

Building a National Literature: The United States 1800–1890

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There was no American literature in the nineteenth century. So said a chorus of British and European critics of the new nation. “Literature the Americans have none – no native literature . . . It is all imported,” the Rev. Sydney Smith pronounced in the *Edinburgh Review*. In 1820, Smith famously insulted American pride: “In the four quarters of the globe, who reads an American book?” Two decades later, Alexis de Tocqueville was obliged to agree. During his 1830s’ tour of the United States, the liberal aristocrat found much to admire about “democracy in America” but not its literary productions: “The inhabitants of the United States have . . . at present, properly speaking, no literature.” What did exist was best hidden from foreign guests. “If the American nation be judged of by its literature,” the English traveler Harriet Martineau concluded in 1837, “it may be pronounced to have no mind at all.” That verdict persisted, even as the United States was rising to world power. In 1888, the English critic Matthew Arnold echoed Sydney Smith. For all their industrial success and national wealth, Americans were lacking in civilization: “In literature they have as yet produced little that is important.”

Many Americans unhappily agreed. With high hopes for the Revolution, aspiring poets had anticipated a “rising glory” of the arts in a free republic. That expansive vision soon faded. Far from heeding Noah Webster’s dictum that “America must be as independent in *literature* as she is in politics,” most writers in the early republic took their cues from the former mother country. America remained a cultural colony of the Old World well into the nineteenth century. In 1837, Ralph Waldo Emerson summoned the “American Scholar” to answer “the postponed expectation of the world.” “We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe.” This call for literary independence was but one in a litany of complaints about native mediocrity heard throughout the century. American literature was deemed inferior either because it failed to realize European models or because it tried too hard to imitate them.

Perhaps the critics were looking in the wrong place. In the eighteenth century, literature carried a distinctive meaning it no longer bears today. Samuel Johnson defined

it in 1756 as “learning,” the acquisition of which required education in the Greek and Roman classics. Learned men (and a few women) were the citizens of the republic of letters, communicating freely across national borders to advance the “improvement” and enlightenment of mankind. Every branch of knowledge invited their interest, from “natural philosophy” (the progenitor of modern “science”) to history and politics to languages, rhetoric, and *belles lettres* (encompassing essays, drama, poetry, and fiction). When Noah Webster embarked on the linguistic inquiries that culminated in his monumental *American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828), he appealed to “the Friends of Literature in the United States” for financial aid. “Similar undertakings in Great Britain have been supported by contributions,” he explained. Would not “the lovers of learning” in America do the same “to enlarge the sphere of knowledge”? Apparently not: Webster was in constant need of funds to carry on his scholarly project, an experience shared by other literary men in his day and confirming the view that in the absence of aristocratic patrons and well-endowed institutions, the Muses could not thrive in the infant republic. In fact, Americans did establish diverse associations and launch numerous journals to promote the progress of knowledge. Still, their reputation was fixed, in Emerson’s words, as “a people too busy” with business ever “to give to letters” more than token regard.

If “letters” did have a future in the new nation, that lay in the wider field opened up over the nineteenth century, when “literature” ended its narrow alliance with elite learning and admitted into its ranks the entire body of writing produced in a time or place. In the age of Enlightenment, men of letters competed to contribute to the world’s stock of knowledge. The agenda shifted with the currents of nationalism and democracy. Now every Western nation claimed a distinctive character, given form in original works of literature and art from the common life of its people. By this standard, Emerson would identify the “English traits” of “strong common sense” and “mental materialism” as characteristic of the nation that produced Chaucer and Shakespeare, Macaulay and Dickens, while seeking the essence of American experience in the popular realm of “the familiar” and “the low.” This quest for national distinctiveness has shaped literary history ever since. Until recently, critics have told the story of American literature as the long struggle to find an original, authentic voice for the unprecedented realities of experience in the New World. Such a narrative is suggested by the very title of this chapter, “Building a National Literature.” But book history alters the angle of vision. It goes beyond the particular agendas that writers and historians attribute to books and comprehends the wide array of interests and participants, the diversity of institutions, and the host of cultural practices that were bound up in the world of print Americans made, through their domestic engagements and their international entanglements, over the nineteenth century. By these means and media, writers and readers carried on the conversations among themselves and with the wider world that can appropriately be called “American literature.”

