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Blayney, Peter W. M. *The Stationers' Company and the Printers of London, 1501–1557*. 2 vols. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. 2 vols. xxxvi, 600; xii, 634 (“601–1238”) pp. £160/\$273, cloth (ISBN 978-1-1070-3501-0).

In March 1842, prompted by the suggestion that its archives might “contain a fund of Literary Information at once curious and interesting,” the governing body of the London Stationers’ Company considered commissioning a history of their organization. They resolved to appoint a committee:

for the purpose of inspecting the Books of this Company and report[ing] to a General Court their Opinion as to the propriety of publishing such Particulars of its Literary and other History as may be likely to prove interesting to the Reading Public and which may be found not injurious to the interests, or derogatory to the dignity of the Company.¹

[In early May](#), [Two months later](#) the committee reported that “ample materials exist for the compilation of a moderate sized Volume, describing the Constitution and History of the Company, which would possess much interest to the Members of the Company, and which might in some degree illustrate the history of Literature in this Country.” However, caution was to be exercised—“much discrimination and judgment will be required with reference to the interests of the Corporation in printing, what (when once given to the Public) can never be recalled”—and so the task was assigned to the company’s clerk, Charles Rivington. Rivington accepted but with some hesitation as “a Work of this description may be edited, with more advantage to the Public at large, by a Gentleman who makes the pursuit of Literature his Profession, than by any one else.”² Rivington never wrote a history of the company, and while several of his successors produced pamphlet-length accounts, it was not until 1960 that the company’s hopes for a “moderate sized” volume were realized with the publication of Cyprian Blagden’s *The Stationers’ Company: A History 1403–1959*.³ Since then a handful of other histories have appeared: Philip Unwin’s chatty memoir of the company’s post-1918 history; a collection of academic essays on the company edited by Robin Myers and Michael Harris; an illustrated

¹ Stationers’ Company, London, Court Book V, 475–76.

² *Ibid.*, 494–97.

³ Cyprian Blagden, *The Stationers’ Company: A History 1403–1959* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1960); it was reprinted, without its illustrations, by Stanford University Press in 1977.

history of the company between 1800 and 2000, edited by Myers; and a short account of the pre-1557 history written by Peter Blayney for the company's 600th anniversary of its foundation in 1403.⁴ The last—which was not made available for general sale—served as an appetizer for the publication a decade later of *The Stationers' Company and the Printers of London, 1501–1557*.⁵

Almost thirty years in the making, Blayney's *Stationers' Company* is a truly monumental work that in its contribution to our knowledge of the sixteenth-century English book trade will stand alongside Edward Arber's *Transcript of the Registers of the Company of Stationers 1554–1640 AD* (1875–94) and Pollard, Redgrave, and Pantzer's *Short-Title Catalogue of Books Printed in England, Scotland, & Ireland . . . 1475–1640* (1926; 1976–91).⁶ As with Arber's *Transcript* and [the STC](#), however, assessing the scope and significance of Blayney's history is no small task, and a reviewer's courage may well falter when faced with the opening line: “Of all negative book-reviews, the least justifiable are those that castigate books for not being entirely different books” (xv). Blayney is insistent that we begin with no “false expectations,” but what kind of expectations might a reader bring to a work about [on-a](#) period that has, truth be told, garnered relatively little interest among bibliographers and historians of the book in comparison to the decades that immediately precede and follow it? Moreover, while *The Stationers' Company* declares itself to be a “revisionist” (i) work in the full, iconoclastic sense—“What is needed is demolition and replacement”—what exactly is “the familiar edifice . . . so riddled with misunderstandings, oversights, errors, and fictions of various kinds” (xxi) that is in such urgent need of razing?

⁴ Philip Unwin, *The Stationers' Company 1918–1977: A Livery Company in the Modern World* (London: Ernest Benn Ltd, 1978); Robin Myers and Michael Harris, eds., *The Stationers' Company and the Book Trade 1550–1990* (Winchester: St. Paul's Bibliographies, 1997); Robin Myers, ed., *The Stationers' Company: A History of the Later Years 1800–2000* (Chichester: Phillimore & Co. Ltd, 2001); Peter W. M. Blayney, *The Stationers' Company before the Charter, 1403–1557* (London: Worshipful Company of Stationers and Newspaper Makers, 2003).

⁵ Copies can still be purchased directly from the company.

⁶ Blayney dates his preface as “2001–12” (xxii) but notes that the “roots of this book lie in a project begun in 1984.” I began corresponding with him about the Stationers' Company in 1996.

In reading Blayney, I am reminded of the preface to *Moll Flanders*, which declares it to be a work “chiefly recommended to those who know how to Read it.”⁷ Unlike Defoe, though, I use it without irony. Blayney is as gifted a writer as he is a scholar—*The Texts of King Lear and their Origins* is one of the most gripping works of non-fiction I have read—but *The Stationers’ Company* is not an easy work to grasp. It is complex, rich, mischievous, disconcerting, and at times frustrating. Its twelve hundred pages, spread across two hardback volumes, weigh in at over five pounds. It is no literary history: “[p]arts of this book may be of interest or use to scholars in other fields—perhaps even textual and literary studies . . . [a]ny such usefulness, however, is merely a by-product” (xvii). Its style is at times unapologetic: “I have sometimes been admonished that because everyone makes mistakes it is somehow neither sporting nor mannerly to draw attention to them” (xx). Its first chapter traces the first century and a half of the company’s history, but otherwise the focus is on a period of fifty-seven years, only four of which overlap with the company’s own surviving archive. It is self-evidently not what Charles Rivington or his colleagues had in mind in 1842, and modern readers too may find it intimidating and perhaps even a little peculiar. A few of the reviewers to date confess to a degree of bemusement.⁸ All of which would be unimportant were it not that I have yet to read an account of the work that adequately identifies what I believe to be its most significant findings. Like Arber’s *Transcript* and *the STC* before it, Blayney’s *Stationers’ Company* is idiosyncratic in its structure, style, and methodology, and I fear that, like those two works, it will be cited far more than it is ever properly read. Consequently, I offer this review essay not simply as an assessment of *The Stationers’ Company* but as a guide, a “Companion to Blayney” as it were, about why the book is the way it is—and why it matters.

“THE FAMILIAR EDIFICE . . . IS SO RIDDLED WITH MISUNDERSTANDINGS”

The Stationers’ Company is one of London’s several dozen “livery companies,” a term used to describe a large variety of trade and craft organizations, most of which date their origins to the

⁷ Daniel Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, ed. by Albert J. Rivero (New York; W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), 4.

