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## Introduction: What Is the History of (Electronic) Books? Or, This Page Intentionally Left Blank

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The *Oxford English Dictionary* supplies sixteen definitions for “book” (noun, from Old English) including: “a writing, a written document;” “a written or printed treatise or series of treatises, occupying several sheets of paper or other substance fastened together so as to compose a material whole;” and “that in which we may read, and find instructions and lessons.”<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, “e-book,” (noun, English) is simply defined as “a hand-held electronic device on which the text of a book can be read. Also: a book whose text is available in an electronic format for reading on such a device or on a computer screen.”<sup>2</sup> What do book historians do with these distinctions between “book” as physical object, “book” as text, and “book” as code? Or, as G. Thomas Tanselle asks in his foreword to this special issue of the *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of Canada / Cahiers de la Société bibliographique du Canada*, “what does ‘book’ mean in ‘the history of the book?’” This special issue pushes the question further by also asking, “What does ‘e-book’ mean in ‘the history of the book?’” Despite the widespread availability of e-books for approximately two decades, the electronic book has been at the fringes of bibliographical study. It has been left to media scholars, technology specialists, and literary critics to ponder, amongst other things, how the e-book has caused the death of the (printed) book, the death of literature, and the death of the reader.<sup>3</sup> Yet there is evidence that bibliographers

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<sup>1</sup> *OED Online*, s.v. “book, n.”

<sup>2</sup> *OED Online*, s.v. “e-book, n.”

<sup>3</sup> David J. Gunkel provides a good summary of the literature on electronic book publishing to 2003 in “What’s the Matter with Books?” *Configurations* 11, no. 3 (2003): 277–303. See also, but not exclusively: Kevin Larson and Rosaline Picard, *The Aesthetics of Reading* (n.p., n.d., 2005), accessed 3 July 2012, <http://affect.media.mit.edu/pdfs/05.larson-picard.pdf>; Jeff Gomez, *Print is Dead: Books in Our Digital Age* (New York: Macmillan, 2008); Catherine C. Marshall,

and book historians are starting to incorporate the electronic book into their research and scholarly considerations. The University of Virginia's David Vander Meulen made an important contribution in an essay published in this journal in 2008 titled "Thoughts on the Future of Bibliographical Analysis," in which he meditated on analytical bibliography and the digital environment. He advised that the field's historic emphasis on the physicality of books and a more recent emphasis on their sociological aspects be incorporated into a wider whole lest scholars lose the ability to find and describe a textual totality.<sup>4</sup> In his 2010 Robert L. Nikirk Lecture titled "Digital Books [*sic*] & the Future of Bibliographical Knowledge," Michael F. Suarez, SJ, Director of Rare Book School and University Professor of English at the University of Virginia, stated to an audience of Grolier Club members that the electronic book "in the final analysis is no book at all."<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, Catherine C. Marshall, Principal Researcher at Microsoft and an affiliated researcher at the Center for the Study of Digital Libraries at Texas A&M University, wrote in 2010 that technology provides readers and scholars with new forms and new possibilities: "we can do things with digital texts that we were never able to do with print books."<sup>6</sup> A panel at the 2011 Modern Language Association annual convention was organized around the theme of "E-Books as Bibliographical Objects" and in a 2012 issue of *Book History*, Alan Galey, a professor at the University of Toronto's Faculty of Information, concluded that "e-books are human artifacts, and bear the traces of their making no less for being digital, though they bear those traces in ways bibliographers have yet to explain thoroughly."<sup>7</sup>

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*Reading and Writing the Electronic Book*, Synthesis Lectures on Information Concepts, Retrieval and Services (n.p.: Morgan & Claypool, 2010), accessed June 28, 2012, [http://o-www.morganclaypool.com/mercury.concordia.ca/doi/abs/10.2200/1\\_S00215ED1V01Y200907ICR009](http://o-www.morganclaypool.com/mercury.concordia.ca/doi/abs/10.2200/1_S00215ED1V01Y200907ICR009); Martyn Lyons, *A History of Reading and Writing in the Western World* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Guylaine Beaudry, *La communication scientifique et numérique* (Paris: Hermès science publications / Lavoisier, 2011); and Ray Siemens et al., HCI-Book? Perspectives on E-Book Research, 2006–2008 (Foundational to Implementing New Knowledge Environments," *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of Canada* 49, no. 1 (2011): 35–89.

<sup>4</sup> David L. Vander Muelen, "Thoughts on the Future of Bibliographical Analysis," *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of Canada* 46, no. 1 (2008): 17–34.

<sup>5</sup> Michael F. Suarez, SJ, "Digital Books [*sic*] & the Future of Bibliographical Knowledge," Vimeo video, accessed 1 June 2013, <http://vimeo.com/17044752>.

<sup>6</sup> Marshall, *Reading and Writing the Electronic Book*.

<sup>7</sup> Alan Galey, "The Enkindling Reader: E-Books in the Bibliographical Imagination," *Book History* 15 (2012): 214.