The United States embarked on independence with a print culture that was at once local and cosmopolitan but hardly national. America’s arrival on the world stage was heralded in print, with the Declaration of Independence circulating in thirty

newspapers and fourteen broadsides before it was even signed. The republic was dependent on its constituent parts, the very news of its existence spread by a decentralized network of printers among a loosely connected people. The success of the new nation required better communications, and so the federal government that came into being with the Constitution in 1789 set about promoting a greater sense of nationality. Newspapers were central to that goal. “Whatever facilitates a general intercourse of sentiments,” James Madison wrote in 1791, “as good roads, domestic commerce, a free press, and particularly *a circulation of newspapers through the entire body of the people . . . is equivalent to a contraction of territorial limits, and is favorable to liberty.*”

Under the fostering arm of government, the press enjoyed special privileges accorded to no other genre of print. The Post Office Act of 1792 allowed newspapers to circulate through the mail at cheap rates, subsidized by high charges on personal letters; books were banned from the mailbags. Editors could also exchange issues at no cost, and they were free to reprint whatever they pleased. Government put few obstacles in their way. Liberty of the press was guaranteed by state and federal constitutions, and following the storm over the 1798 Sedition Act, official efforts to regulate newspapers faded. In contrast to Britain and France, the new republic eschewed the state powers customarily employed to police opinion. In the Old World, heavy taxes on newspapers restricted their circulation to an economic elite; in the United States, news was potentially accessible to all. Subscriptions, to be sure, were costly – as much as ten dollars a year for a daily, five for a weekly, the bill payable in advance – but copies were readily available in coffee-houses and taverns, where it was common to see men sociably gathered, as the poet Philip Freneau noticed, “to spit, smoke segars, drink apple whiskey, and *read the news.*” Politicians encouraged the habit by providing a variety of subsidies – printing contracts, official advertising, and patronage jobs – to ensure the well-being of the press. Thanks to all these measures, newspapers took on the character of public utilities, and reading them became a conscientious act of citizenship. As early as 1800, the *Portfolio* dubbed Americans “a nation of newspaper readers.”

Serving both public purpose and private interest, newspapers proliferated at a dizzying pace up and down the coast and deep into the Western frontier, faster even than the burgeoning population of the new nation. Some 200 papers circulated in 1800; a quarter-century later, that figure had grown four-fold to 861, then swelled to 1,400 by 1840. Everywhere, except the rural South, where printers were seldom seen, the press played an integral part in the conduct of business and politics. Like their eighteenth-century predecessors, urban dailies supplied valuable commercial “intelligence” about prices and markets far and near. They rightly called themselves “advertisers”; commonly, half or more of these four-page sheets were given over to paid notices of goods and services for sale.

The political columns of the press were no less devoted to salesmanship. At the dawn of the republic, editors vowed to be “open to all parties but influenced by none,” as the *Freeman’s Journal* of Philadelphia declared in its masthead, while the ambitious entrepreneur John Fenno hastened from Boston to New York with the dream of founding a “gazette of the United States” as official organ of the national establishment. But hardly

had the new government gone into operation than it split into competing factions, centered around Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson, that developed after 1800 into full-fledged partisan bodies contending for power in Washington and the states. Each party cultivated its own network of newspapers to carry on the contest in print; from editorial offices functioning as party headquarters flowed the official messages calculated to rally the faithful and win over the undecided. In election seasons, urban advertisers and country gazettes made politics their main business, selling candidates and platforms like any other product. Up to 1820, newspapers preferred to cloak their partisanship in seemingly impartial language stressing the common good; in succeeding decades, they took up the cudgels and waged the fight for Democrats and Whigs, Anti-Masons, Know-Nothings, and Republicans without inhibition. Editors, more often politicians than printers, denounced their rivals as scurrilous skunks, dirty dishcloths, and “lickspittle tools” and brawled with them in the streets. Epithets and opinions were the stuff of the party press in campaign mode.

