The Business of Enlightenment

A Publishing History of the *Encyclopédie* 1775–1800

Robert Darnton

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To Susan

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ment of the late Charly Guyot, and I hope that this book may help to perpetuate the memory of his kindness. Another Neuchâtelois also helped me enormously, although I never met him. He was Jean Jeanprêtre, a retired chemist, who devoted the last years of his life to cataloguing the papers of the STN. His labor and the cheerful cooperation of the staff of the Bibliothèque de la ville made it a joy to work in the STN archives.

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A Note on Terminology and Spelling

In the eighteenth century, the French did not have an equivalent of "publisher" in English or *éditeur* in modern French. They normally spoke of *libraires, libraires-imprimeurs,* or simply *entrepreneurs.* Of course many *libraires* sold books without becoming involved in their production, so "publisher" and "publishing" have been used in their modern, English sense throughout this book. "Edition" is also an ambiguous term. Modern bibliographers distinguish between "editions," "printings," "states," and other units in the production and reproduction of texts. But eighteenth-century *libraires* and *imprimeurs* talked loosely of *éditions,* which were partial reruns of incomplete printings and sometimes did not exist at all, as will be seen in the discussion of the "missing" second editions of the quarto and octavo *Encyclopédies.* To avoid confusion, and at the cost of some bibliographical impurity, the term "edition" has been used in the casual, eighteenth-century manner. In this way, it will be possible to follow the publishers' discussions of their work without becoming entangled in anachronistic terms or distracted by the excessive use of quotation marks. As this book is based almost entirely on manuscript material, which has a rich, original flavor, quotations have been given in French. Spelling and punctuation have been modernized, except in a few cases, where the original is so primitive that it indicates a significantly poor mastery of the written word. Place names such as Lyons and Marseilles have been spelled according to English usage, except where they occur in French passages.

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INTRODUCTION: THE BIOGRAPHY OF A BOOK

By recounting the life story of the *Encyclopédie,* this book is meant to dispel some of the obscurity surrounding the history of books in general. A book about a book: the subject seems arcane, and it could contract into the infinitely small, like a mirror reflected in a mirror. If done properly, however, it should enlarge the understanding of many aspects of early modern history, for *l'histoire du livre,* as it is known in France, opens onto the broadest questions of historical research. How did great intellectual movements like the Enlightenment spread through society? How far did they reach, how deeply did they penetrate? What form did the thought of the philosophes acquire when it materialized into books, and what does this process reveal about the transmission of ideas? Did the material basis of literature and the technology of its production have much bearing on its substance and its diffusion? How did the literary market place function, and what were the roles of publishers, book dealers, traveling salesmen, and other intermediaries in cultural communication? How did publishing function as a business, and how did it fit into the political as well as the economic systems of prerevolutionary Europe? The questions could be multiplied endlessly because books touched on such a vast range of human activity—everything from picking rags to transmitting the word of God. They were products of artisanal labor, objects of economic exchange, vehicles of ideas, and elements in political and religious conflict.

Yet this inviting subject, located at the crossroads of so

many avenues of research, hardly exists in the United States today. We do not have a word for it. *Histoire du livre* sounds awkward as "history of the book," and the awkwardness betokens unfamiliarity with what has emerged as a distinct historical genre, with its own methods, its special journals, and its allotted place among sister disciplines, on the other side of the Atlantic. In the United States, book history has been relegated to library schools and rare book collections. Step into any rare book room and you will find aficionados savoring bindings, epigones contemplating watermarks, *érudits* preparing editions of Jane Austen; but you will not run across any ordinary, meat-and-potatoes historian attempting to understand the book as a force in history.

It is a pity, for the generalist could learn a great deal from the specialists in the treasure houses of books. They could teach him to sift through their riches and to tap the vein of information that runs through their periodicals: *The Library, Studies in Bibliography, Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America, Revue Française d'histoire du livre, Den gulden passer,* the *Gutenberg Jahrbuch,* and many others. Admittedly, these publications seem to be written by bibliographers for bibliographers, and it can be difficult to see issues of substance beneath the esoteric language and the antiquarianism. But bibliography need not be confined to problems such as how consistently compositor B misspelled the text of *The Merchant of Venice* or whether the patterns of skeleton formes reveal regularity in compositorial practices. Bibliography leads directly into the hurly-burly of working-class history: it provides one of the few means of analyzing the work habits of skilled artisans before the Industrial Revolution.

Curiously, however, it has not attracted much attention among the French, who have done the most to bring the history of books out of the realm of mere erudition and into the broad paths of *histoire totale.* French research tends to be statistical and sociological. It usually takes the form of macroscopic surveys of book production or microscopic analyses of individual libraries, but it neglects the processes by which books were produced and distributed. Those processes have been studied best in Britain, where researchers have pursued their quarry into the account books of publishers and the ledgers of booksellers, not merely into state and notarial ar-

chives, as in France. By mixing British empiricism with the French concern for broad-gauged social history it might be possible to develop an original blend of the history of books in America.[1]

Of course it is easier to pronounce on how history ought to be written than to write it; and once the historian of books has equipped himself with prolegomena and methodologies and has ventured into the field, he is likely to stumble on the greatest difficulty of all: inadequate sources. He may work in a library overflowing with ancient volumes, but he cannot know where they circulated before they reached him and whether they really represent the reading habits of the past. State archives show how books appeared to the authorities in charge of controlling them. Auction catalogues and *inventaires après décès* give glimpses of private libraries. But the official sources do not reveal much about the lived experience of literature among ordinary readers. In fact the catalogues as well as the books had to pass the censorship in eighteenth-century France, so it does not seem surprising that the Enlightenment fails to appear in research based on catalogues and requests for *privilèges,* a kind of royal copyright. The Enlightenment existed elsewhere, first in the speculations of philosophes, then in the speculations of publishers, who invested in the market place of ideas beyond the boundaries of French law.

