Jean-Yves Mollier and the legacy of Lucien Febvre in the history of nineteenth-century French publishing

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Jean-Yves Mollier’s work on the history of French publishing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has completely renewed this scholarly field and has become a fundamental reference point for any new intervention within it. In a series of substantial books starting with his monograph on Calmann-Lévy in 1984,¹ and including most notably his *L’Argent et les Lettres*,² he has analyzed the successes, failures and originality of the French publishing world between the 1830s and the present. Unlike many French historians, he has never regarded 1914 as a chronological frontier, but has embraced a time-span which includes most of the twentieth century as well. His conclusions have often had a direct bearing on the political history of the Third Republic and beyond (the Panama Scandal, the Dreyfus Affair, the German Occupation of 1940–44). On the eve of his retirement as professor at the Université de Versailles-Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines, and taking advantage of a SHARP meeting in his home country, I think this is a suitable moment to recognize and review his scholarly contribution as a researcher, animator, and engaged commentator on the state of the contemporary publishing industry.

These three introductory articles offer a critical appreciation of several aspects of his scholarly career, each addressing a particular period or type of contribution that Mollier has made. I will review his major published work on nineteenth-century French publishing; Patricia Sorel will concentrate on the twentieth-century French publishing industry, mentioning its dilemmas and compromises during the German Occupation; François Vallotton will consider Jean-Yves Mollier’s work as an animator of new research and syntheses in the transnational history of the book.

I take as my starting point the legacy of Lucien Febvre. In *L’Apparition du livre*, published in 1958, Lucien Febvre (together with Henri-Jean Martin) invited historians to consider the book as a commodity, an object of consumption and the product of a complex manufacturing process whose sale and distribution obeyed market imperatives and depended on established trade networks. In a work that proved to be the foundation of *l’histoire du livre* as a sub-discipline, he treated publishing and printing as an industry. The book was examined not only as a source of intellectual ferment but at the same time as a commodity. Mollier’s work, I believe, has been consistently framed by Lucien Febvre’s assumptions, but he has successfully extended Febvre’s insights both chronologically into the modern period, and thematically. As far as the nineteenth century is concerned, Jean-Yves Mollier has developed and enriched Febvre’s legacy in at least three distinctive ways, which my paper will highlight:

- He has put the publisher center-stage, as an autonomous culture broker and creative strategist, and a major figure in the development of French capitalism in the nineteenth century
- He has demonstrated the early appearance of a mass literary culture in late nineteenth-century France

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• He has emphasized the importance of the educational book market in nineteenth-century French publishing.

The publisher

The birth of the modern publisher began, in Mollier’s chronology, with Charles Panckoucke in the last decade of the eighteenth century, but entered a new phase with the activities of Ladvocat in the Romantic period. By the 1830s, the publisher had arrived, as an independent figure with a specialized and creative role, quite distinct from the professions of printing and bookselling with which his or her role had once been combined. Far from being the “evil genius” constructed by authors in the immediate post-revolutionary decades, analyzed by Christine Haynes,⁴ he was a determined pioneer, a self-made man who owed little or nothing to established trade dynasties, and he possessed great entrepreneurial skills – otherwise he could not survive in the cut-throat world of nineteenth-century capitalism. Imaginative individual publishers were responsible for innovations which transformed the book market, like the new, compact, one-volume in-18o (octodecimo) format for novels invented by Charpentier in 1838 – the first modern livre de poche – or the new “collection Michel Lévy” in 1856, which offered fiction and poetry at the unprecedented low price of 1 franc per volume. Or like Louis Hachette, who first seized on the opportunities offered by the expansion in primary education to capture the market for school texts, moving later into secondary education, then dictionaries, and eventually following the English example of W.H. Smith in selling through railway station bookstalls. Mollier’s work illustrates a range of new techniques successfully introduced by entrepreneurs looking for a competitive edge and a larger share of the market. These included publishing by installments, extending credit to

customers in the case of Calmann-Lévy, bypassing traditional bookshops to sell through street peddlers and the new Parisian department stores, or systematically buying up other, ailing businesses in the case of Ernest Flammarion in the 1880s and 1890s.⁵

Jean-Yves Mollier has brought the careers of these crucial figures to the forefront of book trade and literary history. He and his colleagues have emphasized the development of the “collection” – the publisher’s series as it is known in English – such as Hachette’s Bibliothèque des Chemins de Fer, which contained volumes of equal length and price, color-coded by theme and written to a formula dictated by Hachette. During the Second Empire, the series editors came to occupy a new echelon of the publishing hierarchy, specializing, under Hachette, in educational publishing, travel guides, English translations, and so on.⁶

The publisher was usually an authoritarian figure. Hachette, Mollier tells us, did not wait for authors to turn up at his door; his notion of a series was one he himself created and directed, recruiting the authors he needed and dictating his success formula to them.⁷ Pierre Larousse, the subject of another Mollier study published in 2012, treated his business in paternalist fashion. He paid for workers’ holidays out of his own pocket, but he systematically underpaid them and made them work six full days a week even when other companies were moving towards la semaine anglaise, i.e. allowing workers Saturday afternoons off.⁸

There are many rags-to-riches success stories in Mollier’s panorama of the economy of nineteenth-century French publishing. A pioneer like Flammarion started out with capital of only 2,000 francs and a bookstall by the Odéon. Simon Lévy, father of Michel and

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⁷ Ibid., conclusion.