Where was the *news* in these papers? It consisted chiefly of official documents – the annual message of the president, laws enacted by state legislatures, proceedings of political conventions, trial records – along with extracts from the foreign press, prices current, and accounts of ships arriving and departing. From the 1820s on, editors competed fiercely to be the first to put such items into print, employing schooners, pony expresses, even carrier pigeons to win the race. But independent reporting was lacking. Journalists did show initiative by attending sessions of Congress and taking stenographic notes on the debates. Unfortunately for contemporaries and historians interested in what exactly was said, such transcripts were not what the public read. Politicians were accorded the right to review the notes and “improve” them before speeches went into print – a practice known as “speaking to Buncombe” whereby the people’s representatives said one thing to their colleagues and another to their constituents. If national “news” was bowdlerized in the press, events close to home could go missing entirely, partly because everyone already knew them, but even more because such matters were beside the point. Scattered across an extensive republic, local newspapers served to connect readers to wider worlds beyond the community. They constituted a national bulletin board, posting stories from all over the land. Noah Webster, an erstwhile editor himself, was quick to discern the significance of this process. Newspapers, he observed in the very first issue of his *American Minerva* in December 1793, were “common instruments of social intercourse, by which the citizens of this vast Republic constantly discourse and debate with each other.”

The boundaries of American journalism expanded dramatically with the birth of the penny press. In September 1833, a new era of mass communications dawned with the inauguration of Benjamin Day’s *New York Sun*. This brash upstart adapted recent innovations in the London press to American circumstances and challenged the business model for an urban newspaper. It was soon followed by a host of imitators in New York and beyond, most notably, James Gordon Bennett’s *New York Herald* (1835) and Horace Greeley’s *New York Tribune* (1841). Unlike the high-priced “mercantile advertisers” aimed at New York’s political and business elite, the penny papers catered to the broad

middle and working classes of the surging city. The papers were tiny: at 8½ by 11 inches, the *Sun* easily folded into a man's pocket, whereas its established rivals, three times that size, were "blanket sheets." They were cheap, a penny an issue (soon raised to two cents) and available in single copies hawked by newsboys on the streets. They were independent in politics and populist in style. And they promised to print "ALL THE NEWS OF THE DAY." This was an entirely new formula for commercial publishing. With its handy format, low price, and appealing contents, the penny press gathered up readers en masse and sold them to advertisers for huge profits. The *Herald's* daily circulation climbed to 60,000 by the eve of the Civil War, an achievement made possible by the introduction of steam-powered printing presses and machine-made paper. Popular journalism was at once a cause and consequence of the industrial revolution.

In the hands of Bennett, a Scottish immigrant who had labored long and futilely in the party press, the modern tabloid emerged in its quintessential form, capturing all the "human interest" of the day: crime, violence, sex, high society, sports (boxing matches, horse races, yachting regattas), Wall Street, show business, and celebrities. But the *Herald* did not ignore politics, which Bennett pursued as aggressively as he sniffed out scandal. Seizing on the invention of the telegraph, *Herald* correspondents broke the news of American victories in the Mexican war and the discovery of gold in California; the provisions of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo surfaced in the paper the same day as the US Senate received the confidential document from President Polk. (Furious at the leak, senators ordered the arrest of the *Herald* reporter and demanded to know his source – to no effect; after a month, the defiant newsman was released.) The scoops and sensations brought to public view in the popular press constituted a distinctive contribution to American literature. In the pages of the penny papers unfolded the daily life of a great metropolis with "a variety, a piquancy, a brilliancy, an originality," according to Bennett, "that will entirely outstrip the worn out races of Europe, who have been degenerating for the last twenty generations." Capturing the excitement, novelty, and dangers of an ever-changing city, these heralds and tribunes of the people reflected urban society to itself.

The popular appetite for news was insatiable. In 1869, the British journalist Edward Dickey characterized the American as "a newspaper-reading animal." A periodical existed for virtually every breed of *genus Americanus*. Where the party and penny press targeted readers in particular cities and towns, other enterprises identified groups with specialized interests and fashioned them into regional and national audiences. Vocational publications abounded, with farmers getting the most attention and advice. No self-respecting denomination of Christians was without its house organ. Temperance advocates drank from the *Fountain* and enlisted in the *Cold Water Army*; health reformers looked to the *Sanitarium*; abolitionists championed the cause of the slave in the *Emancipator* and the *Liberator*. Starting with *Freedom's Journal* in 1827, African Americans fought not only for their own liberty but for the *Rights of All* (as the paper was renamed). The Cherokee Nation advertised its progress in civilization in the bilingual *Cherokee Phoenix*, and although that effort failed to stop forcible removal from Georgia, the paper, true to its original name, was reborn in Oklahoma as the *Cherokee Advocate*. There were