⁸ Helen Smith sympathises with the “trembling and anxious reader” (*The Times Literary Supplement* 5828, 12 December 2014, 28), and Adam Smyth remarks that at times “[i]t is difficult to know how to respond” (*The London Review of Books* 37, 27 August 2015, 37–39). Other reviewers include David L. Gants in *The Library*, 7th ser., 15 (2014), 448–51; Carol M. Meale in *The Book Collector* (Winter 2014), 668–9; and William Proctor Williams in *Notes and Queries* 62 (2015), 140–2.

late medieval or early modern period. One became a freeman of a livery company—and thus, also a freeman or citizen of London—through the completion of an apprenticeship to an existing member, by virtue of having been born to a member (“patrimony”), or by payment of a fee (“redemption”); it was also possible to “translate” from one livery company to another.⁹ It is from the livery companies’ ranks that the Lord Mayor of London has been chosen almost every year since medieval times. (This is the lord mayor of Dick Whittington and William Walworth rather than the much more recently established london mayor of Boris Johnson and Sadiq Khan.) Economic and social historians describe livery companies as “guilds” (*pace* Blayney) and thus comparable with similar bodies found in cities across medieval and early modern Europe. Unlike most of their European cousins, however, London’s livery companies managed to survive political revolution, mass industrialization, reformist suspicion, and modern capitalism to become primarily philanthropic, non-profit entities, although a few still retain some formal jurisdiction over their specific craft or trade. There is, though, a rich irony that associations that were denounced as monopolies in the seventeenth century and condemned as “conspiracies against the public” by Adam Smith in the eighteenth find themselves now not only cheek-by-jowl with the financial industry in London’s so-called Square Mile but number many bankers and financiers among their members. The most recently established London livery company is the Worshipful Company of Tax Advisers.

The “Worshipful Company” of Stationers and Newspapers Makers, to adopt the formula that has been used as a formal designation of the livery companies since at least the late sixteenth century, is currently ranked 47th out of the 107 companies.¹⁰ For most of its history, this has placed the company in the second half of the civic pecking order. It is one of forty or so livery companies to maintain its own hall: it moved to its current location, just off Ludgate Hill and a stone’s throw from St Paul’s Cathedral, four hundred years ago, although the hall was rebuilt after the Great Fire and was substantially restored after bombing during World War II. The company can trace an institutional history back to 1403 when the city authorities formally

⁹ Blayney outlines the different methods at pp. 24–28.

¹⁰ Blayney declines to date the origins of the official practice but notes that the wording does not appear in the [Stationers](#) company’s 1557, 1559, or 1684 incorporations (1023 n.A). The earliest reference to the “Worshipful Company of the Stationers” I know of comes from John Stow’s *The Chronicles of England* (London, 1580), 5E6^v.

granted the two misteries of Textwriters (that is, scribes of non-legal manuscripts) and Limners (illuminators of manuscripts), and those “citizens of London, who use to bind and sell books” (5) the right to establish a single book-trade association. The word “Stationers” appears first in the title of this company in 1417, and from 1441 this became its sole name (4–10). In 1557 the company, numbering at least 133 freemen, was incorporated by Mary Tudor and her husband, Philip II of Spain, an act that was formally confirmed by Elizabeth II in 1559. Then as now, incorporation conferred a legal identity that enabled an association to own property, to sign contracts, and to appear in court. For the Stationers’ Company, incorporation also formally granted it national search rights along with a near-exclusive monopoly over printing: “no person . . . shall practise or exercise . . . the art or mistery of impressing or printing . . . unless the same person . . . is or shall be [a member of the Stationers’ Company] . . . or has licence for it . . . by letters patent [from the crown]” (1025).¹¹ The company was governed by a master and two wardens, chosen annually from a Court of Assistants who acted as the company’s executive. The company’s incorporated status endured until 1684, when all the London companies were issued with informations of *quo warranto* that in effect dissolved them as part of Charles II’s audacious attempt to gerrymander the national electorate. (The privileged rank of the companies, the so-called livery, had the right to vote for London MPs.) The Stationers’ Company was the first to seek a new incorporation, which further extended its powers, but this lasted only a few years: in 1688 James II revoked all the informations of *quo warranto*, and in 1690 a statute formally restored the *status quo ante bellum*.¹² The company continued to operate formally under the terms of the 1557 incorporation until the 1930s, when it merged with the recently established Newspaper Makers’ Company; a fresh charter, in its new name, was issued in 1937.¹³ The company last provided a lord mayor in 1999, and among its 900 or so current members are

¹¹ Blayney transcribes and translates the charter of incorporation at pp. 1009–26.

¹² Paul D. Halliday, *Dismembering the Body Politic: Partisan Politics in England’s Towns, 1650–1730* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Mark Knights, “A City Revolution: The Remodelling of the London Livery Companies in the 1680s,” *English Historical Review* 112 (1997): 1141–78; Cyprian Blagden, “Charter Trouble,” *Book Collector* 6 (1957): 369–77.

¹³ “Stationers’ And Newspaper Makers’ Company,” *The Times*, 14 April 1937, 11; Blagden, *Stationers’ Company*, 276–78; Michael Harris, “The Newspaper Makers and the Stationers,” in Meyers, *The Stationers’ Company*, 51–7.

Rupert Murdoch, Sir Christopher Meyer, William Hague, and the Prince of Wales. Peter Blayney became a freeman of the company in May 2015.¹⁴

The Stationers' Company has the distinction of having had more articles and books written about it and more published editions of its archives than any other London livery company. Indeed, there are few historical organizations in Britain or beyond about whose records, activities, members, and associated artifacts so much is known. To readers of *PBSA* this will seem heartening, and also entirely unsurprising. The Stationers' Company had particular responsibilities for the book trade and its related crafts, and it is to the company that we owe the origins of Anglo-American copyright. Books *are* different (“a book is not a tin of beans” as Allen Lane memorably observed), something that the company itself proclaimed as early as 1643: “Books (except the sacred Bible) are not of such generall use and necessity, as some staple Commodities are, which feed and cloath us.”¹⁵ Notwithstanding its mid-table city ranking, the Stationers' Company is historically one of England's most important cultural institutions. As Blagden remarked, “because they earned their living from books, [the Stationers] seem to us—and seemed even to some of themselves—so much more important than Fishmongers or Haberdashers.”¹⁶

The first scholar to assert the distinct significance of the Company was John Strype in *The Survey of London* (1720). Brief accounts of the livery companies had featured in the previous edition of 1633, and the relevant entry for the Stationers' Company was typical in its style and description:

The Company of the *Stationers*, of great antiquity, before the famous Art of *Printing* was invented or brought hither, as (for the most part) their then dwelling in *Pater-noster Row*, and the adjoining parts can testifie. Their Charter of incorporation was granted the fourth day of May, in the third and fourth yeeres of King *Philip* and Queene *Mary*.¹⁷

¹⁴ The Stationers' Company, “Freedom Ceremony—11 May 2015,” accessed 5 January 2017, <https://stationers.org/latest-news/1084-freedom-ceremony-11-may-2015.html>.

¹⁵ [Henry Parker], *To the High Court of Parliament: The Humble Remonstrance of the Company of Stationers* (London: [1643]), A3^r.

¹⁶ Cyprian Blagden, “The Stationers' Company in the Civil War Period,” *The Library*, 5th ser., 13 (1958): 1.

¹⁷ John Stow, *The Survey of London*, ed. Anthony Munday and Humphrey Dyson (London, 1633), 312^r.

