his cousin. Since the opening of his shop in 1774 to his retirement he managed to become a £5000 man. The Temple of the Muses continued to grow even after his retirement, but it has burnt down.¹⁵⁸

Lackington’s career attracted considerable interest in his time. He was a hero of a poem and a villain of many enraged and moralistic attacks. His retail activities showed the way forward in the separation of publishing and retailing. In a way, Lackington’s life and his unrelenting egotism show some merit to the claim of his more famous contemporary and supposedly the founder of the modern economics Adam Smith that: “It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages.”¹⁵⁹ As many pioneers in their fields Lackington was faced with resistance. To conclude this chapter let us mention the characterisation Lackington earned in the trade: “the funeral undertaker of literature”¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁷ Lackington, *Memoirs*, 264.

¹⁵⁸ Knight, 282.

¹⁵⁹ Adam Smith and Edwin Cannan, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977) 29-30.

¹⁶⁰ St. Clair, 199.

Conclusion

This thesis presented a picture of the English book trade of the eighteenth century. It showed a picture of both change on the hand (especially in retail) and stability on the other (technical side of the trade). The enormous change in retail was driven by powerful individualities. Men such as Newberry, Donaldson, Lane brothers and the main subject of this thesis – James Lackington. They were the successful ones, yet as Ludwig von Mises points out when discussing the moral criticism of profits: “If those self-styled moralists were not blinded by their envy, they would not deal with profit without dealing with simultaneously with its corollary, loss.”¹⁶¹ It is true that Lackington made an enormous amount of money, but he did so by risking everything in his shop. Despite the majority opinion his unorthodox selling methods succeeded and Lackington retired a rich man.

His success was based on serving his customers. He could not force anybody to buy the books in his shop. The customers flocked to him because he was able to give them the best deal. This is what is called “the sovereignty of the consumers”.¹⁶² Lackington was a product of this system and earned all his money because people wanted to give him their money as a reward for Lackington’s services. Not many moralizing critics of this system can say the same.

¹⁶¹ Mises, *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics*, 296.

¹⁶² Mises, *Human Action: A Treatise on Economics*, 270.

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