

Ina Ferris, *Book-Men, Book Clubs, and the Romantic Literary Sphere*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. Pp. 192. £55. ISBN 9781137367594.

Offering a decentred understanding of book culture in the late Georgian period, Ina Ferris places the bookman at the centre of her engaging and deeply-researched study. While much work has been undertaken with regards to the Romantic literary sphere's rich body of periodical reviews, the bookman's liminal position on the border between literary production and reception, as Ferris ably points out, has effaced the important role that such bibliophiles had in changing the way that people thought about and lived with books during the early nineteenth century. As opposed to the 'literariness' of the *belles-lettres* tradition, the bookman's 'bookishness', Ferris makes clear, was 'attached to print: to book copy and to the practices technologies, and rituals that make up the fabric of book culture' (1). Exploring the prevalence of the book club in various geographical locations from the elitist clubs of London, to the provincial circulating clubs of Chichester, Ferris' work represents an important development in our understanding of reading culture beyond the high-minded criticism of the Edinburgh journals.

The first part of Ferris' study deals with 'urban associations' and opens with a discussion of London's Roxburghe Club which was founded in 1812 by the archetypal bookman, Thomas Frognall Dibdin. Whereas literary societies met with the purpose of reading and discussing works of literature, the 'bibliomaniacs' (18) of clubs such as the Roxburghe 'notoriously downplayed reading and dissemination' and were instead interested in 'unreadable old books outside current circulation' (19). Understanding books 'as literal "pieces" of the past' which 'they valued as the products of printers and other-book-craftsmen' rather than as 'immaterial authorial texts' (19), such bibliomaniacs were commonly charged with elitism and intellectual myopia. Whilst the literary-sphere sought to select books based upon their literary merit, members of elite clubs such as the Roxburghe offered contesting justifications for the books that they sought to reprint and were 'content to supplement rather than reform current taste' (19). As Ferris argues throughout her study, in fact, it was in their disregard for common notions of what merited preservation that bookmen not only questioned the literary-sphere's discourse of improvement, but also provided a polyphonic addition to Romantic book culture. Inaugurating a new genre of 'book fancy' in their bibliographical publications, men such as Dibdin, as chapter one demonstrates, bridged the gap between literary appreciation and book production in a way that has never received due consideration.

Chapter 2 develops discussion of bibliomania to consider the ways in which the process of printing as an art in and of itself featured in the bibliographical publications of the bookmen of the nineteenth century. Again focussing on the representative works of Dibdin, Chapter 2 argues that the bookman's interest in print served to complicate the author-reader relationship by foregrounding the book as a material object made possible by the burgeoning print industry. 'Outliers' (vii) to the literary sphere, bookmen's keen interest in print culture saw their influence extend across class barriers with their publications, as Ferris points out, devoting great energies to valorising Britain's artisanal printers.

In Chapter 3, Ferris takes us to Edinburgh in her examination of Walter Scott's antiquarian Bannatyne Club. Dedicated to the reprinting of long-forgotten historical works, printing clubs such as the Bannatyne delved into the archive and faced criticism for their less than rigorous selection process. Despite being accused of reprinting the 'rubbish' (85) of history by the professionals of the literary-historical world, however, such clubs, as Ferris argues, brought history to light in a dynamic way that resisted the contemporary urge to standardise interpretations of the past.

The second part of Ferris' study takes into account reading cultures 'beyond the metropolis' (vii) in provincial book clubs and reading societies. Long regarded as imitations of metropolitan clubs, the country book club, as Ferris ably points out, was in fact a very particular organisation which broadened the horizons of book culture. While many books clubs, with their meetings held in taverns and inns, remained defined by their masculinity, country book clubs, as Chapter 4 underlines, also 'domesticated' bookishness and provided a space for female engagement with book culture. Demonstrating the ways in which the social aspects of country book clubs 'connected books, persons and locality' (113) Ferris' study closes with a consideration of the archetypal 'clubman' John Marsh. A member of a number of book and music clubs, Marsh's journals are used by Ferris to highlight the important role that clubmen had in shaping provincial engagement with artistic culture.

It is a testament to the usefulness of Ferris' model of reading book culture from its margins, in fact, that her study provides various routes for future scholarly endeavour. Bringing the bookman to the fore of our understanding of book culture, Ferris' work, I am sure, will offer an engaging point of departure for future studies of reading culture during the Romantic period.

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