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The Coffin lecture, of which this is a revised, corrected, and enlarged version, updated with new relevant statistics, was given and published in 2005. That version is available to be read at www.ies.sas.ac.uk/sites/default/files/files/Publications/Coffin%20lectures/stclair.pdf. It is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 2.0 England & Wales License, see <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/uk/> for details. You may copy this work freely for your own use, for teaching, and for research, including downloading from the online text, subject only to the courtesies of attribution. The text may not be altered in any way. Rights to commercial publication are reserved.

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we see that prices tumbled, production soared, and access widened. For example, in the case of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, first published in 1719, the archival records of publishers and printers show that, although it had been regarded as a 'best seller' from the day it was published, it had sold more copies within a few years of the ending of perpetual copyright, than in its first half century.⁹ With Shakespeare, within twenty-five years of 1774, more copies were sold than in the one hundred and fifty years since the first collected edition, the 'first folio' of 1623. And, if you are thinking that the fall in price was due to mechanisation of book manufacturing, as is often asserted, that was not the case. The books that poured from the English presses in rising numbers at falling prices after 1774 were manufactured by traditional hand-craft methods largely unchanged since Gutenberg.

On the lower part of my textbook demand curve diagram, I have mentioned anthologies, abridgements, and adaptations. They are part of the means by which ideas were, and are, diffused, in economic terms 'trickle down'. They enabled longer texts to be made available to wider readerships, including young people, to the less-well educated, and to the economically disadvantaged. They help to bind a society together, uniting the reading experiences of one generation with that of others, introducing children to texts which they may later read in more sophisticated versions, and maintaining a shared memory across time, place, and social situation. One pattern that I noticed in my scrutiny of the archival record is that, quite suddenly, in about 1600, the English book industry stopped producing texts of this kind that drew on copyrighted material and the restrictions continued. There were, for example, no abridgements of the eighteenth century novels, of Adam Smith, of Gibbon, of the English translations of Homer or Virgil, long works that cry out for abridgement.

The judicial decision of 1774 to enforce the statute law of 1710 not only enabled innumerable complete texts to be read by millions who had previously been excluded but resulted in a flood of anthologies, abridgements, and adaptations that drew on the same body of older texts and carried the ideas to even larger constituencies including children.

The patterns relating to abridgements, anthologies, and adaptations, Alps on the landscape of book history, were not brought to light either by traditional descriptive bibliography or by narrative history. But, as with the practice of tranching down the demand curve once noticed, the explanation jumps from the page. The business purpose was to prevent the high price market in the complete texts from being undermined. Since the clampdown was not retroactive, the older texts, that is those for which an intellectual property ownership claim had been made before 1600, continued to be reprinted. This resulted in the build-up of vested commercial interests in prolonging the existence of the older texts that had been first printed before the clampdown.¹⁰ A political economy approach helps to explain why after 1774 the reading nation grew rapidly until near universality was reached by the end of the nineteenth. It explains why Shakespeare disappeared from popular reading, from 1594 to 1808, and why a body of texts of mediaeval romance that had been continuously favoured for many centuries should suddenly lose all appeal around 1800.

The time lags in access that resulted from these governing economic structures and business practices were not trivial. For example, in the romantic period, a large constituency of middle class readers were caught in the print of texts produced in an England of two or more generations before, texts that became more out of line with their real life experience every passing year. The poor were caught in texts first printed several hundred years earlier, English language bibles, almanacs, chapbook abridgements of mediaeval and Renaissance romance such as *Guy of Warwick*, *Bevis of Hampton*, and *the Seven Champions of Christendom*. Those at the top of the demand curve could of course buy the less expensive books and many did. Samuel Pepys and James Boswell, for example, loved the old abridged chapbooks and made collections. But those at the lower tranches could not regularly buy access to the books in which more modern texts were inscribed.

9 Some of the main archival figures in *Reading Nation* 507. This finding, that has been questioned, depends upon considering print runs, not just numbers of titles recorded in catalogues.

10 Discussed in Chapter 4 of *Reading Nation*.

What determined the shape of the demand curve? Many factors we can think of — literacy, incomes, horizons, censorship, appeal to readers, none of which are static, and all of which have to be investigated and factored in. The curve for books as a whole, for example, looks very steep in the century before the romantic period, in the sense that the number of additional copies which were sold if the price was reduced was modest. By 1900, as a result of a virtuous circle of cheaper books leading to more reading, it had become much flatter as more and more men, women, and children joined the reading nation.

I next discuss the effects of the changing technology. To my initial surprise, I found that the figures for edition sizes, that is print runs per edition, for British books in the early nineteenth century were not all that different from those found in the previous centuries of the print era, when the population, the economy, and the market for books were only a fraction of what they had become. The normal range, from about 500 to 3,000 copies per edition, with a few outliers on either side, is similar in France, Germany, the Netherlands, and Italy for which there are sixteenth-century figures. It seems to be constant across Europe and North America. Only in the mid nineteenth century, with the introduction of printing by stereotype plates do we see much of a change and some print runs become longer.

Why, we should ask, did the coming of print in fifteenth-century Europe result in more texts? Surely the political and ecclesiastical leaders of the time, who controlled the book industries and often claimed a monopoly of truth, should have preferred more copies of the existing body of texts? There is a micro-economic explanation relating to the marginal costs of producing extra copies. With moveable type, after about 3,000 copies, since the costs of paper and of pressing are broadly proportional to the number printed, with only the costs of type setting offering opportunities for economies of scale, the producer of a book maximises his returns relative to his costs and risks by putting the type back in the case, and starting again with a new edition if expected demand exceeds 3,000 or in many cases a far lower figure.

In the age of manufacture by stereotype that began in Britain in the 1820s, the microeconomics of text copying are radically different from those of the age of exclusively moveable type that preceded it.¹³ And the problems of assessing production, if we do not have archival sources, are severe. In the nineteenth century a high proportion of print was undated — perhaps deliberately so to offset readerly resistance to perceived obsolescence, a phenomenon we see returning with print-on-demand. For many types of print, reliance on numbers of titles in catalogues as a surrogate for output or for reading can be so misleading as to be worthless. We know, for example, from the firm's archives, that one firm alone, Frederick Warne over forty years ran off fifty impressions, ranging from 24,000 to 250 copies per impression from plates of *The Poetical Works of Lord Byron*. The plates produced a total of over 170,000 copies, plus an unknown further number before the plates were melted in 1937. In terms of 'titles' or 'editions' as judged by changing title pages, this vast output counts as two.

The political economy point is this. In the past, the differing technological and economic limitations on manufacturing of copies of texts changed the balance of production, and therefore of reading, between old and new texts. Some technologies encouraged the production of more copies of the existing body of texts. Moveable type encouraged the production of more newly composed texts. I have summarised these patterns in the Table 3.

Table 3

MANUFACTURING: Tendencies

Manuscript era

Encouraged the production of more copies of the existing body of texts relative to new texts.

Promoted stability/obsolescence in the culture

13 Discussed in *Reading Nation* 179–184, 416–418. And more fully with more figures in 'Following up *The Reading Nation*.'