In his revised edition, Strype substantially expanded the section devoted to the companies, keeping the original 1633 accounts only as the opening paragraph for each. Of all the companies, the Stationers' Company received the most extensive attention: almost five double-columned folio pages.¹⁸ In contrast, the Mercers' Company, ranked first among the city's companies and to which Caxton belonged, was given only three.¹⁹ Strype's account of the Stationers' Company is particularly impressive as he had no direct access to the company's records; for the most part, he interweaves indirect quotation from a range of primary sources, notably the Lansdowne papers (now at the British Library), to create a narrative about the Elizabethan book trade that still bears comparison with more recent studies.²⁰ There is relatively little company history, though; instead, the focus is primarily the development of English printing and publishing. A similar view of the company is presented in Joseph Ames's *Typographical Antiquities* (1749). The company features in passing in several of Ames's biographies of sixteenth-century printers and publishers, and receives a dedicated entry in the appended chronology of printing.²¹ The latter includes a translation of the 1557 charter of incorporation taken directly from a 1741 pamphlet published as part of an internal squabble within the Company about governance.²² Ames prefaces the charter's text with the observation, paraphrased from the 1633 *Survey of London*, that the Stationers "were of great antiquity, even before the art of PRINTING was invented," but he found the lack of documentation prior to 1557 perplexing: "yet hitherto I have not been able to find their privilege, or charter, though several of the old printers are said to be of the stationer's [*sic*] company, nor had any authority granted them with relation to printed books as a company."

¹⁸ John Strype, *A Survey of the Cities of London and Westminster*, vol. 2 (London, 1720), 221–25.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 173–76.

²⁰ The account ended with a summary of the Copyright Act of 1710.

²¹ Joseph Ames, *Typographical Antiquities* (London, 1749), 520–25.

²² *The Charter and Grants of the Company of Stationers of the City of London, Now in Force* (London, 1741). As Blayney notes (927), this seems to be the original source for the misdating of the company's incorporation to 1556 (based on a misinterpretation of the regnal year). With the notable exception of John Nichols and his grandson John Gough Nichols, the error persisted in accounts of the company—including, shamefully, Arber's *Transcript*—through to the twentieth century: 1556 was cited in souvenir histories of the company as late as the 1920s.

(Blayney quotes this passage [927] but appears unaware of Strype's 1720 account or its 1633 antecedent.)

We can see in Strype and Ames the origins of two kinds of scholarly interest in the Stationers' Company. The first is an historical approach that draws on archives beyond the company's own and, while it sometimes lapses into antiquarianism, usually attempts to place the company's activities in a broader economic, social, political, or cultural context. The 1633 and 1720 editions of the *Survey of London* present the company as one among many, and Strype, an ecclesiastical historian, based his account primarily on documentary sources rather than imprints. Other "historical" accounts of the Stationers' Company appeared in the nineteenth century,²³ and manifest themselves nowadays primarily in studies of Reformation England, copyright, and guilds.²⁴ The other approach is bibliographical, an interest in the company and its records that is primarily led by a desire to learn more about what its members printed, published, and sold. It began in earnest with Ames and was much enhanced by John Nichols, who not only published what seem to be the first extracts from the company's archive in 1797 but also was the first to identify 1403 as company's foundational date in an extended account in *Literary Anecdotes*.²⁵ The bibliographical approach to the company can be seen in various overlapping forms in Philip Luckombe's *History and Art of Printing* (1771), T. C. Hansard's *Typographia* (1825), and C. H. Timperley's *Dictionary of Printers and Printing* (1839), and reached an extraordinary apogee with Edward Arber's *Transcript* in the late nineteenth century.²⁶ [It has Similar efforts have](#) since

²³ See, for example: John Gough Nichols, "Notices of the Stationers' Company," *Transactions of the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society* 2 (1864): 37–61; Charles Welch, *A Brief History of the Worshipful Company of Stationers* (London, 1880); W. C. Hazlitt, "The Stationers," in *The Livery Companies of the City of London* (London, 1892), 624–41.

²⁴ See, for example, the work of David Loades, Diarmaid McCullough, William St Clair, H. Tomás Gómez-Arostegui, Ian Gadd, and Patrick Wallis.

²⁵ John Nichols, *Illustrations of Manners and Expences of Antient Times in England* (London, 1797), 221–28; John Nichols, *Literary Anecdotes*, vol. 3 (London, 1812–16), 545–607. He was also the first to locate a copy of the Company's charter on the Exchequer rolls—see Blayney, p. 1011.

²⁶ Philip Luckombe, *The History and Art of Printing* (London, 1771), 175–211; T. C. Hansard, *Typographia* (London, 1825), 237–83; C.H. Timperley, *A Dictionary of Printers and Printing* (London, 1839), 325–6 and *passim*; Edward Arber, ed., *A Transcript of the Registers of the Company of Stationers 1554–1640 AD*, 5 vols. (London & Birmingham: privately printed, 1875–94).

proliferated, providing us with editions of the Stationers' Register to 1710 and the Court Books to 1640, indexes of apprentices and freemen through to 1800, various archival transcriptions, calendars, and catalogues, the microfilming of nearly all the records in the 1950s and 1980s, and, most recently, the announcement of a new digitization project by Adam Matthew.²⁷

Literary scholars first discovered the Stationers' Company or, more accurately, the "Stationers' Register"—a series of volumes in which the company recorded publishing rights—in the late eighteenth century. Unlike Strype or Ames, they were given remarkably privileged access to the archive. William Herbert and Edmund Malone were both allowed to borrow specific volumes, while George Steevens and John Payne Collier both left their mark, quite literally, on the pages of the Register.²⁸ It was the activities of literary scholars rather than printing historians that prompted the company's discussion in 1842 about commissioning a history, and ever since Arber most scholars interested in the company (including both Blayney and myself) have had a background in literary criticism. Literary scholars, though, have remained resolutely focused on the Register itself, "a Collection of information of the highest possible value in reference to its period of the Literature of England," in Arber's words.²⁹ Extracts were published by the Shakespeare Society as early as 1848, few critical editions of Elizabethan and Jacobean drama omit mention of the Register, and Arber's *Transcript* remains one of the most consulted—if, frankly, least understood—reference works in early modern English literary studies.³⁰

The way that scholarly interest in the company has developed over the past three hundred years goes some way to explain the "familiar edifice" that Blayney mentions, but it has also created a perspective that isolates the company's development as an organization while

²⁷ The two approaches can even be seen in the proposed sub-class Library of Congress and Dewey classifications on Blayney's copyright page: Z329 (Bibliography, Library Science, Information Resources: Bookselling and Publishing: Commerce and Trade); and 381 (Social Sciences: Commerce, Communication, Transport: Internal commerce).

²⁸ Robin Myers, *The Stationers' Company Archive 1554–1984* (Winchester: St Paul's Bibliographies, 1990), xix, xx; Franklin Dickey, "The Old Man at Work: Forgeries in the Stationers' Registers," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 11 (1960): 39–47.

²⁹ Arber, *Transcript*, 1:30.