Calmann Lévy, was a peddler who sold play scripts and rented opera glasses and umbrellas to queues of Parisian theatergoers waiting to buy their tickets. When Calmann Lévy died in 1891, he left a business worth 17 million francs.

Jean-Yves Mollier’s strategy takes a leaf out of Balzac’s *Comédie Humaine*. Balzac introduced significant characters in his novels with a biographical sketch, whose main purpose was to identify how they got rich during the French Revolution, often by supplying essential goods to the French revolutionary armies. Similarly, Mollier gives us a biographical fiche à la balzacienne of France’s leading nineteenth-century publishers. One important feature of Mollier’s publisher-biographies is to detail where successful entrepreneurs invested their profits. The money went into banking, railways in France and elsewhere in Europe, and sometimes real estate. Michel Lévy preferred railways to property, but Louis Hachette, one of the richest men of his time, was the opposite. The Garnier family owned at least forty Parisian apartment blocks in the Belle Époque, mainly in the area of the Boulevard Montparnasse and the Avenue du Maine. Calmann Lévy moved his money into Rio Tinto, telephones and public utilities. At the beginning of the twentieth century, when his widow died, publishing only accounted for 20 per cent of the value of the total estate. What Mollier shows us here, from his examination of wills and inheritances, is a publishing elite closely connected with the world of industry and finance. Publishing was thus an integral part of the advance of French capitalism in general.

What were the ingredients of their success, according to Jean-Yves Mollier? Many started as specialists in a niche market. The Lévy brothers began as publishers of play scripts, vaudevilles, and opera *libretti*, the Garnier family made their first fortune selling erotic and obscene literature, while Hachette cornered the emerging market in school texts after the

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10 Ibid., 357.

11 Ibid., 243.
Guizot Law on primary education in 1833. They needed support networks, which were Jewish in the case of the Lévys, and Orléanist in the cases of both Lévy and Hachette, although it was unwise in nineteenth-century France to advertise strict political allegiances – regimes changed often and there was no profit in being the enemy of the next government. In addition, publishers needed government connections – Louis Hachette cultivated his political connections both under the Bourbon Restoration and the July Monarchy. This *habitus* of subservience to authority, however, was the French book trade’s fatal flaw. When the Nazis occupied France, the book trade was content to purge its catalogs and implement the “Aryanization” of the industry.\(^\text{12}\)

Publishers had to adapt or survive, and Mollier’s history comprises declining or extinct species as well as spectacular successes. Gervais Charpentier, for instance, who initiated a revolution with his small-format books in the 1830s, did not adapt to changing market conditions later in the century. Nor did Calmann-Lévy, in the sense that the company did not embrace modernism and eventually relied too much on reprints rather than recruiting a new cohort of authors.\(^\text{13}\) Hachette on the other hand secured a monopoly on railway bookstalls, and bought the *Messageries* in 1897, in a coup of vertical concentration, which made the company a huge distribution agent for the press.

The authors were the ones who suffered from the supremacy of the publishing entrepreneur. Royalties were not high and a substantial proportion of the print run could be royalty-exempt. It was normal for publishers to charge interest on authors’ advances. Mollier’s dissection of Émile Zola’s early contracts with Lacroix and Georges Charpentier shows that the author made huge sacrifices of his rights and income simply in order to get into print. Zola ended up heavily in debt until the commercial success of *L’Assommoir*


\(^{13}\) Mollier, *L’Argent et les Lettres*, 243.
enabled him to be more demanding. In the later years of the century, the crisis of the book trade was not an environment conducive to improving authors’ incomes. They were sometimes the victims of tyrannical cost-cutting publishers.

Jean-Yves Mollier is fond of attributing a “Schumpeterian temperament” to France’s dynamic publishers. What does he mean by this allusion to Joseph Schumpeter, the Austrian-born economist who wrote on capitalism, imperialism, and the concept of entrepreneurship? Schumpeter attributed an important role to innovative and thrusting entrepreneurs, who implemented what he called “creative destruction” in establishing new practices and eliminating old techniques. No doubt this applies to the late-eighteenth-century media baron Charles Panckoucke.

