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McKitterick, David. *Print, Manuscript and the Search for Order, 1450-1830.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Pp. xv + 311; illus. CDN$60.00 (cloth). ISBN: 052182690X.

Reviewed by Adrian Johns, University of Chicago

David McKitterick, librarian at Trinity College, Cambridge, is one of the English-speaking world's leading historical bibliographers. *Print, Manuscript and the Search for Order* is based on his Lyell Lectures in Bibliography which he presented at Oxford in mid-2000. It is a worthy contribution to a growing revisionist literature devoted to the history of print in the era between Gutenberg and full-scale industrialization.

McKitterick's target in this book is a notion of Gutenberg's "printing revolution" that is widely shared, apparently intuitive, and hard to dislodge. It is the notion formalized in Elizabeth Eisenstein's *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*.[1] Appearing in two volumes in 1979, Eisenstein's work aimed to provide a survey of the effects of Gutenberg's invention on high European culture — and hence, in effect, to explain its role in forging modernity itself. It succeeded remarkably well. From the premise that the press allowed people for the first time to produce documents that were substantially identical in huge quantities and at cheap prices, Eisenstein proceeded to argue that this elemental power fomented radical transformations in every field of life from religious experience to the technical sciences. It has become one of the most influential arguments in the history of intellectual culture in the last generation. Since about 1980, studies of "print culture" and its effects have proliferated across the fields of history, literature, and anthropology. Although McKitterick's book is by no means a polemic against Eisenstein, it is a polemic against the foundational assumptions that most of those studies share and that her work has done more than any other to entrench.

McKitterick is not alone. As the history of the book grows as an enterprise, so it is perhaps inevitable that its starting assumptions should face revisionist challenges. And this has indeed been the case. Starting in the mid-1990s, a number of historians have charged that our basic premises about the nature of printing, while intuitively appealing, are empirically flawed, and that the "impact" of print may be better understood in terms of the work done by communities large and small to appropriate and accommodate themselves to the new craft. This has given rise to new accounts of the role of print in, for example, the American and French Revolutions (Michael Warner's *Letters of the*

[1] Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early-Modern Europe*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

Republic and Carla Hesse's *Publishing and Cultural Politics in Revolutionary Paris*), the republic of letters and the public sphere (Anne Goldgar's *Impolite Learning* and Dena Goodman's *Republic of Letters*), the development of reading practices (Roger Chartier and Guglielmo Cavallo's *History of Reading in the West*), and the story of science (James Secord's *Victorian Sensation* and my own *Nature of the Book*).[2] The list could readily be extended. Each of these has seen the phenomena of uniformity, quantity, and accessibility less as elemental starting-points than as achievements, embedding the press itself in its various historical settings. McKitterick is entering an increasingly crowded arena.

What McKitterick himself brings to the fray is an unparalleled expertise in bibliography, and an unmatched knowledge of the huge surviving corpus of early modern printed works. He deploys these skills to great effect, to show beyond all doubt that printing is at root "an exercise in communal responsibility" (117) and that features like standardization are cultural achievements in which the mechanism of the press itself is but one ingredient. The sheer number and variety of ways in which the new craft introduced not fixity but variation is revealed here as never before. Nobody else has had the knowledge or patience to do this and it is a very welcome contribution to the debate.

But if our intuitive assumptions about early print are so off-base, what should replace them? McKitterick's more positive point is that there is a history of understandings of print and that this history as much as the press itself determined the character of the printed book. For my own part, I think he is absolutely right. Specifically, in his account, this encompasses four discrete periods. First, in the fifteenth century, came wonder at the possibilities the press offered, along with "experiments" in its use. Second, in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, came a period of anxiety about the proliferation of error the press afforded and about the sense of "information overload" (as Ann Blair calls it in her forthcoming book) that readers suffered. This was in turn followed by a third period, in the eighteenth century, characterized by antiquarian histories of the press itself and by a new wave of experiments. And finally, McKitterick stops in the mid-nineteenth century with a revived fascination at the speed, technology, and social impact of newly-industrialized printing. In each stage, these understandings gave rise to distinctive objects and practices — the massive "universal libraries" that sought to quell early modern readers' anxiety about overload, for instance, or the debates over literary authorship in the Enlightenment. It was through this long sequence, he says, that the effects we often associate with Gutenberg really came into their own and for reasons at least as much cultural as technological. He gestures at too many implications to relate in a brief review but notable among them are a reconsideration of the relations between orality, manuscript transmission, and print (he concurs with Adam Fox's view in *Oral and Literate Culture in England, 1500-1700*[3] that the three remained in dynamic equilibrium rather than print superseding the first two), the effects of print's instability on such genres as maps, and a new line on the vexed issue of censorship. In all of these, McKitterick has wisely moderate things to say.

Yet, for all that this is an excellent book, I suspect that readers of a journal like *History of Intellectual Culture* may find it rather frustrating. McKitterick's intended audience here seems to be the same as it presumably was for the Lyell lectures themselves, namely bibliographers and those engaged in editing critical editions. Neither he nor his publisher makes any concession to a broader readership

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[2] Michael Warner, *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990); Carla Alison Hesse, *Publishing and Cultural Politics in Revolutionary Paris, 1789-1810* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Anne Goldgar, *Impolite learning: Conduct and Community in the Republic of Letters, 1680-1750* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995); Roger Chartier and Guglielmo Cavallo, eds., *History of Reading in the West* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999); James A. Secord, *Victorian Sensation: The Extraordinary Publication, Reception, and Secret Authorship of Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Adrian Johns, *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

[3] Adam Fox, *Oral and Literate Culture in England, 1500-1700* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000).

(the price of the book is prohibitive, and after the first few pages they stop bothering to translate Latin, Italian, or French quotations). Altogether more important, it seems to be no part of McKitterick's mission to pursue seriously the many implications of his argument at which he gestures. His analysis repeatedly comes to a sharp halt where it seems about to venture into matters of political, religious, or scientific knowledge — that is, at just the points where intellectual historians would like to see it accelerate. And when he does venture a bit further into broader historical matters, his air of assured mastery quickly dissipates. To cite what I think is a telling example from my own field of the history of science, he introduces the work of a very eminent scholar for no obvious reason other than to declare it "extreme" and "folly" (223) without evident cause. This is an especially unfortunate lapse from his normally impeccable standards, since McKitterick himself so frequently appeals to "experiment" to drive his history of understandings of print and the scholar he treats so brusquely, Steven Shapin, happens to be one of the world's best historians of experiment. Had McKitterick listened more carefully, Shapin could have told him that experiment too has a history that would need to be taken into account for his own narrative to be wholly convincing for an informed readership of historians.

As a result, excellent as this book undoubtedly is in its own terms, the historian is ultimately left with a sense of an opportunity missed. The argument that print in and of itself did not guarantee textual stability is no longer as startling as it once was. The claim that collective practices and representations served the turn instead is rather less familiar but still no longer new. What we still lack are books that trace the implications of this kind of argument for intellectual history at large. We need a revisionist synthesis that can rival Eisenstein's. McKitterick is one of the few people alive who could write such a work. Until we have it, too many of us will be forced to fall back on intuitive notions of printing and the revolution it allegedly caused.