³⁰ John Payne Collier, *Extracts from the Registers of the Stationers' Company*, 2 vols. (London, 1848–49).

simultaneously magnifying the company's importance. It presupposes a unified and coherent organization of national, political, and cultural significance, occupationally and demographically homogeneous, whose sole business was the regulation of the book trade. This in turn has fostered a belief, often unvoiced, that the company was fundamentally different from other London livery companies. Yet the Stationers' Company was not the most important, the largest, the richest, or the most powerful livery company. It was not the only livery company the Crown listened to or acted upon, nor was the Crown the only authority the company deferred to. As London custom allowed any citizen freed by apprenticeship or patrimony to practice virtually any craft or trade regardless of the livery company to which they belonged, the company did not comprise, or indeed represent, the entirety of the London book trade, and its members and officers were not all members of the trade: Thomas Dockwray, who became the company's first Master in 1557, was an ecclesiastical lawyer. Crucially, its behavior was not just about books: as a London livery company, it oversaw training and the labor market, provided financial support and welfare, arbitrated disputes, and acted as an extension of the city's own administrative infrastructure. The history of the Stationers' Company is not the same as the history of the English book trade, English printing, English copyright, English censorship, nor the "History of the Book in England"; it impinges on all but cannot be subsumed entirely within any. This is not to deny the company's importance in the development of the English book trade: in fact, quite the reverse. One thing that was unusual, but never unique, in comparison with other London livery companies was the company's national reach. From the mid-sixteenth century to the end of the seventeenth century, practically every important printer or publisher in England was a member; even in the eighteenth century, many of the key figures of the trade were members. Although it was never a censoring body in the way that many scholars have presumed, it was regularly cited in secular and ecclesiastical proclamations, decrees, and statutes that sought to control the content of printed material. For over two centuries, it played a pivotal and at times paradoxical role in the emergence of statutory copyright. One cannot write a history of the English book trade after 1403 without mentioning the Stationers' Company—and one cannot hope to write a *good* history without a proper understanding of it.

Literary scholars and bibliographers have therefore long needed an accurate, authoritative account of the company, but too often their approach has been hidebound by their presumptions. Blayney might well dispute my grand narrative here: there is no excuse for bad scholarship, and

an error is an error. However my point is that many of the “misunderstandings, oversights, errors, and fictions” that he seeks to correct are the consequence of a prevailing attitude to the company rather than mere intellectual shoddiness or even a conspiracy against the truth. To take one minor but instructive example that Blayney cites in his preface (xxi): W. W. Greg’s description of the 1557 incorporation as “a master-stroke of Elizabethan politics” in his and Eleanore Boswell’s edition of the company’s first surviving Court Book.³¹ Of course, if there is one term that cannot be used to describe the actions of Elizabeth’s older sister, it is “Elizabethan,” and Blayney sees this as symptomatic of both a carelessness for the facts and an unwillingness to see the very particular contingencies that led to incorporation.³² But the elision also reveals a fundamental misapprehension about the company’s relationship with the Crown that is perhaps best reflected in a line by Cyprian Blagden in his discussion of the company’s reincorporation in 1684: “while the King was unlikely to lose any sleep because the Worshipful Company of Ironmongers were, for a month or two, unable to sue or be sued, he relied on the Stationers to keep printed attacks on his government within reasonable bounds.”³³ Assumptions about this kind of high-powered preferential treatment for the company were perhaps easier to maintain given that, only three years after Greg and Boswell’s edition, the company appointed the future Edward VIII as its master and that, in the same year as Blagden’s observation, it welcomed Prime Minister Harold Macmillan to its the 400th anniversary dinner, “not only as the principal guest but as a Stationer in his own right.”³⁴ Blayney argues that it is the scale of error that requires a razing of previous narratives; in suggesting that much of the scholarly edifice has been built on flawed presumptions and that a history of the company needs a return to first principles, I am quibbling with his diagnosis, not the proposed cure.

“WHAT IS NEEDED IS DEMOLITION AND REPLACEMENT”

³¹ W.W. Greg, and E. Boswell, eds., *Records of the Court of the Stationers’ Company 1576 to 1602 from Register B* (London: Bibliographical Society, 1930), lx.

³² Blayney makes the latter point in his penultimate chapter (914–15).

³³ Blagden, “Charter Trouble,” 374.

³⁴ Philip Unwin, *The Stationers’ Company 1918–1977: A Livery Company in the Modern World* (London: Ernest Benn Ltd, 1978), 37–39; “People & Things,” *The Sunday Times*, 12 May 1957, 7. Macmillan had been made an honorary liveryman six months earlier, while Chancellor of the Exchequer—“ ‘No Regret’ on Suez Move,” *The Times*, 7 November 1956, 6.

Cyprian Blagden was a publisher with Longmans, Green, who published nine articles on the Stationers' Company between the mid-1950s and his death in 1962. He had been selected by the company as the author of a monograph history to coincide with its 400th anniversary, but its reluctance to fund the venture meant he had to turn to the Leverhulme Foundation for support, and the volume did not appear until 1960.³⁵ Published not by the company or an academic press but by George Allen & Unwin, it received mixed reviews—A. E. Musson in *The Library* felt “it is not easy to read”—and its style and scholarship compares unfavorably with Blagden's articles.³⁶ It switches, often awkwardly, from broadbrush synthesis to detailed financial analysis, and its lack of footnotes and anecdotal structure are a rather unhappy concession to the non-specialist reader. It remains, though, the only book-length account of the company's full history.

It is also thanks to Blagden's *Stationers' Company* that we now have Blayney's *Stationers' Company*. In his history, Blagden explains that he was only able to give the company's first 150 years “a mere 20 pages because there is evidence for no more,” and it is his first chapter, or more particularly the twelve pages that focus on the period between 1357 and 1553, that prompted Blayney to write his own.³⁷ Blayney characterizes Blagden's account of the pre-1557 company as singularly egregious as “there is scarcely a paragraph free of factual errors, unfounded assumptions, or both” (xxi). It is worth quoting in full Blayney's next three sentences, which conclude his preface:

To be fair, those paragraphs are largely derivative, and most of their faults were inherited by Blagden from untrustworthy sources—but he also created new distortions by stretching other people's bad guesses beyond their original context. I have long considered the first half of Blagden's history to be seriously inadequate and misleading, and that belief is what

³⁵ Robin Myers, “From Past to Present,” in *The Stationers' Company: A History of the Later Years 1800–2000*, ed. Myers (London: The Worshipful Company of Stationers and Newspapers Makers, 2001), 192–93.

³⁶ *The Library*, 5th ser., 16 (1961): 151–53. It was also reviewed in *PBSA* 55 (1961): 247–48; *Book Collector* 11 (1962): 238–41; *The Times Literary Supplement*, 25 November 1960, 768; *American Historical Review* 66 (1961): 777–78. Most of the students who have taken my Stationers' Company course at Rare Book School over the past decade have agreed with Musson.

³⁷ Blagden, *Stationers' Company*, 9.

prompted me to write a corrective. This book can therefore be considered a replacement for those “mere 20 pages” (xxi–xxii).

One might feel that to respond to a single chapter in an out-of-print history of a minor livery company that was aimed at a non-specialist readership with a two-volume academic behemoth is overkill, and I imagine that Blagden, always much happier when discussing the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century company, would have been surprised to find himself singled out in a work that focuses on the period prior to 1557. Blagden is cited by name in the main text no fewer than twenty-five times, slightly more than Sir W. W. Greg, but not quite as frequently as Graham Pollard, both of whom wrote more extensively, and in more scholarly contexts, about the pre-1557 company. However, while it appears to be the scale of error that singles Blagden out for opprobrium, his account also exemplifies broader misapprehensions about the company: that there is little new to say about pre-incorporated company, that the incorporation marked a moment of natural maturity, and that the best way to understand the early history of the company is to look backwards from 1557—what Blayney elsewhere dismisses as “a tale of manifest destiny” (928). From this perspective Blagden appears to be the most convenient door to which Blayney can nail his *Ninety-five Theses*.