In formulating this special issue of the *Papers/Cahiers* on the history of electronic books, I wanted to know if those of us interested in the history of books, publishing, and information had the ability to start telling the history of electronic books. The answer to that question, at least in my reading of the contributions that follow, is categorically no. Depending on which historical narrative you follow, the electronic book is almost fifty years old, but it is neither stable nor mature and delivery platforms, devices, and technologies are still in their relative infancy. Authors, publishers, librarians, and readers are experimenting with e-book production, delivery, and access, and the publishing industry seems to be in a state of perpetual e-anxiety and crisis. As I write this introduction, Apple has just been found guilty of e-book price-fixing collusion in the United States and the American retailer Barnes & Noble has announced it will stop making its colour Nook tablets.<sup>8</sup> Covering this news from Barnes & Noble on his blog, David Pogue of the *New York Times* wrote: “That’s it: Amazon has won that battle [between e-readers], and no more competition.”<sup>9</sup> The technological, financial, and legal complications that accompany e-books are enough, to borrow from Robert Darnton’s famous essay from which this special issue borrows its theme, “to make one want to retire to a rare book room and count watermarks.”<sup>10</sup> Within this context and reading the essays that follow, it is obvious that we need more historical and technological distance from the electronic book before we can begin to measure and assess how it has changed established notions of authorship, reading, book production, and the transmission and uses of texts. What follows, however, are essays that meditate on the philosophical, social, and cultural ramifications of e-books and describe how they are affecting the ways by which readers access and encounter scholarly and popular works.

The electronic book did not appear fully formed with the Kindle or Google Books. In trying to deal with the explosion in published information produced by massive investments by government in science and technology as a result of the Second World War, Vannevar Bush in 1945 described “the memex,” a device that researchers could

<sup>8</sup> Chad Bray, Joe Palazzolo, and Ian Sherr, “U.S. Judge Rules Apple Colluded on E-Books,” *Wall Street Journal*, 11 July 2013, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424127887324425204578597453053469898.html>.

<sup>9</sup> David Pogue, “Upheaval in the E-book World,” *Pogue’s Posts*, 11 July 2013, <http://pogue.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/07/11/upheaval-in-the-e-book-world/?src=recg>.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Darnton, “What Is the History of Books?” *Daedalus* 111, no. 3 (1982): 67.

use to manage, store, and retrieve information.<sup>11</sup> The memex was never built, but it did spur investigations into electronic information delivery by Roberto Busa, Alan Kay, William Morrledge, and others.<sup>12</sup> Michael Hart, founder of Project Gutenberg, is now credited with creating the first collection of electronic texts in 1971, and beginning in the 1970s texts became available on a succession of storage media including magnetic tape, laserdiscs, floppy discs, and CD-ROMS. The scholarly e-book has been with us for a while, too. Early English Books Online (EEBO) was created in 1999 as a partnership between ProQuest LLC, the University of Michigan, and the University of Oxford to make the thousands of titles microfilmed through Early English Books machine readable, and ACLS Humanities E-Book began in 2002 as a way to offer access to high-quality titles in the humanities. Scholarly publishers like Harvard University Press and Palgrave Macmillan are now making their annual frontlists available online at the same time as the print editions and non-profit organizations like Project MUSE and JSTOR, originally created to provide access to and digital archiving for digital journals, are now providing access to e-books. Interestingly, many of these publishers provide access to e-books in Portable Document Format (PDF), which replicates the design and appearance of a printed book, albeit in only two dimensions. There is every reason to believe that the shift in favour of electronic publishing in the academic environment will become permanent. In 2012 Amherst College announced that it was creating an electronic scholarly press, something currently being contemplated by my institution, Concordia University. Established academic presses are not immune to digital forces. In an interview in 2011 with *Against the Grain*, a trade publication for collection development and serials librarians, Alison Mudditt, Director of the University of California Press, was asked to describe what book publishing would look like within the next five years. She replied, “we’ll be in a world where digital editions and business models are primary. While print will continue to exist, it will be more of a luxury item for those who can

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<sup>11</sup> Vannevar Bush, “As We May Think,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, July 1945, accessed 21 August 2013, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1945/07/as-we-may-think/303881/>.

<sup>12</sup> For more on the history of electronic books see: Laura Manley and Robert P. Holley, “History of the Ebook: The Changing Face of Books,” *Technical Services Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (2012): 292–311.

and want to pay a premium.”<sup>13</sup> This is a radically reconceived vision of a not-too-distant scholarly communications environment. It may be merely a vision that does not materialize, but it reveals a great deal about the issues at play within academic publishing.

