Introducing Early Editions: Conversations with Emerging Researchers

In the absence of in-person conferences and networking opportunities due to COVID-19, SHARP News is pleased to present a new feature, Early Editions: Conversations with Emerging Researchers. Early Editions pairs an emerging researcher with an established SHARPist with similar interests and flips the script: through informal dialogue, the established scholar introduces the work and interests of the early-career researcher to the broader SHARP community.

Our first conversation is between Joe Saunders, PhD student at the University of York, and Ian Gadd, Professor in English Literature at Bath Spa University. Joe has just completed a master’s at the University of Glasgow. A former president of SHARP, Ian has taught courses on the Stationers’ Company at Rare Book School and the Folger Shakespeare Library. He is editor of a volume of the History of Oxford University Press, and general editor of The Cambridge Works of Jonathan Swift. He and Giles Bergel are co-editors of Stationers’ Register Online: http://stationersregister.online/

Joe: I completed my master’s degree at the University of Glasgow on the history of the Stationers’ Company, looking at their wills in the 1620s and 30s—essentially a social history of the Company through the Prerogative Court of Canterbury wills. I had a sample of 59 wills to look at networks, relationships, or trade links. In the PhD, I’m looking to expand that into a wider social history of the Stationers’ Company for the hundred years between its incorporation and the Great Fire.

Ian: One of the reasons I’m so pleased to talk to you is because I also did my PhD on the Stationers’ Company. How did you come about your intellectual journey?

Joe: I stumbled across book history in undergrad with a course by Professor Thomas Monk at Glasgow. I wrote my undergraduate dissertation on Nehemiah Wallington, the London woodturner, who during the 1630s and 40s collected a lot of print and kept diaries of what he collected. He often quotes from such-and-such devotional text, and I started looking at what he’d written and comparing them to the originals. He revisited these notebooks over time, so they’re not a linear diary—he writes in different notebooks depending on how his mood took him, so you often get entries from the 1620s right next to things from the 1640s. You start seeing the copies of these texts change. You look at one text from 1614 and another from
1642, and there’s a completely different set of people on the title page. It’s the same book, but it’s being printed by different people in different places. I’d never intended to do a master’s at all, but this idea grabbed me. It’s funny, I probably had more fun in those few months looking through different versions of early printed books than I did in the prior years of my undergrad.

Ian: There’s always one or two transformative courses in our university studies that do something intellectually revelatory. You’ve talked about looking through the editions, and that seems quite an affecting moment. I’d be interested how that was also critical in changing your intellectual perspective?

Joe: I took every single early modern course I could as an undergraduate. But the idea of looking at the world through books is something that I’d never really considered before. We see different fields of study—the history of emotions for example—and it’s not until someone shines a light and says, “this is an intellectual pathway that you can take through history” that you realize you can look at things from that perspective. For me, the idea that I could take something that I loved in my everyday life, but then study history—something just clicked.

Funnily enough, the first encounter that really got me excited was with Edward Arber’s A Transcript of the Registers of the Stationers’ Company, 1553-1640 A.D. (1875-1894). Arber was one of the first people to look at the Stationers’ Company from a semi-historical perspective, transcribing the registers of all the copies of texts and the names of the people who owned them or had the right to publish them. I think I picked up the first volume and
spent an afternoon just trawling through it: you’ve got the old book with the musty smell, and at the front you can see all of the universities and individuals who subscribed, including the University of Glasgow, where I was.

Ian: You’re right about Arber—just reading the prefaces is extraordinary. He remediates the manuscripts into print form, and remains a standard reference tool to this day, even though the first volume was published in 1875. Whereas most other historical or literary works have been re-edited or reworked, Arber is sitting there on the shelves, still being the first point of contact for people like yourself.

Joe: You’ve got a hand in this—you’re one of the guiding lights behind the Stationers’ Register Online (SRO), which is taking the records into the modern era. My first port of call now is usually the SRO, and as a historical tool it’s been massively useful for me, so thank you.

Ian: That’s good to hear! Arber’s Transcript as a tool is as good as it is frustrating, because you’re essentially looking at a list of records for which the index is not great. SRO, though, was a fiendishly complex project in its own right.

Joe: SRO is a great elevation of the past, but using new methods. While I had my first encounter of Arber in the university library, there’ll now be students whose first encounter with Arber will be through your database.

Ian: That’s true, so there’s a greater responsibility for us to make sure those students or first users understand what they’re looking at. Arber has the advantage of being totemic but also quite opaque, which at least makes the users feel that this is something slightly odd that they’ve got to try and figure out.

