



AN EMPIRE of PRINT

THE NEW YORK PUBLISHING TRADE
IN THE EARLY
AMERICAN REPUBLIC

STEVEN CARL SMITH

Steven Carl Smith. *An Empire of Print: The New York Publishing Trade in the Early American Republic*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2017. xvi, 244p. ISBN 9780271078519. US\$ 99.95 (hardcover).

It has been roughly 35 years since Benedict Anderson posited a connection between “print culture” and the “imagined community” of American nationhood. In the meantime, this relationship between things material (print) and things imagined (nation) has, somewhat paradoxically, become both a widely-held assumption and an incredibly difficult connection to measure and prove. How do we know “nation” when we can’t see it, except for what we can see of its smaller, material parts? Landmark scholarly works on print culture in the early Republic such as Michael Warner’s *Letters of the Republic* (1990) and Trish Loughran’s *Republic in Print* (2007) have made considerable waves in the discipline with their varying accounts not only of *how*, but also *when* print created and shaped a national community. In the Warner paradigm, the moment in question is pre-1800. In the Loughran paradigm, the measurable moment does not occur until after 1830.



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Steven Carl Smith's new book, *An Empire of Print*, gives a compelling and meticulously-documented account of an evolving "national" print culture existing prior to 1830. Extensively researched, each chapter offers a case study of select printers, booksellers, and publishers and uncovers their efforts to develop business plans and strategies designed to reach larger, national markets. The book's detailed account of these activities outlines the nuanced and incremental emergence of the New York publishing trade and its significant interstate and interregional scope, which Smith successfully shows preceded, even as it laid the groundwork for, the industrialization and proliferation of print in the 1830s.

By focusing primarily on records tied to the business of print, Smith's book provides a much-needed economic dimension to print histories of early American nationhood. He makes it clear that the business of nation-building in print was exactly that - a business tied to material and marketplace demands - even as it was simultaneously engaged in creating imagined value. Smith's timeline therefore traces a major shift in the print industry's core business model, from that of an industry centered on local print shops and booksellers to an industry driven by a "publishing" ethos, which was intrinsically more oriented toward public demand at a geographically-expansive scale. This history of the emergence of the publishing industry suggests that, for those who were positioned to influence the nation's early print culture, national ambitions were also business ambitions, blurring the line between nationalism, economic motivation, and considerations of production and distribution.

And yet, one is left wondering whether Smith's focus on quantifying and mapping the material contours of nationhood unnecessarily limits the implications and scope of his impressive findings. While Smith's numbers and documentation are convincing, they ironically also heighten the sense that there will always be an unavoidable division between "nation" defined politically and "nation" defined geographically or print-materially. Such distinctions fall into the cracks between chapters. For example, in his penultimate chapter on the publisher Evert Duyckinck, Smith defines the publisher's fully-realized national ambitions almost exclusively in terms of geographic distribution and networks of economic relationships (such as selling books on commission), marking a shift or slippage of terms away from the more "nationalist" or politically-driven national "ambitions" of figures in earlier chapters. Though successful, Smith's reorientation of the timeline seems secondary to what he has revealed about this early publishing industry, which he shows was not driven by mechanization, but rather by the economic logic of profit-driven business models designed to



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facilitate and amplify mediated political and social experiences. In our present age of “national belonging,” shaped as it is by social media, “fake news,” and a modernity in which shared desires and values are exponentially tied to mediated and monetized social experiences, Smith’s book on the economic foundations of an early national media culture is especially timely.

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