“amulets,” “garlands,” “mirrors,” and “toilets” for ladies (and an *Agitator* for women’s rights); “assistants” and “companions” for mothers; “friends” for orphans and youth. Alas, “sporting papers” like the *Flash* and the *Whip*, modeled on English originals, led young men astray with titillating tales of vice in the nation’s cities and detailed guides on where to find it.

Those preferring the safer precincts of fiction could turn to the “story papers” that flourished in the mid-1840s, when canny businessmen took advantage of a loophole in the postal laws and began churning out cheap editions of foreign novels in newspaper format. In the spirit of James Gordon Bennett, the editors of *Brother Jonathan* and *New World* in New York and *Universal Yankee Nation* in Boston (which claimed to be “the largest paper in all creation”) won the hearts of “the Reading Million” and threatened the interests of established publishers by snapping up the latest works of Charles Dickens, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, and other popular writers as soon as they arrived on the transatlantic steamers and getting them into print well before they appeared as books. “We are friends of the people,” boasted the *New World*, “and our motto is ‘The greatest good to the greatest number.’” Though that practice was soon halted, newspapers never stopped running fiction. Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* first created a sensation in the anti-slavery weekly *National Era*, where it was serialized in forty installments in 1851. *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Magazine*, launched by an English engraver-turned-publisher in New York, played a prominent part in popularizing such novelists as Wilkie Collins in the Civil War decades and after, while literary syndicates marketed works by the leading American and British writers to newspapers all over the country during the last two decades of the century. Thanks to the post office, the railroad, and the telegraph, the newspaper could chart diverse paths – local, regional, national, or perhaps all at the same time – in the building of a literary marketplace.

In histories of American literature, book publishing usually holds pride of place and with good reason. Books carried a cultural prestige lacking in periodicals. Whether bound in leather or cloth, they were made to last, embodying “timeless” knowledge across the generations; newspapers, by contrast, were typically as short-lived as the information they contained. Ephemera comprised the bulk of items issued by colonial printers: almanacs, broadsides, newspapers, pamphlets in political and religious debates, primers, and spellers. For their books, Americans went to London, Edinburgh, and Dublin in a habit that survived the Revolution. It was simply cheaper to import the latest literature from Britain than to patronize the native press, and it signified a cosmopolitan desire to participate in the international republic of letters. For that situation to change, entrepreneurs would have to find new ways of conducting the book business, and consumers would have to alter their literary tastes.

In the early 1790s, the printer Mathew Carey, a radical Irish nationalist who had fled prosecution for sedition by the English authorities and set up shop in Philadelphia with an endorsement from Benjamin Franklin, devised an ingenious route into publishing. With the backing of well-heeled merchants, he ordered thousands of pounds worth of books from several leading British booksellers, stocked a store on Market Street, and turned the inventory to immediate profit. Carey’s ambitions went beyond the import

trade. Instead of paying his suppliers, he pocketed the money and invested it in two risky ventures, expensive reprints of William Guthrie's *New System of Geography* (1786) and Oliver Goldsmith's *An History of the Earth and Animated Nature* (1774), which had gone through multiple editions in London and Dublin. Carey aimed to cover his costs by signing up advance subscribers, some 1,200 in all, for Guthrie's two volumes, which were adapted for American readers by the Philadelphia astronomer David Rittenhouse and Massachusetts geographer Jedidiah Morse. So ambitious was this design that Carey was obliged to give up printing altogether and concentrate on marketing his wares – no easy task, as it turned out, since the ready audience for the project in the Middle States and New England was quickly tapped out and the newspaper advertisements Carey placed brought in few others. Facing an imminent crisis of debt, Carey seized on the expedient of hiring a footloose Anglican parson named Mason Locke Weems to peddle his books wherever they could be sold. A born salesman, Weems traveled throughout the Chesapeake, winning over the gentry with visions of “Worlds upon Worlds” about “to burst upon their senses” from the pages of Guthrie. The sales pitch did more than rescue Carey from financial ruin. It pointed up the opportunities and the obstacles in publishing books for a people dispersed across the countryside of an extensive republic. In the bid to bring books to readers, rather than wait for them to come into his store, Carey learned a crucial lesson: picking titles was only part of a publisher's task; marketing and selling them demanded equal attention.