Nonetheless, Blayney’s case is compelling. Blagden along with the vast majority of literary, bibliographical, and historical scholars who find themselves listed in Blayney’s index have been fundamentally wrong about how the Stationers’ Company developed between 1501 and 1557. They have failed to understand the relationship between printing and the company, the company’s changing demographic, the book trade’s complex social and economic networks, the company’s position in London, the emergence of publishing rights, the impact of the Reformation, and the sheer unexpectedness of the company’s commercial coup in 1557. This collective failure of scholarship is why Blayney feels “rather less gratitude” to his predecessors, and why his “attitude towards [them] sometimes falls short of reverence” (xix, xxi). Blayney’s history cannot therefore be read as mere critique or as a counter-response to previous studies. Instead its aim is to construct, systematically and almost entirely from scratch, a comprehensive picture of the London book trade during those years.

I have already made frequent reference to Blayney’s preface, but it deserves further attention given its explicit purpose, “to explain both what [this book] is and what it is not” (xv). Blayney explains that the work’s “geographical and chronological limits are deliberately chosen” (xvii).

The focus on London makes sense to anyone knowledgeable about early English printing, or indeed to anyone aware of London's political, economic, ecclesiastical, social, and cultural preeminence in the period. The choice of the Stationers' *annus mirabilis* as the chronological terminus is similarly understandable. (Blayney actually takes the account up to the very day of the incorporation, 4 May 1557, and no further.)³⁸ While the first chapter (all sixty-seven pages of it) covers the period from the first sightings of the proto-company in 1357 through to 1500, Blayney stresses that "the particular story I have chosen begins with 1501 . . . the first year during which all books known to have been printed in England were printed in London" (xviii). Only later do we discover that 1501 was also most likely "the first year during which all books known to have been printed in London were printed by freemen of the Stationers' Company" (69), the printers in question being Richard Pynson and Wynkyn de Worde, who were probably freed in late 1500 when they both moved inside the city's limits. This may be seem a minor distinction, but given the importance of the changing proportion of printers who were members of the Stationers' Company to Blayney's central argument—hence why this is a history of "The Stationers' Company *and* the Printers of London"—it is odd not to mention it from the outset. Blayney also defends his decision to structure the work chronologically and, in each chapter, to foreground the lives of printers and publishers: "my main focus is on the book-trade professionals . . . [a]nd those Stationers, printers, binders and others lived their lives from year to year rather than topic by topic" (xviii), and "my priorities require me to introduce the characters before discussing the plot" (xix). These are noble reasons and, as Blayney notes, the biographical accounts along with the repeated "Printers and Stationers in the records" sections in each chapter will stand as the nearest that scholars have to a comprehensive and reliable biographical dictionary of the book trade for the period. (I wish, though, he had gone even further and supplied date-spans for these individuals, whether in the text or the index.)

The overall result is extraordinarily rich. The apparatus alone is formidable: a two-tier system of annotation in which numbered endnotes are used for citations (the vast majority from archival sources) and lettered footnotes to supply extra commentary. (The innovation does achieve a much less cluttered page, although the preferred format for referring to these notes in the index is ugly: anyone for xxxiinA?) The description of conventions is six pages long. All but one of the

³⁸ "I shall sometimes glance ahead to events later in Mary's reign or even beyond. But the terminal date of this study is 4 May 1557, and I shall usually try to observe it" (882–83).

dozen chapters are sub-divided into between eight and eighteen sections, most of which focus on the biographies of individual printers and publishers. Chapter 11, which brings the history to its climax, includes a forty-page enumeration of the 133 freemen, eighty-one apprentices, and twenty-four “brothers” known, or likely, to have belonged to the company at the moment of its incorporation (871–910).³⁹ There are eleven appendices (936–1071), reflecting the sheer diversity of Blayney’s methodological abilities: documentary transcription and editing (A and J); analytical, descriptive, and enumerative bibliography (B, C, and K); bureaucratic and legal history (D and J); biography (E and F); geography and cartography (G, H, and I).⁴⁰ Of these, the reconstructed maps of Fleet Street, St. Paul’s Churchyard, and Paternoster Row, and the transcription and translation of the Stationers’ 1557 charter of incorporation deserve their own separate notice and, indeed, publication. (I would, though, have welcomed appendices listing the known wardens of the Stationers’ Company prior to 1557 and a chronology of privileges.) The index of cited STC numbers runs to twenty-four double-columned pages (1139–62).

Nothing is beyond Blayney’s forensic scrutiny (whether sight-lines in St. Paul’s Churchyard (123, note C) or the risks of well-digging (1008, note B), and the range of scholarship is breathtaking. He has exhaustively trawled surviving legal, administrative, and financial records kept by the Crown, the Church, and the City (see the full list at 1092–1103) and examined effectively every book-trade will between 1500 and 1630 (221; 222, note A) in order to bring the intimacy, vigor, and interrelationships of Tudor London vividly to life. Hundreds of individuals’ lives are documented: their births and deaths, their spouses and children, their working lives and personal peccadillos, their finances and property holdings, their arguments and adventures, their wills and inventories. They range from the gloriously named book importer Evangelista Font to the Stationer-turned-martyr James Bainham to William Tylley, the only printer known to have featured in a Holbein painting (475, 311–12, 633–34). Women feature frequently, most notably Elizabeth Pickering Jackson Redman Cholmeley Cholmeley who, while not quite England’s first female printer, was very likely instrumental in the company’s attempts to seek incorporation (414–20, 514–15, 843, and *passim*), and Elizabeth Toy who was the only woman to attend the

³⁹ Blayney counts twenty-five brothers (910) but only twenty-four are listed in his table (909).

⁴⁰ Appendix K is sufficiently complicated to require its own internal set of endnotes.

Court of Assistants' annual dinners in 1558 and 1559 (898–99).⁴¹ Perhaps the most extraordinary of all the characters is John Rastell, a lawyer and printer who never belonged to any livery company and was closely associated with Thomas Cromwell. Rastell's extensive index entry includes "major failed schemes" as a sub-heading, and his litigiousness was matched it seems only by his propensity for being beaten up (294, note B).⁴² He deserves a *Wolf Hall* all to himself.

The sheer abundance of detail brings challenges. I suspect that there are few capable of following all the nuances of an account that is as accomplished in biographical reconstruction, bibliographical analysis, legal history, urban geography, and archival study. Such richness can be disorienting as well as daunting, and the weak-spirited reader may be tempted to skim detailed descriptions of type and initials or a discussion of misleading imprints and colophons that cites over 100 STC numbers in seven pages (683–89). Yet to do so is to risk missing the vitality of detail and the vital detail, both of which Blayney deploys often only with a casual flourish: the birthmark on the face of Richard Faques (73); the apparent cannibalism resorted to by John Rastell junior and his fellow sailors on a voyage to Newfoundland in 1535 (451–52); the lioness imported by Henry Pepwell ("probably not kept at the sign of the Trinity; bookshop cats are usually smaller" [129]); the markings of Cardinal Wolsey's horse (214); John Gough's religious sensibilities (292); contemporary attitudes to domestic violence (468); the vagaries of Tudor courtship (711–12); the possible reason why "most printers in England normally used calendar-year dating" in imprints (xxvii); printing house practices regarding signatures (260–61); the first printed use of commas (304–5); the likely source of the "gratuitous history lesson" included in the statute of 1534 (335–36); the practice of masking bearing type (624); that the near-total lack of duodecimo editions between 1540 and 1579 might have something to do with their association with imported Catholic primers (682). To give a more extended example, Blayney's groundbreaking attempt to quantify the printing output in England during the first half of the sixteenth century in order to challenge the widespread scholarly belief about the extent of book

⁴¹ Joan Warwyke of York was England's first female printer (197). It is a shame, though, that Blayney does not make explicit Pickering's claim to be the first female printer in London as he does in *The Stationers' Company before the Charter, 1403–1557* (39).