This special issue of the *Papers/Cahiers* includes contributions from distinguished and emerging scholars in the fields of bibliography, classics, information, English literature, and publishing, and the authors include university teaching faculty, a PhD student, a library director, a publisher of scholarly critical editions, and one of our foremost bibliographers and textual scholars. G. Thomas Tanselle’s thoughtful foreword and his reminder that the concerns of scholars interested in printed books are applicable to electronic texts, frame the essays that follow. James J. O’Donnell, a distinguished scholar and academic administrator, writes about e-books within a framework of intellectual and technological loss and gain. His Cicero is now available electronically in a variety of formats and files, but it will be some time before he achieves success as an e-book and for good reasons. John Maxwell reminds us that almost all books have been digital since at least the 1980s when publishers transitioned to computerized book design and production. His paper suggests new models for e-book publishing that favour the book and the reader over the publisher. The history of French language electronic publishing in Quebec is the subject of a comprehensive essay by Guylaine Beaudry, a librarian and the former director of two digital scholarly publishing programs in that province. Her contribution is a *prologue*, a word that in both French and English describes an opening that introduces and frames a longer narrative. In a case study on a company that he founded to publish scholarly critical editions on CD-ROM, Peter Robinson writes about models for digital publishing, distribution, and access that include a variety of actors, not just large university presses or grant-funded publishers. Jennifer Burek Pierce situates e-books for children within larger considerations of electronic publishing and e-book use by young readers who often only have access to titles selected for them by parents, guardians, and librarians based on notions of “good reading” that are over a century old. Questions of format, specifically the picture book, are essential to understanding how young people relate to electronic texts. Christopher Doody

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<sup>13</sup> “ATG Star of the Week: Alison Mudditt, Director, University of California Press,” 29 December 2011, <http://www.against-the-grain.com/2011/12/atg-star-of-the-week-alison-mudditt-director-university-of-california-press/>.

focuses his investigations on one specific and monolithic player in the e-book market, Amazon, and describes the way it has marketed and promoted its Kindle reading device.

If this special issue of the *Papers/Cahiers* confuses rather than clarifies the history of the electronic book and its place in book history, then on the other hand I believe it greatly succeeds in more firmly situating the electronic book on the bibliographical landscape, the shape and contours of which can easily support the study of the production and uses of books and texts in electronic, as well as printed, form. In 1914 W.W. Greg wrote that “bibliography” should define the study of “the transmission of all symbolic representation of speech or other ordered sound or even of logical thought ... [T]he view which would confine the term ‘bibliography’ to the study of printed books seems to me a very foolish one.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the venerable publisher of this journal, the Bibliographical Society of Canada / La Société bibliographique du Canada, describes its mission as “the scholarly study of the history, description, and transmission of texts in *all media and formats* [emphasis added].”<sup>15</sup> It is true that electronic books ask different questions and require different methods of inquiry than printed books, as well as a solid understanding of sophisticated computer technologies and software ranging from HTML to EPUB to Cascading Style Sheets (CSS) to Digital Rights Management (DRM), but they will present new and exciting answers. The authors of the contributions to this issue have pursued many lines of inquiry and investigation but others remain like so many pages left intentionally blank. How can book historians better incorporate the electronic book into our work? What concerns do electronic books bring to bear on the study of communication in print? What kinds of methodologies and information technology skills do bibliographers need to apply to the study of e-books? How do we measure or what kind of evidence do we need to determine if e-books have changed reading habits? What impact will the electronic book and electronic publishing have on book history as an academic discipline? How will electronic book publishing and acquisitions affect library collections and collecting, particularly in the field of rare and special collections

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<sup>14</sup> W.W. Greg, “What Is Bibliography?” in *Sir Walter Wilson Greg: A Collection of His Writings*, ed. Joseph Rosenblum (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1998), 87. The essay was originally printed in *Transactions of the Bibliographical Society* in 1914.

<sup>15</sup> “Bibliographical Society of Canada,” accessed 2 July 2013, <http://www.bsc-sbc.ca/en/bschome.html>.

to say nothing of digital preservation or the acquisition of what the professional community is calling “born digital” materials, i.e., materials created electronically that have never had a physical form? Does a collection of e-books constitute a library? This is all to ask, once more and with feeling, what is the history of electronic books?

## SOMMAIRE

Cette livraison spéciale des *Cahiers/Papiers* porte sur l'évolution du livre électronique envisagée sous l'angle de l'histoire du livre en général. Malgré la diffusion de plus en plus massive des livres numériques depuis les deux dernières décennies, les bibliographes et les historiens du livre commencent seulement à se préoccuper de la question dans leurs travaux de recherche. Les articles qui suivent comportent des historiques, réflexions et autres études de cas par des auteurs aux antécédents scolaires variés ou œuvrant dans des disciplines différentes mais intéressés par les répercussions qu'entraîne le livre électronique aussi bien chez les auteurs, les éditeurs que les lecteurs. Cette livraison spéciale amène les historiens du livre à se poser la question suivante à savoir quelle est la place du livre numérique dans l'histoire du livre. Au lieu d'apporter une seule réponse, le sujet risque de susciter de nombreuses autres questions qui méritent d'être résolues à la lumière d'une définition de la bibliographie qui englobe le livre électronique.