Carey's example was repeated by other printers-turned-publishers in the 1790s, not all of whom obtained working capital by expropriating British creditors. The patriot printer Isaiah Thomas of Worcester, Massachusetts, launched his publishing career with a line of “toy” books for children, reprinted from London originals, and with substantial quarto and folio editions of the Bible. However they entered the business, these entrepreneurs built American publishing on the recycling of British and European books. This specialty was made profitable by the Copyright Act of 1790, which, in keeping with the Constitution's mandate to “promote the Progress of Science and useful Arts,” granted authors “the exclusive right to their Writings” for a limited term of fourteen years (renewable, in the author's lifetime, for another fourteen) – a provision modeled on English precedent (the 1710 Statute of Anne, the first copyright law in the world). There was a catch: only American citizens (and resident aliens) need apply. Foreigners could claim neither protection against nor payment for unauthorized reprints of their works by the likes of Carey and Thomas. In effect, the vast body of British and European literature constituted a public domain free for the taking. Like squatters on the frontier, booksellers seized the opportunity; from the 1790s on, the bestselling books in London were being reprinted in the United States within one or two years.

The loose copyright laws fostered a “culture of reprinting” that made the American reading public the largest and most up-to-date in the Western world. In Britain, where the “intellectual property regime” tightened sharply in the early nineteenth century, publishers exploited their legal monopoly over current titles and kept book prices high and edition sizes low. As a result, the great works of the Romantic age, especially the poetry and novels of Walter Scott, gained a wider audience across the Atlantic than in

their native land. With no legal obligations to foreign authors, American booksellers saved on royalties, and they cut costs further by altering texts at will. In the course of reprinting, “three-decker” English novels shrank to two volumes (and often two-in-one), shorn of unnecessary verbiage. One Boston publisher had no apologies for condensing Scott’s *Waverley* novels: “there is a great deal of rubbish – such as the long introductions &c.” Every branch of knowledge, from theology to biography to natural history, suffered such cavalier treatment. In 1820, 70 percent of the titles issued in the United States were pirated from overseas; three decades later, following a great expansion of original American publishing, that figure remained a substantial 43 percent. Even with all those reprints in circulation, Americans had not lost their taste for imports. Serious learning still carried an Old World lineage. Well into the nineteenth century, book collectors, colleges, and library societies provided a sturdy market for British books, which such businessmen as George Palmer Putnam serviced by setting up quarters in London as agent for customers back home. In similar fashion, prosperous Americans were accustomed to celebrate Christmas by presenting loved ones with fancy gift books from England. Far from retreating before American books, the import trade boomed, growing nearly tenfold over the middle decades of the century.

British models shaped virtually every aspect of American publishing during its formative decades. Technology came from abroad, as did the craftsmen trained to use it. What books and periodicals Americans did not import or reprint they imitated and made their own. Many genres – the evangelical magazine, the gift book, the picturesque “tour,” the illustrated weekly, even the Valentine writer – originated in the Old World, then spread to the New, where they won large followings. In one crucial respect the fledgling book trade departed from the norm. Unlike the highly concentrated business of London and Paris, publishing developed as an infant industry in diverse cities and towns, from Boston to Charleston on the coast and west to Pittsburgh and Cincinnati. Decentralization was due both to the transportation barriers obstructing a national market and to the economic opportunities afforded by the copyright laws. Anybody could enter the field, issue a new title, or reprint an existing one by a foreign writer, so long as he had the capital to hire printer and binder and the willingness to assume the financial risk. But how to get books to potential readers beyond a locality? Publishers combined forces to enlarge the geographical scope of bookselling, while regulating regional and national competition. In emulation of an English practice known as “courtesy of trade,” they devised a rule for reprinting: whoever first issued a foreign text was its rightful owner, notwithstanding the absence of copyright. Under this compact, a single reprint of an English work could circulate throughout the nation, free from competing editions. Booksellers, like newspaper editors, would exchange publications with one another, thereby increasing and diversifying their stock. Or they might join together in co-publishing ventures and divide up the territory for sales. Other methods of dissemination were to purvey books on commission, supply them at standard discounts, establish branch stores, and send traveling salesmen into the countryside. These cooperative arrangements rested upon a shared sense of identity and common interests. Splitting off, like Carey, from printers and devoting themselves to publishing and