⁴² The frequency with which members of the book trade were either perpetrators, victims, or witnesses of assault in this period makes me wish that there had been a separate index heading for "violence."

importation is worthy of an article all by itself (96–106). There is an account of the technicalities of music printing (264–74), detailed analysis of every key statute and proclamation, and a whole chapter devoted to the bible editions of 1535–41. A practitioner of what he termed “digressive bibliography” in 1990, Blayney gloriously embodies the maxim, attributed to the Cambridge Professor of Anglo-Saxon, Bruce Dickins, “that nothing is irrelevant, if you know enough.”

Nonetheless, there are also passages that even to the keenest reader will seem *recherché*. Blayney is not the first to lament that “bibliography” no longer means what it used to, but apart from teeing up probably the funniest line in the whole work, such disciplinary angst seems out of place in a study that is so emphatically empirical (xv–xvii). (Moreover, on three subsequent occasions Blayney uses “bibliographical” and “bibliographically” in precisely—and helpfully—the sense that he feels has been vitiated: 336, note D; 381, note B; 485, note A.) A four-page exploration of the term “guild” in medieval and Tudor London (16–19) concludes that “our understanding of [the Stationers’ Company] will not be enhanced by calling it a guild,” but this is rather narrow pedantry for a work that twelve pages later defends its anachronistic use of “publisher” on the grounds that, “without a clear distinction between printing and publishing the early evolution of the book trade cannot be properly understood” (31): economic historians might well cite a similarly taxonomic defense when comparing craft and trade associations across city and national boundaries.⁴³ More defensible to me at least is Appendix D, which outlines the administrative and material process for granting privileges and patents in the Tudor period, although the level of knowledge on display probably surpasses that of even the most specialist archivists at the institution formerly known as the Public Record Office.

Blayney is a superb stylist: he writes with remarkable clarity, fluency, and syntactic balance. He is adept at the striking turn-of-phrase, whether it is Shakespearean paraphrase (e.g. “he was more sued against than suing” (56, note A); “[h]e was not only litigious in himself, but the cause that litigiousness was in other men” (139), or something more Wodehousian, “only the most optimistic of pessimists” (731); “somewhere between negligible and negative” (807). I do quibble though with his use of the conditional perfect to describe future events that did indeed happen (such as in xxvii, note A, or 932). His mode of analysis frequently adopts what classical rhetoricians would describe as *expeditio* or *apophasis*, that is, the systematic enumeration, and rejection, of multiple possibilities to reach a single conclusion: see for example his discussion of

⁴³ That said, I admire the mischief of this section’s title.

the Stationers' Company's livery (224–26) and John Day's printing activities in the 1550s (803–5). He can be very droll, whether discussing early modern alternatives to the anachronistic “publisher” (“English does not need the noun forthsetter” [31, note A]), observing dryly that Richard Pynson's “main qualifications” for being chosen by the Crown to print a set of ordinances in 1492, “were probably only that he was both a printer and alive” (54), or describing an attempt to use the surviving physical and archival evidence to reconstruct comparable figures for books printed in England and those imported from abroad as equivalent to, “comparing the weight of English apples with the price of imported oranges and the diameter of imported prunes” (98), noting that “[b]ooks are not customarily either bound or sold by the ounce” (154), and that “to say a man keeps a dog is not to claim that he is one” (227), or deducing that £3 for a “hole grayle” in a 1537–38 inventory must refer to a “gradual” (that is, a book of antiphons) as the “only alternative would require values to have plummeted since King Arthur's day” (472, note A).⁴⁴

In their reviews, both Adam Smyth and Helen Smith highlight what the latter calls “a tongue that is, if not quite ‘serpent-like,’ then at the least waspish.” Smyth recommends that for those “cited in the text it is probably best to take a large measure of whisky before proceeding,” and it is true that practically every scholar cited, even including the book's dedicatee, Katharine F. Pantzer, and Blayney himself, is subject to some kind of correction: a kind of redefined Peter Principle in which all scholars must rise above their own incompetence.⁴⁵ Blayney's eye for error is unsparing: for example, he lists every error made by the editors of the third volume of *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain* in transcribing 1 Ric. III c. 9 and 25 Hen. VIII c. 15 (41, note A; 331, note B). But correction need not be punitive. Blayney can be famously

⁴⁴ As with his *King Lear* volume, Blayney has kindly indexed his moments of levity, although the first three examples quoted above are not listed, and I confess that several of those were passed me by. Personally, I found *King Lear* funnier, and nothing approaches the sublime heights of footnote 60 from his review of the revised *STC* (*PBSA* 88 [1994]: 353–407).

⁴⁵ Blayney acknowledges his own errors: 72, note A; 197, note B; 409, note A; 423; 495, note D; 708, note B; 857, note A; 910, note A; 998; 1003, note A. While I am grateful that I emerge relatively unscathed despite six citations, I am reminded of Pepys's observation on discovering that his family was not included in Thomas Fuller's *The Worthies of England*: “But I believe, indeed, our family were never considerable” (10 February 1662).

withering—witness his recent review of David Harvey’s *The Law Emprynted and Englysshed* for *PBSA*, or his deadpan demolition in a 1997 essay of Leo Kirschenbaum’s claim that senior officers of the company entered their own publications in the Stationers’ Register during their year of office, “at most five or six times: “For ‘at most five or six,’ read ‘274’ ”⁴⁶—but a distinction should be drawn between the tone of *The Stationers’ Company*’s preliminaries and preface (and, to a lesser degree, the conclusion) and the rest of work. His frustration at sloppy scholarship is palpable in the former, but as painful as it is to have one’s errors publicly catalogued, I detect few barbs in the main text. Nevertheless, both Smyth and Smith wonder aloud whether Blayney’s corrective urges ought to have been curbed or at least ~~to have been~~ applied more judiciously, partly because they distract from the overall narrative, and partly because, as Smith notes, they “seldom discriminat[e] . . . between senior scholars of bibliography, the authors of general histories of print, doctoral students, and the long-dead New Bibliographers.” However, given the evangelical goals of the work—to reconstruct the Henrician, Edwardian, and Marian book trade from the ground up—documenting the careers of London’s printers and publishers accurately, fairly, and extensively is more important than sparing the feelings of scholars who, it seems, have collectively assumed too much and erred too often.

“THE LAST PRINTERS STANDING”

While the work’s chronological structure does give the lived experience of men and women of the sixteenth-century book trade a welcome prominence, it does have the unfortunate side effect of fragmenting themes and topics.⁴⁷ Some of these can be reconstructed through the index. There are, for example, very useful entries for book prices, misleading dates, printers devices, false imprints, paper, type, signs in St. Paul’s Churchyard, shared printing, book-trade statutes, and so on, while many of the printers and publishers have lengthy and structured entries.⁴⁸ Other

⁴⁶ *PBSA* 110 (2016): 485–91; “The Publication of Playbooks,” in *A New History of Early English Drama*, ed. John D. Cox and David Scott Kastan (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 420n38.

⁴⁷ Smyth describes the work as “aggressively chronological . . . [t]he effect is of resuming a cocktail party conversation mid-sentence, thirty years later.”