In his analysis of imperialism, Schumpeter also underlined the feudal survivals in bourgeois imperialist culture, arguing that it inherited the atavistic aggression of medieval warlords. I am not sure whether Mollier intended to characterize nineteenth-century French publishers as violent feudal warriors, but the analogy draws attention to a few backward-looking features of nineteenth-century capitalist publishing. The publishers were, like the feudal nobility, attached to the notion of the lineage. They operated as family firms, self-financing their expansion as far as possible. Hachette did not become a public company until 1919. On occasions they expressed timidity rather than aggression, bowing to political authority. As Hachette’s trajectory confirms, they fiercely protected their monopolies against open competition. As Christine Haynes demonstrates, there was a continual tension between new forms of economical liberalism and more traditional, corporate mentalities. The liberal entrepreneurialism of Mollier’s nineteenth-century publishers had its limits.

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16 Haynes, Lost Illusions, e.g. chapter 2.
Mollier has achieved more than anyone in outlining the innovations of the industry in the nineteenth century, identifying its most successful exponents, and demonstrating their significant role in French capitalist development. Today, he feels compelled to ask, has the role of the publisher come to an end? Has the inventive line of innovators like Hachette, Larousse, and the Garniers fulfilled its historical destiny, giving way to a new economic model in which their species will be obsolete? The question remains open.

**Mass literary culture**

At the end of the nineteenth century, France achieved universal literacy, and the impact of the Ferry Laws was delivering state primary education for all, on a free and compulsory basis. An integrated domestic market was further consolidated by the gradual extension of the railway network under the Third Republic. France now had a more homogeneous national reading public, and it was being supplied with cheap fiction on a massive scale. Whereas in the eighteenth century the only forms of literature that reached everybody were catechisms and prayer books, now every French reader consumed *The Three Musketeers*, *Les Misérables*, and Pierre Loti’s *Pêcheur d’Islande* (An Iceland Fisherman).¹⁷

Jean-Yves Mollier treated the advent of mass literary culture in his book on *Le Camelot et la Rue*, focusing on the place of ephemeral literature in Parisian street culture.¹⁸ Street-sellers were key figures, Mollier argues, in the dissemination of print culture in the modern city, and they contributed to the formation of a mass culture of print. They were most active in times of political crisis, such as the Boulanger Affair, the Panama Scandal, and the Dreyfus Affair (1880s and 1890s). The street vendors sold newspapers, pamphlets, and song sheets, they put up posters for politicians who paid them to do so, and pulled down the

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posters of opposition politicians who did not. In the late 1890s, they flooded Paris with anti-Dreyfusard and anti-Zola literature, fueling the anti-Semitism, xenophobia, and jingoism of the period. Zola’s famous open letter *J’Accuse* sold 300,000 copies of *L’Aurore* (the Paris daily in which it appeared) on the street; but the anti-Zola *Réponse de tous les français à Zola* sold 400,000. This littérature du trottoir increased exponentially after the 1881 Law relaxed government control of the press. It played a significant part in the mass consumption of print, and at the same time in its politicization. Mollier shows us how publishing history can illuminate broader issues of political history. Having a clearer picture of the literature produced and sold during the Dreyfus Affair directly assists our understanding of its impact and its persistence.

Mollier has often made the claim that the consumer society did not wait until the years after the Second World War to arrive in France – it was already evident, in literary terms, in Paris in the 1880s. He is keen to argue for the precocious development of a mass literary culture in France, in comparison to Britain, and perhaps an element of Gallic pride adds spice to his argument. As I have already mentioned, precedents for the livre de poche can be found from 1838 onwards, at a time when the British market was still wedded to the archaic three-decker novel format. Mass literary culture brought its own problems. Standardization produced a backlash, expressed by the emergence of literary avant-gardes and small-circulation literary reviews. But that is another story.

**The educational book market**

A third direction in which Jean-Yves Mollier has extended the legacy of Lucien Febvre is in his study of the expanding educational book market of the nineteenth century. In 1833, the Guizot Law decreed the creation of a primary school in every commune of France, although

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19 Ibid., 200–01.

it took decades for this to be fully realized. The educational laws of Jules Ferry in the 1880s finally made primary education universal and free of charge. Hachette made his fortune by exploiting the opportunities created by school expansion.

Hachette concentrated first on primary school texts, like Madame de Saint-Ouen’s *Petite Histoire de France*, which I identified in a previous work as a bestseller at mid-century.\(^{21}\) Under the July Monarchy, the government commissioned more alphabets and manuals from him. In the 1840s, Hachette moved into secondary education textbooks and dictionaries before expanding into general trade literature. The fortunes of the Hachette company had a solid base in scholarly publications.

Whereas Hachette had thrived on the patronage of politicians like Guizot, other educational publishers were inspired by strong and even crusading motives. Pierre Larousse, for example, was a committed republican, a supporter of the Paris Commune, and a freethinker who lived unmarried with his partner until approaching death persuaded him to go through a civil ceremony with her. Not surprisingly, his *Grand Dictionnaire Universel* (15 volumes, 524 installments) was put on the Papal Index in 1873.

