

**The concept of the book: The production, progression and dissemination of information**, edited by Cynthia Johnston, London, Institute of English Studies and School of Advanced Study, University of London, 2019, 146pp, £25.00, ISBN: 978-0-9927257-4-7

In the opening chapter of this edited collection of essays, Simon Eliot rightly states that '[b]ook history has been a success story and has produced much good, and some outstanding, scholarship'; (7) he goes on to argue that we should now refocus our attention and also consider a history of communication(s). Eliot's proposal, that research in this field should not be confined to the bibliographic or the literary but that it should be extended to include four specific activities – those of transport, transmission, translation and transaction – activities which are interlinked and which all have a significant role in a fuller understanding of book history, is persuasive.

Each of the essays supports Eliot's overarching premise which is deftly illustrated by his own case study, that of the management of information by the British Government during the Second World War in the UK. Eleanor Robson's essay 'Information flows in rural Babylonia c.1500 BCE' highlights the importance of the cuneiform tablets found at Tell Khaiber in southern Iraq. The importance of these tablets should not be underestimated, nor should Robson's work in interpreting and deciphering these stones – a huge task given that there are in excess of 145 tablets – which are mostly concerned with the administration of a household and, as such, can tell historians a great deal about the daily routines of the Babylonians. This is followed by Laura Cleaver's fascinating and detailed essay, 'The Circulation of history books in twelfth-century Normandy'; through her discussion of a number of important manuscripts, Cleaver argues that these texts provide an invaluable source for our understanding of the dissemination of information in the Middle Ages.

Pamela Robinson's essay, 'Some medieval readers of Aristotle', retains a focus on the Middle Ages. She details the significance of Aristotelian thought in the many translations available at that time, and the subsequent history of ownership from the handwritten manuscript to the first printed editions, a history which is of great importance when considering the dissemination of philosophical thought. Katherine Schopflin turns our attention to the history of the encyclopaedia from the *summa* and the *glossa* (the encyclopaedia's 'ancestors') through to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* to the emergence of *Wikipedia*. She considers not just the text, but also the paratext and marginalia of earlier texts, and the hypertexts of twenty-first century online encyclopaedias which, as Schopflin demonstrates, share many characteristics of earlier versions while also remaining effective vehicles for the dissemination of knowledge.

In 'The *Wonderful Discoveries*: English witchcraft and early Stuart pamphlet culture', Jessica Starr focuses on a time of great religious flux: the seventeenth century. The *Wonderful Discoveries*, three pamphlets which record witch trials in the seventeenth century, tell a tale of the hysteria around those trials, society's desire for information and entertainment, and the role these pamphlets play in both an understanding of the importance of print culture for a non-elite audience and in the history of journalism. The final essay in this collection, Henry Irving's 'Propaganda bestsellers': British Official War Books, 1941-6' returns the focus to the history of communication in the Second World War as Irving discusses the very successful War Books published by the Ministry of Information and the Stationery Office on behalf of the Air Ministry. Irving's account of the publication process involved in producing these books is detailed and serves to reinforce the importance of these texts, books which

sought to provide information within the constraints of censorship but which would also be entertaining.

Eliot argues that ‘we need to understand the material nature and cultural significance of things such as roads, inland waterways, sea routes, telegraph systems, railways, telephones, film, radio, television and the internet if we are to appreciate the ways in which books and letters, telephone messages and tweets, tie a culture together and help define it by the communication networks it generates and sustains’ (9-10). In essence, this is what this collection sets out to do and which it achieves admirably. It is a series of connected essays which, in sum, represent a new understanding of the field of book history. It also provides a rich discussion of a variety of case studies, beautifully illustrated with images of cuneiform stones, Second World War propaganda, medieval and fifteenth century manuscripts (including a wonderful illustration of an elephant), and seventeenth century images of witches, complete with accompanying cats.

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