⁴⁸ As one would expect, Blayney’s index is careful, copious, and well structured; I spotted only a very few minor errors (plays should have had five entries not one; University Microfilms International is misindexed). There were some minor inconsistencies: “charter” is indexed but not “incorporation”;

important narratives can be traced through chapter sub-sections and appendices: provincial printing (73–75, 133–34, 191–97, 289–90, 339–41, 429–37, 506–11, 646–51); the import trade (90–8, 101–6, 157–60, 227–33, 319–22, 474–80, 537–39, 716–20, 820–24, 942–51); press regulation (173–78, 242–51, 326–30, 384–88, 487–91, 548–55, 558–62, 601–6, 736–45, 825–31, 924–26); and publishing rights (160–72, 233–42, 322–26, 480–7, 539–47, 555–58, 606–9, 720–36, 824–25, 952–59). By dispersing these accounts, however, the strength of Blayney’s findings is dissipated. He acknowledges that his research, “challenges accepted conclusions about the evolution of press-control and about the proprietary rights that would one day be transmuted . . . into what we now call ‘copyright’,” (xvii) but he underplays—and the structure militates against—fully appreciating how his accounts of press regulation and especially publishing rights transform our understanding of the Stationers’ Company and the London book trade. Blayney’s *Stationers’ Company* is without doubt a remarkable feat of historical scholarship, but to appreciate fully its importance we must recover other, less visible histories from within.

One of those relates to the Stationers’ Company itself. Prior to 1554 when its surviving records begin, remarkably little can be discovered about the company’s activities. This is hardly surprising: in sixteenth-century London, people left more traces than unincorporated companies, especially those with no hall.⁴⁹ The city’s records allow us to know when the company attended civic events, when it made financial contributions to the city or Crown, and who acted as its wardens every year.⁵⁰ Passing references in a will and a heraldic manuscript suggest that it

duodecimo gets several references but no other format is indexed; not all the page references for statutes are fully duplicated when they appear under the relevant statute’s title. Also, while I understand why “copyright”—a post-1710 formulation—is given a measly six page references, I feel it is a little unhelpful not to cross-refer the reader to the entries on *cum privilegio*, entrance, privileges, and the Stationers’ Register (the last pointedly tucked under “Stationers, the Company of (miscellaneous): Records”).

⁴⁹ Compare, for example, the single page that Blayney is able to give to the failed incorporation of the Stationers’ Company in 1542 with the five subsequent pages devoted to the scandalous marriage of Robert Redman’s eldest daughter (514–19).

⁵⁰ These, though, are not listed by Blayney.

maintained its own religious fraternity and what its coat of arms looked like (220–7).⁵¹ A note in an ecclesiastical register confirms that a draft charter of incorporation was circulating in 1542 (514). A signed scrap from 1551 confirms that Ranulph Cholmeley, Elizabeth Pickering’s latest (and last) husband and later Recorder of London, was appointed as the company’s counsel (713–16).⁵² We have no detailed knowledge of the company’s finances, its ordinances, its records, or even its daily activities before 1554, and we do not know what its officers discussed at their meetings until the 1570s. It is only with Register A, which begins in December 1554, that we discover a company in possession of a hall, raising money through fees, fines, and collections, hiring out the hall to the local wardmote and for a wedding, paying for dinners, furniture and other accouterments, repairs and renovations, and the provisioning of men for war against the French, as well as the costs of seeking incorporation (847–70).⁵³ An inventory of the company’s hall in 1557 lists armor, swords, two “hand gonnes,” and a pair of “playing tables w[i]th 30 men,” alongside the expected crockery, kitchen utensils, and furniture.⁵⁴

Blayney’s meticulous archival and bibliographical work, however, provides crucial new insights into the pre-1554 company by tracing the vicissitudes of its membership and the impact this had on printing and publishing.⁵⁵ From the 1520s, “the always-dominant publishers increasingly gave up printing,” a tendency that grew much more pronounced in the 1540s and 1550s, falling away slightly under Mary (653–55). Blayney both identifies those who were freemen of the Company, including the no fewer than eighteen men and women who joined by redemption between 1534 and 1541 (458–66), and determines the livery company affiliation of London’s printers and publishers. Prior to 1557, printing was not formally under the control of the company and it was not until 1501 that it included any printers among its members. Moreover, the flourishing of printers in other livery companies created a real demographic problem for the company: witness, for example, the sheer number of apprentices that the draper-

⁵¹ Blayney does not make the obvious deduction that the company, like many other book trade guilds across Europe, must have celebrated 6 May (St John *ante portam Latinam*) as the trade’s feast day—it remained a date of significance for the Company after 1557.

⁵² Cholmeley became Recorder, that is London’s chief legal officer, in 1554 (843).

⁵³ Much of this is transcribed in Arber, *Transcript*, 1:33–67, although Arber omitted many entries.

⁵⁴ Stationers’ Company, Register A, ff. 16^r–17^v.

⁵⁵ His argument is summarized in his brief concluding chapter (927–35).

printer Thomas Petyt employed during his thirty-year career (399). During the first half of the sixteenth century, substantially more printers belonged to other companies than to the Stationers' Company, and by 1547 non-stationer printers—essentially “those who had become printers because they belonged to the largely separate community of religious reformers” (934)—were very much in the ascendancy: a series of graphs (836–37) shows how members of the Stationers' Company were responsible for less than half of England's printed output between 1545 and 1553. It took the unexpected death of Edward VI and the accession of the Catholic Mary Tudor in 1553 for the fortunes of the stationer-printers, and by extension the Stationers' Company, to reverse so dramatically that the company could not only seek a successful incorporation but also secure a near monopoly over printing. The famous preamble to the charter of incorporation (“to provide a suitable remedy” against “very great and detestable heresies”) is often erroneously cited as evidence that the company was established as some kind of agent of censorship, but it was in fact penned by the company specifically to appeal to the interests of the Crown—not an uncommon practice amongst livery companies seeking incorporation (915–16). The company “needed to press as many buttons as possible, playing on the queen's demonstrated fear of the harm unsupervised printers could do.”⁵⁶

Blayney's very final paragraph begins inimitably:

It is conceivable that mammals could eventually have out-evolved and out-competed the dinosaurs even if the Earth had not been hit by an asteroid. It is likewise possible that the Stationers might one day have become so dominant as printers that they could have earned

⁵⁶ Blayney raises the possibility that Philip may have been the decisive factor, which would help explain why it took the company two and a half years to secure incorporation (830–1, 914). Six months later, Philip, as Duke of Brabant, ordered Antwerp to found a “guild” to regulate the members of that city's book trade; after some initial resistance from the trade, a civic ordinance was published on 4 May 1558 (exactly a year to the day of the Stationers' Company's incorporation) that all printers, booksellers, and bookbinders in the city to join the Guild of St. Luke. See Algemeen Rijksarchief Brussel, *Papieren van Staat en Audientie, 1709/2*, f. 47; *De Liggeren en andere historische Archieven der Antwerpsche Sint Lucasgilde*, ed. P. Rombouts and T. van Lerius, 2 vols. (Antwerp, 1864–76), 1:205–6. Philip, as Duke of Lombardy, also apparently confirmed the charter of the book trade guild of Milan in 1589; see George Haven Putnam, *Books and Their Makers During the Middle Ages*, 2 vols. (New York & London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1896–97), 2:450–55.

a monopoly with first needing a catastrophe to purge the trade of their more successful rivals (934–35).⁵⁷

After almost 900 pages of meticulously reconstructing the London book trade between 1501 and 1557, his conclusion is both irresistible and irrefutable. However, although Blayney claims that, “it should seem neither surprising nor paradoxical that the charter was granted by Mary—who of all the Tudors had most to fear from the book trade, and could therefore be persuaded by the charter’s preamble that granting it was a prudent move” (932), he does not fully explain why the corporate affiliation of sixteenth-century London printers (as opposed to, say, booksellers or bookbinders) was so vital to the company’s ambitions in the first place. A glib reading of Blayney’s *Stationers’ Company* might suggest that the answer is simply because all the previous scholars got it wrong, but this is to misunderstand the crucial interrelationships between the company, the corporate structure of London, and the emergence of publishing rights more generally—and to miss the significance of Blayney’s argument.