selling books, the leading figures in the book trade cultivated a collective image as urban gentlemen, promoting the economy and culture of the republic. In reality, they were following in the well-marked trail of English stationers, collaborating to uphold prices, curb competition, and limit risks.

The pace of change was actually set outside the established book trade. From the 1820s to the 1850s, the leading agents of the “benevolent empire” – the American Bible Society, the American Tract Society, and the American Sunday School Union – produced and distributed millions of pious pamphlets and books. Intent on propagating the word and winning converts for Christ, these religious publishers employed stereotype plates and steam-powered presses well in advance of their commercial counterparts. But delivering the divine message to needy souls proved a more difficult challenge. The benevolent societies relied on a network of local auxiliaries to finance and distribute their publications, and therein lay the problem. Rich, respectable communities, abounding in professed Christians, were quick to answer the call, while hardscrabble frontier settlements went unserved. The prevailing localism of American life circumscribed the reach of philanthropy. To overcome those limits, the national agencies enlisted an evangelical army of divinity students and ministers willing to work for minimal pay and deployed them to the dark corners of the land. Their mission was to be traveling salesmen for the Lord, going from door to door handing out Bibles and tracts to starving souls at whatever price, if any, they could afford. Employing these colporteurs brought additional complications: they had to be recruited, trained, supervised, paid, and held to account. By the 1850s, the benevolent societies were operating as modern corporate bureaucracies, their central headquarters overseeing a chain of regional offices that directly employed scores of agents in the field. Ironically, they did so in order to combat the immoral influence of the literary marketplace, which supplied people with what they wanted in this life, not what they needed for eternal salvation. Reversing that equation, the tract and Bible societies reinforced older habits of reading. Inside the peddlers’ packs were the steady sellers of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century divinity – Baxter’s *Call*, Alleine’s *Alarm*, Flavel’s *Touchstone* – along with newer evangelical titles like *The Dairyman’s Daughter*, nearly all the products of English pens. In urgent matters of the spirit, numerous Christians still found inspiration in the mother country.

The transformation of commercial publishing developed in tandem with the broader economy. From the 1820s to the Panic of 1837, the United States experienced a long wave of sustained growth, bringing unprecedented prosperity to a burgeoning middle class and swelling demand for consumer goods, including books. The changes stirred the book trade, whose ranks were still small and scattered in various cities, chiefly Boston, New York, and Philadelphia, but with outposts along the trade routes to the West. Just as newspapers raced for the latest news from Europe, so booksellers hastened to reprint the most popular works in London. Driving this enterprise was the craze for the historical romances of Walter Scott, which gave a new respectability to reading fiction. No longer could publishers afford to wait and see if a title sold well enough in England to merit reprinting. With speed of the essence, booksellers paid to obtain advance sheets from London – a compensation of sorts to the publishers and writers

being pirated. The “author of *Waverley*” and his imitators appeared in print as soon as they arrived in harbor. Courtesy of trade dissolved. Publishers invaded each other’s territory with rival editions of the same work, only to find themselves ultimately outflanked by the story papers, which nearly ruined the trade. There was no alternative but to satisfy the demand. The key to success lay in publishing new books. Mathew Carey, who had built his firm on the solid foundation of reprints and the Bible (which he kept in standing type and reissued as warranted), could not fathom why his son and successor was expanding the list of publications so rapidly. “There is nothing on earth worse than an old stock of books,” the son patiently explained. “Five-sixths of the whole sales are of books manufactured within the year.” Even that was not enough to beat the competition. Carey & Lea battled for dominance with the Harper Brothers for a decade; ultimately, the Harpers won. In a striking pattern of concentration, Manhattan emerged as the publishing capital of the nation, followed by Philadelphia, Boston, and Cincinnati.