How these speculations came together in books and how the books acquired readers has remained a mystery because the papers of the publishers have almost entirely disappeared. But the records of the Société typographique de Neuchâtel, one of the most important publishers of French books in the eighteenth century, have survived in the Swiss city of Neuchâtel, and they contain information about every aspect of book history They show how authors were treated, paper manufactured, copy processed, type set, sheets printed, crates shipped, authorities courted, police circumvented, booksellers provisioned, and readers satisfied everywhere in Europe between 1769 and 1789. The information is vast enough to overwhelm the researcher. A few letters from a bookseller can reveal more than a whole monograph about the book trade, yet the papers in Neuchâtel contain 50,000 letters by all kinds

1. For examples of the different areas of research in this field and for further reading see the Bibliographical Note.

of persons who lived by the book trade in all kinds of ways. It would be impossible to do justice to the material and to reconstruct the world of eighteenth-century books in a single volume. Therefore, after some reconnoitering in 1963, I decided to go through the entire collection in Neuchâtel, to supplement it with research in other archives, and to write a series of studies about intellectuals, books, and public opinion in the age of the Enlightenment.

The present volume constitutes the first installment. It is intended to explore the ways of Enlightenment publishing by tracing the life cycle of a single book—not just any book, to be sure, but the supreme work of the Enlightenment, Diderot's *Encyclopédie*. Given the richness of the sources and the complexity of the subject, it seemed better to attempt an *histoire totale* of one publication than to treat the totality of publishing. By following a single theme wherever it leads, one can branch out in many directions and cut into unmapped territory. This approach has the advantage of specificity: better, at a preliminary stage of groping in the unknown, to find out precisely how publishers drew up contracts, editors handled copy, printers recruited workers, and booksellers pitched sales talk while making and marketing one book than to withdraw into hazy statements about books in general. There is also the appeal of novelty: it has never before been possible to trace the production and diffusion of an eighteenth-century book. And finally, the publishing history of the *Encyclopédie* deserves to be told because it is a good story.

The story can be pieced together from the letters of the publishers—not very businesslike letters, most of them. They abound in denunciations of conspiracies and epithets like "pirate," "corsaire," and "brigand," which suggest the flavor of the book trade in the Old Regime. Driven by an unlimited appetite for lucre, uninhibited by compunctions about stabbing partners in the back and tossing competitors to the sharks, the publishers of the *Encyclopédie* epitomized the phase of economic history known as "booty capitalism." Perhaps they had more in common with the merchant adventurers of the Renaissance than with modern executives, but then how much is known about the inside history of business in any period? What other enterprise can be studied as closely as the *Encyclopédie,* not only from its commercial correspondence but also from account books, the secret memoranda

of the managers, the diaries of traveling salesmen, the complaints of customers, and the reports of industrial spies—a whole series of industrial spies the publishers used against allies and enemies alike? The *Encyclopédie* gave rise to so many alliances and alignments that its contracts and codicils —*traités,* the publishers called them—need to be studied in the same way as diplomatic documents. And its publishers wrote so many letters that one can investigate their way of thinking as well as their behavior. To see how they reached decisions, how they calculated strategy, and what they cared about is to enter into the mental world of early entrepreneurs. The story of the *Encyclopédie* suggests the possibility of an intellectual history of businessmen as well as a diplomatic history of business. But it is difficult to tell a story and to analyze behavior patterns at the same time. This book will switch from the narrative to the analytical mode when it seems appropriate, and the reader who prefers one to the other can jump around in the text, using chapter subheadings as signposts.

The story begins around the time that Diderot ended his connection with the *Encyclopédie*—that is, in 1772, when the last volume of plates came out. It may seem strange to embark on a history of the *Encyclopédie* just after Diderot had steered it safely into port, but this procedure can be justified by two considerations. First, a huge literature on Diderot and the original *Encyclopédie* already exists. The text of the book has been analyzed and anthologized dozens of times: to recapitulate all the studies of its intellectual content would be redundant, even if it were important for the purposes of publishing history.[2] Secondly, very little can be learned about the production and diffusion of the first edition. A few fragments from the account books of the original publishers have been found, and some of the publishers' commercial activities can be deduced from material assembled by Luneau de Boisjermain, a cranky subscriber who unsuccessfully sued them for swindle. Although several scholars have combed through these documents with great care, they have failed to find out

2. This statement should not be construed to imply that publishing history can ignore the contents of books. On the contrary, this study is meant to show the importance of understanding not only texts but also the meaning of texts for their audience at specific points in the past. For references to the literature on the *Encyclopédie,* especially studies of the early editions, see the Bibliographical Note.