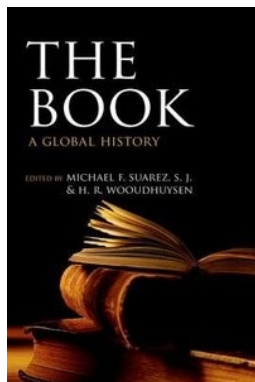


A Not So Global History of the Book

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Michael F. Suarez S. J. & H. R. Woudhuysen, eds. *The Book: A Global History*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, 748 pp. ISBN 978-0199679416

What is a book? Michael F. Suarez S.J. and H.R. Woudhuysen, the editors of *The Book: A Global History*, explain that “book” is a convenient term for any recorded text: the word for book is traceable to “bark”, and originally could signify the surface on which a text was written, and hence all recorded texts (xi-xii). Therefore, a book is a space of storage: it stores words, numbers, images. It materializes ideas, it renders tangible thoughts that otherwise would rely only on the person who conceived them. However, Suarez and Woudhuysen consider that “the ‘book label’ is an unfortunate one. Even when perceived as an archetypal part of a larger whole, the Western codex, much less the printed book, is not really an adequate emblem of many manifestations of text” (xii).

Is the book global? The immediate answer is “yes”. All civilizations, present and past, existing and lost, that started recording text, letters, numbers and pictures on any surface had produced books, in one way or another: engraved or painted on stone, written with all kinds of tinted greasy liquids in codices, leprellos, scrolls, tablets, loose sheets of paper, animal (and human) skin, leaves of trees and bushes and wood blades. But today the dominant form of the book is the codex, and the dominant content of the codex is text.

The Book: A Global History is a collection of essays destined to be the “vade mecum to the world of the book across myriad times and cultures” (xi). It is organized in two parts. The first, “Thematic Studies”, is divided into 21 essays occupying 284 pages. The second is devoted to the “Regional and

National Histories of the Book”, its 429 pages allocated to 30 essays. An index on people, companies and titles of works occupies 31 pages. There is not a general bibliography: bibliographies are annexed to the essays they refer to.

This book is an abridged version of the two-volume, 1408 pages, 250 Euros *The Oxford Companion to the Book* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). The original two-volume work is organized into three parts. The first part is composed of a series of introductory essays. Nineteen of the essays provide a broad account of subjects related directly or more distantly with the book, ranging from writing systems, the ancient and the medieval book, to central aspects of book production, theories of text, editorial theory and textual criticism, the economics of print, and the sacred book. These are complemented by 29 surveys of the history of the book around the world. The third part of the Companion comprises an A-Z section of over 5,000 entries on many aspects of the subject, ranging from brief definitions and biographical entries to more extensive analyses, covering publishers, book-sellers, printers, binders, editors, illustrators, engravers, scholars, collectors, libraries, prizes, types of books.

The present shorter version lacks the A-Z section that singularizes the Oxford companions. Nonetheless, it comprises three new essays, and the essay on the electronic book has been extensively revised (xii). Therefore, the present volume only has the first two parts in common with the companion: “Thematic Studies” and the national surveys.

Naturally, the title was changed. This is no longer a companion, but it keeps an encyclopedic inclination by becoming a global history. The “global” of the title has a double meaning. It is global because the work aims to cover every aspect of the object “book”. The second meaning of global is the coverage of the whole world.

The “Thematic Studies” section deals with the history of the book (the ancient book, the book in Byzantium, the European medieval book), aspects of its materiality (paper, the technologies of print, bookbinding, manuscripts after printing, illustration, the electronic book), of its economy (the economics of print, intellectual property and copyright), of its politics (missionary printing, censorship) and of its semiotics (writing systems, the sacred book, the transmission of Jewish knowledge, theories of text, editorial theory and textual criticism). It gives a comprehensive overview of the main themes usually treated in approaches to book history.

Some of these essays give an encompassing panorama of their respective subjects: the writing systems comprise Chinese and Japanese writing, sacred books are those of Jews, Christians, Islamists, Hindus and Buddhists, ancient books include those from China and Mesoamerica. However, from the chapter on the book in Byzantium we turn permanently to the West: the history of paper is that of paper-making in Europe; the history of printing is only that of the Occidental invention of the press; missionaries are Christians, first

from Europe and later also from America; the book as symbol is the *Pentateuch* and the Christian Bible. The chapter on the history of illustration and its technologies refers briefly to woodblocks for printing with image and text in China and Egypt (232), as well as the non-Western bookbinding structures which are referred to in the corresponding chapter (247-248). Some essays are clear in their titles. Some essays disclose clearly their focus in their titles: they deal with the European medieval book, the European printing revolution, the transmission of Jewish knowledge through manuscripts and printed books. Other themes are exclusively or mainly Occidental, such as intellectual property and copyright or the theories of text, editorial theory and textual criticism. We finally arrive at Oxbridge: the essay on the economics of print focus chiefly on 19th-century Britain (154), as does the essay on censorship. Children's books are only the English ones, as is the case of printed ephemera.