The new business model reorganized publishing along modern lines. With flexibility and speed crucial to success in the competitive marketplace, the leading firms embraced technological innovation. Stereotyping, which preserved cast type on metal plates, allowed for printing on demand; firms could now reproduce works in smaller or larger lots, in response to changing needs. Papermaking machines and steam presses lowered costs, expanded output, and accelerated production. Even the centuries-old art of binding was mechanized. Taken together, these inventions transformed the appearance of books. Attractively packaged in cloth covers, illustrated with engravings, and neatly printed in large editions, each year’s titles from companies like Boston’s Ticknor & Fields, the industry leader in design, arrived, for the first time in book history, as uniform commodities on the market. It thus became easy to assign them fixed prices. Distribution was regularized in turn. Older cooperative arrangements gave way to an impersonal division of labor, as most publishers ceased to be old-style “booksellers.” Their specialized business was to organize the process of publication, bringing works into print at their own expense and risk and then selling them wholesale to jobbers and retailers nationwide. Thanks to the railroad, which extended steadily in the Northeast from the 1830s on and completed its transcontinental journey in 1869, a national book-trade system gradually emerged. From grand offices in Manhattan and other publishing centers issued an ever-expanding volume of books – some 1,350 in the year before the Civil War – to be disseminated across the country by wholesale jobbers, traveling salesmen, and retail shops. The independent bookstore was the hub of the system. In every major city and town, shopping for books became a convenient, everyday experience.

Sarah Payson Willis Parton was a prominent beneficiary of these changes. Better known by her pen name Fanny Fern, Parton achieved celebrity and riches as a newspaper columnist and novelist after years of struggling as a single mother to support herself and three young children. Born in 1811, she came of age with the press, witnessing in her own family the changing practice of journalism and the opening of new opportunities for commercial writing. Her grandfather had edited a patriot newspaper in Boston during the Revolutionary War; her father had enlisted in the fight against federalism

as editor of the *Eastern Argus* in Portland, Maine, before giving up politics for religion and starting one of America's earliest religious newspapers, the *Boston Recorder*; her older brother, Nathaniel P. Willis, fashioned a literary career as an urbane poet and genteel magazine editor. Yet, when financial disaster struck, the young mother, first widowed, then divorced, was cast on her own resources, with no help from her literary kin. To make ends meet, she tried teaching and sewing, then picked up the pen, submitting articles in the early 1850s to several Boston family magazines (the *Mother's Assistant*, the *True Flag*, and the *Olive Branch*). For the sake of propriety, as well as to conceal her identity from inquisitive relatives, she adopted the pseudonym Fanny Fern. But her ambition burned bright, and it was rewarded by a shrewd publisher who collected her periodical pieces and issued them as a book with the title *Fern Leaves from Fanny's Portfolio*. The volume was an instant success, selling 70,000 copies within a year. With a satirical wit that gave bite to sentimental prose, Fanny Fern won a huge following for her forthright pieces portraying the sufferings of poor children on New York's streets and the burdens of women in a patriarchal world. As a literary professional, she reveled in her large sales and loyal fans. Her novel *Ruth Hall* (1854), a *roman-à-clef* about a brave woman writer trying desperately to feed her children, culminates in a remarkable financial reward: 100 shares of stock in a local bank, worth \$100 each. For pouring "her own heart's history" onto the pages of a book, the author has unknowingly earned a fortune of \$10,000 – roughly what Parton herself had by then garnered in royalties from her books. That was far more than Parton's grandfather and father had ever gained from political and religious newspapers.

The astonishing career of Fanny Fern is tribute to the forces behind the expansion of the literary marketplace by the mid-nineteenth century: the rise of national periodicals; the huge popularity of novels; the profitability of writing as a vocation, especially for women; the appeal of celebrities in popular culture; and the collaboration of author and publisher in creating and disseminating American literature. As much as anyone writing in her time, Sarah Parton demonstrated just how valuable intellectual property could be. Her financial coup was the product of the smart bargain she had made in selling the copyright to her works in exchange for a share of the revenues their publication brought in – a royalty agreement that remains standard practice today. Right from the start of the 1790 Copyright Act, Noah Webster had seen its economic uses, as had such female writers as the historian Hannah Adams and the feminist Judith Sargent Murray. So, too, had booksellers like Henry C. Carey, who was quick to buy the copyrights and finance the publications of James Fenimore Cooper and Catherine Maria Sedgwick in the 1820s and 1830s – investments that only gained in value after Congress extended the copyright term in 1831 to twenty-eight years (with a possible renewal for another fourteen). The complaints of literary nationalists notwithstanding, copyright facilitated the making of American literary careers. Both native and foreign works could come from the same presses.