Larousse was dedicated to providing textbooks and knowledge for all. Unlike Hachette, who was good at “managing upwards” – in other words gathering political support – Larousse relied on close contact with schoolteachers themselves.\(^{22}\) His *Nouveau Dictionnaire de la langue française*, published in in-32o in 1856, was an unprecedented attempt to produce a major reference work in small format. It sold 50,000 copies per year and made Larousse’s fortune. Larousse was a driven man, a control freak with a lifetime project, which became an obsession. He worked fifteen hours a day on the *Grand Dictionnaire Universel*.

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\(^{22}\) Mollier & Dubot, *Histoire de la librairie Larousse*. 
Universel and it ruined his health. He was never one of the richest publishers, but he was a man with a pedagogical mission.

Conclusions

Jean-Yves Mollier’s history reveals La Belle Epoque as the heyday of family publishing firms. Paper was cheaper, primary education was expanding, the recruitment of female labor was putting downward pressure on wages and, until the First World War, there was no income tax in France. Within this very favorable context, Mollier has detailed for us the internecine struggles between publishers to capture profitable authors, their price wars to eliminate competitors and eventually, the saturation of the market. The family firm remained the dominant model. Jean-Yves Mollier has followed the example of Lucien Febvre, but in doing so he has made the nineteenth century his own and described the emergence of the publisher as a specialized professional. Through a careful excavation of wills, inheritances, authors’ contracts, and company archives, he has outlined the publishers’ diverse investment portfolios and placed them at the forefront of French capitalist modernity.

There are, to conclude, a few limitations to this approach. We learn little from it about what happened to bestselling books after they left the booksellers’ shelves. What did readers make of them? In the approach to the history of the book adopted by Lucien Febvre, and by Jean-Yves Mollier, the history of reading is treated only tangentially. There is perhaps one exception to this criticism. In his book on the Abbé Bethléem, Mollier has finally discovered one aspect of reading history. 23 In his periodicals Romans à lire et à proscire and Revue des lectures, the abbé doggedly and for thirty years pursued a one-man crusade against mauvais livres, warning librarians and teachers against all forms of modernity in print. He was committed to defending traditional Catholic values against what he saw as the Jewish-

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Protestant-pornographic conspiracy, meaning not just Voltaire and Rousseau, but also Naturalism (Zola), homosexuality (Gide), Bolshevism and the Americanization of children’s reading (Le Journal de Mickey). Bethléem was not merely an isolated eccentric; Mollier is at pains to demonstrate that he was always supported by the Catholic episcopate and the Papacy itself. His book thus grows from an individual biography into an essay on Catholic censorship more generally. This is one way to attack the history of reading: by studying the normative sources in which authorities and individuals prescribed what the public ought to be reading. I see this as a new departure for Jean-Yves Mollier.

Apart from its neglect of the history of reading, the Lucien Febvre approach carries with it some other limitations. L’Apparition du livre took its place within Albin Michel’s series entitled “L’évolution de l’humanité,” and Febvre had previously worked on a volume on “La Civilisation de l’écrit” for the Encyclopédie française. These loaded titles now recall an outdated anthropology, which used to divide human societies into those which knew writing and those which did not. Societies with writing were implicitly considered civilized, modernizing, and rational, whereas those immersed in oral culture were correspondingly primitive, backward, and superstitious. Here I am simplifying a western-centric view of the history of writing, which once prevailed but from which some exponents like Jack Goody have recently tried to distance themselves. Cultural historians today would not accept such a stark dichotomy between oral and written societies. They know that both have been deeply imbricated with each other.

These remarks, however, refer to Febvre, not to Jean-Yves Mollier. But the two join company in privileging the world of print. In his alternative history of French publishing, one of Mollier’s first references is to Lucien Febvre, and he inherits the implications of Febvre’s approach. Mollier starts his story at the printing revolution (a concept which he accepts

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without acknowledging recent challenges to the Eisenstein thesis from Adrian Johns among others). Furthermore, he underestimates the importance of manuscript culture which, I would suggest, did not simply “survive” the invention of print, but had an important role to play alongside it. Manuscript culture did not “take refuge in private correspondence,” at least not until our own time. In Mollier’s nineteenth century, writing was vital as a tool of education, a means of communication and an instrument of government. The history of *La Civilisation écrite* will be impoverished if it is confined to a history of print culture.

My brief reservations take nothing away from Jean-Yves Mollier’s achievements. On the emergence of the publisher, the development of the market in mass fiction, the expansion of educational publishing in the nineteenth century, Jean-Yves Mollier has made a colossal personal contribution, which has defined the field. Long may he continue to do so!

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