Although limited to a Western or English point of view, the interest or quality of the essays are not hindered. They are generally stimulating, well informed and propose new paths of investigation both for the researcher and the learned curious reader. Unfortunately, the second section poses more serious problems. "Regional and National Histories of the Book" comprises essays on almost any place on Earth, from almost every European country (Britain, Ireland, France, the Low Countries, Germany, Switzerland, Italy, Greece, Austria, Hungary, Czech Republic and Slovakia, Poland, the Slavonic book in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus, China, Korea, Japan, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, America); to the joint treatment of regions or continents (the Iberian Peninsula, the Nordic Countries, the Baltic States, the Balkans, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Indian Subcontinent, Southeast Asia, Latin America, West Indies/Caribbean) to a nonexistent entity (the Muslim World).

It dedicates three chapters in 72 pages (287-319) to the printed book in Britain (that is, from c. 1475 to today), and just 20 (328-348) to the history of the book in France, starting in the 2nd Century AD. The same remark is applicable to the chapters on Germany (365-387) or Italy (420-440), just to name two cradles of the book and its major producers, both physically and spiritually, since the book's dawn in the case of Italy, and since the dawn of the book printed with movable types as is the case of Germany. America (i.e., the United States) is treated in 27 pages (682-709). It is true that it comprises only the last four centuries, but it is also true that the US is home to the biggest production of books in the world and to the two biggest revolutions in book distribution, Amazon and the concentration of publishers in gigantic conglomerates. Thereby, despite the apparent comprehensiveness of the coverage, it is difficult to call global such a way of presenting the history of the book in the World.

The Book: a Global History is actually a picture of the history of the book taken from England. According to the editors, Australia and New Zealand are still the antipodes (xi). Most contributors are European and American

specialists in literary studies or working in big national libraries, namely the British Library. Many are specialized in old books and literature. Therefore, it is only natural that the vision of the book they transmit is that of the codex with a literary content. And the farther away the countries, the languages, the regions, the cultures the more blurred the picture gets. It is undeniable that Anglophone scholarship has led the way in many key areas of book history. But in this truly globalized scholar world, with academics and specialists travelling worldwide both physically and virtually, and communicating in English, it would have been possible to find specialists on their own histories of the book in Korea, Japan or China. This would be a way of adding a local touch to the history of the book from a local point of view, and, probably, more in-depth knowledge and accuracy.

It is unavoidable to cast a veil of suspicion on the national and regional essays when we detect flaws in the essays on issues we master. Surely the lack of space fosters abridgments that hamper accuracy and necessary specifications. Let's take a look at some examples.

The way the authors handle the history of the book in Africa in general is questionable. The discussion of this subject is split into two chapters: "The History of the Book in Sub-Saharan Africa" (512-523) and "The History of the Book in The Muslim World" (524-552). This partition leads the authors to almost completely ignore the North of Africa. The Muslim book is in fact treated as a part of the Arabic book, and this is surely the justification for the insertion of an essay on a religious subject into the section on regional and national histories of the book, and not in the section of thematic studies, along with the chapter on Jewish knowledge or as an extension of the essay on the sacred books. In this Muslim World, Muslim countries in North Africa and the Near and Middle East are all taken as Arabic, as is the case of Turkey. Other Muslim countries are out of this Muslim book world: Indonesia is in the chapter "The History of the book in Southeast Asia (1): The Islands" and Pakistan is nowhere. And as to what concerns the Maghreb readers are told: "Other Arab countries have therefore become relatively more important, notably those of the Maghreb (with an important output in French as well as Arabic), Iraq until 1991, and most recently Saudi Arabia (551)". This error of considering the Maghreb as Arabic, and all Muslim peoples and cultures as Arabic too, is common but inadmissible.

A look at the analysis of the Lusophone world also brings discomfort. Portugal is discussed in the chapter on the Iberian Peninsula, an allotment of 13 pages (406-419) for a history that starts at the end of the 15th Century (it tells us that printing arrived in a non-existent country, Spain, in 1472, and in Portugal in 1487). Relevance is given to the Portuguese Jewish community and the first Hebrew incunabula printed in Faro in 1487 (409-410). A page and a century later, Portugal is annexed by Spain (411) and thus it remains because it simply disappears for the rest of the chapter, except for a brief reference in five lines to the Marquis of Pombal and the expulsion of the

Jesuits (414). The Spanish author of the essay patently had limited access to recent Portuguese studies on the history of the Portuguese book, and to studies on the recent history of the book in Portugal.

The history of the book in Brazil is handled much more carefully, although the entire Latin-American countries are squeezed into 14 pages (656-670), Incas and Aztecs comprised. Nevertheless, according to this essay, all missionaries in Latin America were Spaniards.

A fair account of the Portuguese contribution for spreading the printing press is given in the essay “The History of the Book in the Indian Subcontinent” (553-572); however, there is not even the faintest reference to Pakistan or Bangladesh. The chapter on missionary printing (107-115) is also fair about the role of the Portuguese in spreading print, in India as well as in Japan.

As for Sub-Saharan Africa, nine pages of text are not a suitable space to cover a continent which houses the Copts, all the political and literary movements in the Portuguese, French and English colonies that preceded the independence wars of the 20th century, and South Africa. Even so, Lusophone Africa is presented with an entire paragraph on page 522.

To be truly global, it would have been better to balance more evenly the space given to each country or region, and to appeal to local experts on their respective histories of the book. The added value of *The Book: a Global History* is the collection of the generally interesting and stimulating essays in the first part of the book. They are an up-to-date introduction to book history and may suggest new research paths.

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