It was not Fanny Fern, rooted in journalism and popular culture, whom the builders of American literature had in mind during the late nineteenth century when they

established a canon of the nation's major writers, but rather a coterie of New England males: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and a few lesser poets. The elite roster owed its existence to Boston publisher James T. Fields, who had the inspiration to market these authors, all issued by his company and its successors, as a rare breed of artists creating superior works of the imagination that truly deserved recognition as "literature." Set apart from ordinary books by their elegant format and gathered into standard editions and distinguished series, such masterpieces claimed the status of American "classics" on a par with England's best. "It is literature . . . that holds in precipitation the genius of the country," decreed Houghton Mifflin editor Horace Scudder, "and the higher the form of literature, the more consummate the expression of that spirit . . ." This canonizing frame of mind, with its sacral view of art and its ranking of writers in a finely graded hierarchy, was well suited to the mood of the publishing establishment in the Gilded Age. The heirs and successors to the leading family firms – Appleton, Harper's, Putnam, Scribner's – liked to downplay the commercial aspects of their trade. Publishing for them was not so much a business as a profession with a high cultural mission. Happily, philanthropy coincided with self-interest. Through national magazines (*Atlantic*, *Harper's*, *Scribner's*, *Century*), major publishing houses served the cause of literature, while promoting their authors and advertising themselves.

It would be a mistake to idealize the publishing world of the late nineteenth century. Like any entrenched interest, industry insiders treated newcomers as interlopers. In the 1870s and 1880s, another wave of cheap fiction rose, with the appearance of George Munro's Seaside Library and similar series. Consisting of foreign novels reprinted in magazine format, these books in disguise, like the earlier story papers, took advantage of postal regulations and circulated as second-class mail. Mainstream firms denounced this violation of courtesy, which Munro scorned as "a right of possession" based primarily on the principle, or lack of principle, of *first grab*." Only with US ratification of international copyright in 1891 were the reprinters driven out of business. Even so, the establishment continued to face stiff competition from subscription publishers, who did a handsome business selling Mark Twain, Ulysses S. Grant, and other popular writers by advance order to the vast countryside. Despite their huge sales, such volumes, sneered spokesmen for the regular trade, were "absolutely worthless," with a "gaudy" appearance belied by shoddy construction – "gorgeous binding, usually in very bad taste, thick but cheap paper, outrageously poor wood-cuts, the largest type with the thickest leads." Only the ignorant, seduced by silver-tongued salesmen, would accept such "humbug." Clinging to a conservative vision of publishing as an elevated, gentlemanly affair, the leading firms stood apart from the expanding mass market cultivated by the purveyors of cheap books and the entrepreneurs of popular journalism.

Elite and mass media together strengthened national perspectives in American life at the expense of the local and the cosmopolitan. The process of change made for a more uniform, standardized print culture. It eroded the position of country editors as mediators between small towns and the wider world. It turned once-proud printers with dreams of owning their own presses into a permanent industrial working class. It

converted the civic organs of the early republic into sales bureaus for consumer culture. And it gave vast license to the newspaper barons – Joseph Pulitzer, William Randolph Hearst – who built on the legacy of James Gordon Bennett and fashioned the “yellow journalism” of the 1880s and 1890s. But national institutions of print also spread literary culture at home and abroad, winning grudging respect for American writers even in London, where Fanny Fern was pirated not long after her US debut. Ultimately, the advance of the publishing media enabled Americans to see themselves and the larger world through native eyes. In that rise to literary independence, we can also discern an ebbing of the cosmopolitanism that once was central to American print culture. In a globalized world, where old habits of cultural nationalism clash with the urgent need for international understanding, the making of American literature was not an unmixed blessing.

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