Ian: Who would you like to read and learn from your work?

Joe: The Stationers’ Company is obviously interesting to people working on scholarship of early modern print books. But the scholarship I see myself doing is much more
sociohistorical, looking at the lives of people, so we can strip away the print trade element and look at these people as tradesmen, craftsmen, but also as church wardens, fathers, brothers, mothers, daughters. By studying this community, we actually learn a lot about early modern trade, family, community, credit networks, social capital, and culture, and that’s of interest to people working on all sorts of guilds, trade networks, and early modern England—hopefully early modern Europe. Anything I can contribute to the understanding of literature is, for me, secondary, and hopefully that can then be pulled out by people in a more specific and meaningful way.

Ian: Yes, in the Anglo-American tradition, the origins of the history of the book lie primarily in English literature and literary studies. Arber was a professor English literature, as were most of the pioneers who called themselves “bibliographers.” The study of printers and publishers was seen as secondary to literary analysis: you were investigating who printed Shakespeare's first folio only because it was Shakespeare. That’s something that has created unfortunate consequences for certain aspects of the field: I mean, great if you’re interested in Shakespeare, but if you wanted to know how popular printing operated, for example, you had to wait quite a long time for scholars to get interested.

But there’s still areas where historians have not ventured into the study of the book trade, and I think the work you’re doing and will do is overdue. It’ll make a contribution to that particular kind of conversation that has not been had as much as it should have done with the exceptions of the Robert Darntons and the James Ravens and the Leslie Howsams. Who are a couple of key scholars for you, and how have they helped shape your approach to your subject?

Joe: One of the big people has been Maureen Bell, especially her work on women, for example, “Women and the Production of Texts: The Impact of the History of the Book” in The Book Trade in Early Modern England, ed. J. Hinks and V. Gardner (2014), pp.107-131. Also, Helen Smith’s book Grossly Material Things: Women and Book Production in Early Modern England (2012) was for me really one of the big eye openers during my master’s, and I’m lucky enough now to work with her on the PhD.
I’ve realized that two of the biggest influences have been people that work on women’s book history, and that’s interesting: firstly, their work is just interesting in itself, but secondly, it’s taken these historians looking at women, trying to piece together the role of women to make us all realize that there’s all sorts of people working in the book trade that need piecing back together again. You can’t find women in necessarily the same way as you would do John Field or William Norton, who have court records and registers. You have to do a lot more digging, and I’d be interested to look at apprentices and people working in and around the book trade—people that don’t appear in the registers.

Ian: Those stories have been overlooked, oddly enough, because they are often occluded by the primacy of the book. That’s something I try to address in my own research. If you end up just looking at the imprints, for example, you get one view of these individuals: it doesn’t tell you everything and can sometimes misrepresent reality. You overlook people who may have been fantastically important in the trade but who just don’t appear on imprints—this includes women, who routinely wouldn’t appear unless they were widows. It is crucial to link together individuals who enabled publications, ventures, or businesses to flourish in ways that aren’t visible. There is something there about the way that you’re trying to piece together stories about these individuals that isn’t focused on the individual per se but rather how that individual fitted into a larger network of friends, family, business colleagues, neighbors, and fellow members of the Company—I think that’s really important.

The field of the Stationers’ Company sometimes goes decades without moving that far forward, but where do you see the future in a decade or so? How do you think interest in the Company might look?

Joe: ... From a technical point of view, I suppose more digital ways of looking at things. We have the Adam Matthews resource that’s come through, also the beta version of the Stationers’ Register Online, we potentially have work on the British Book Trade Index and on the London Book Trades database at some point in the future, so there’s lots of potential in the pipeline. I don’t know if you’ve seen the Six Degrees of Francis Bacon project, but I’d love to do something like that with the book trade—use interactive tools to conceptualize some of these links and networks. I think the more people being turned towards book history and of
early modern England in particular will almost by accident bring new ideas and fresh insights as well as maybe some of these new technologies.

Ian: I think you’re right. There are opportunities afforded now by new resources and new support from the Stationers’ Company which make it easier for scholars to engage with the records and, hopefully, contextualize them or approach them in a more informed way than before. There are new tools—particularly once we have more biographical data out there—that, for example, would enable us to create visualizations that would make us think about the book trade in ways we’ve not managed to do yet. Clearly, there’s an exciting future ahead for the study of the early modern English book trade, and I wish you all the best with your PhD research! Thank you for sharing your thoughts.

Joe: And thank you.