Producing printed books for sale, or what we would call publishing, involved up-front costs and commercial risks far beyond what a scribal workshop faced, even one that might produce some manuscripts in anticipation of demand. One of those risks—that someone might publish a work already published by someone else and sell it cheaper—only became a serious concern for the England’s printers during the second decade of the sixteenth century. Hitherto, as Blayney observes,

[t]he demand for books was growing faster than was their output, and no one printer could expect to satisfy it all. It hardly mattered which of them printed which of the books in greatest demand; if “competing” editions of a steady-selling work happened to appear in the same year, that simply meant that each printer’s next edition of it would be somewhat delayed. Given the close proximity in which they lived and worked it is anyway difficult to doubt that they would sometimes have discussed their plans and negotiated with each other in order to prevent potential clashes of interest. But none of them had ever had the exclusive right to print any work, so we cannot expect them to have behaved as if such rights were the expected norm (109).

Blayney demonstrates that it was only during the 1510s that the principle of protecting one’s right to print a particular work became established through a series of royal grants that forbade

⁵⁷ Technically, of course, an asteroid becomes a meteorite once it strikes the earth.

others from printing named works for a specific period. The first such privilege was issued to the printer and stationer Richard Pynson, most likely in 1510, protecting his right to print the first statute of Henry VIII's reign for a period of two years (160–3). In 1512 Thomas Linacre was granted a two-year privilege to protect his new Latin schoolbook; Linacre was the first author, as opposed to a printer, to receive such a privilege, but as Blayney suggests, it was unlikely that it had been obtained without the involvement of John Rastell, the work's printer and probable publisher, and himself not the member of any London company (166–67). A third privilege, this time granted to the Oxford printer John Scolar in 1518 by the university's chancellor, was narrower in its geographic scope—it only applied to Oxford—but extended the term of protection to seven years (167). Strikingly, its terms seemed to apply to all subsequent works printed by Scolar and forbade the sale in Oxford of any rival editions printed elsewhere. It proved a vital precedent: later that year, Pynson appears to have secured a lifetime privilege that protected all his new publications for a period of two years from the date of publication (167–70). Similar “generic privileges” (to use Blayney's term) were granted to six further printers and one author during the 1520s (233–35). By 1528 almost half of the printers active in England had privileges, regardless of their company affiliation: “[t]he idea of entitlement had arrived—and it was a genie that would never go back into the bottle” (235). Further privileges were issued during the next decade, and by 1538 over a third of all extant books printed during the previous two decades claimed some kind of privileged protection (322–26, 928).

As the example of Scolar shows, it was possible for an authority other than the monarch to grant a privilege; in other words, the Crown had no special or exclusive right to bestow grants relating to printing. This may seem self-evident, but over a century later, the idea that there was a “property” inherent in printing that belonged ultimately to the Crown, and that it was this “property” that was granted by a privilege, was cited in legal cases (170–2). Many scholars have assumed that this concept dated back to the Tudors, but this was not how it was understood during Henry VIII's reign:

[a] hitherto-unprinted book . . . had no owner at all, and could therefore be printed by anyone. By granting a privilege Henry did not transfer property rights that were otherwise his: he used the prerogative to *forbid* anyone *other* than the grantee to print it for a specific period—after which it returned to the public domain from which he had temporarily removed it (172).

Privileges were no more than temporary commercial monopolies. That many of them were generic—that is, they applied to all new publications by a specific printer—warns us against seeing “cum privilegio regali” on the imprint of a sixteenth-century book as an official endorsement. Indeed, the risk that some contemporary readers might do just this seems to have prompted a royal proclamation in 1538 stating that any book bearing that phrase on its title page should add “ad imprimendum solum” to make it clear that the privilege only concerned the *printing* of the book (480–87). The *content* of books was instead regulated through a system of pre-publication licensing that owes its origins to papal bulls of 1487 and 1515 (173–78) and was applied in various forms by ecclesiastical and secular authorities in England from the 1520s onward; the system, albeit in a more developed form, remained England’s primary means for controlling the publication of texts, with some hiatuses, until the end of the seventeenth century. (Blayney is one of the very few scholars since Milton to acknowledge the relevance of the papal decrees as the ultimate source of England’s licensing system.)⁵⁸ Privileges, however, were not part of the mechanism of censorship.

During Henry’s reign, the majority of privileges issued by the Crown were granted “by placard” (that is “under the sign manual, the privy signet, or more probably both” [953])—a relatively simple bureaucratic process that bypassed chancery and were thus cheaper (hence Blayney’s separate appendix on the different processes [952–59]). The first privilege to be granted under the great seal as opposed to by placard (and thus enrolled onto chancery’s patent rolls) was issued to Anthony Marler, who belonged to the Haberdashers’ Company, in 1542 for the right to print the English bible (542–45): the added authority (and cost) reflected the king’s particular interest in the work and may, according to Blayney, have been intended “to *prevent* publication rather than facilitate it” (544). The following year, a privilege to the printers Richard Grafton and Edward Whitchurch (members of the Grocers’ and Haberdashers’ Companies respectively) granted them seven years’ protection for any work they published and indefinite protection to any Sarum liturgy published: both the term limit and specification of genre represented a departure from the usual practice (545–47). Under Edward VI, privileges by placard continued to “significantly outnumber those issued under the great seal” (721), with a much larger number than before being granted to non-printers. As before, some privileges were

⁵⁸ John Milton, *Areopagitica* (London, 1644), B1^f; Rudolph Hirsch, “Bulla Super Impressione Librorum, 1515,” *Gutenberg-Jahrbuch* (1973): 248–51.

for specifically named works, but there were now more for particular *genres*: for example, all authorized service books; service books for use in Wales and the Marches; works in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew; liturgies in French for the use of the Channel Isles; common law books; primers, psalters, and books of private prayer (545–47, 604, 606–7, 628, 644–46, 649, 734). Overlaps became inevitable, such as with stationer Richard Tottell’s common law book privilege, which explicitly excepted certain titles already published, or stringer-turned-stationer John Day’s privilege for Ponet’s *Short Catechism*, which originally allowed him to print it also in Latin (thus clashing with stationer Reyner Wolfe’s rights as the Royal Typographer for Latin, Greek, and Hebrew). Apparently by way of compensation, Day secured the right to publish the *ABC with the Brief Catechism* (itself already under privilege), but *only* when annexed to the *Catechism*, a nicety that Day himself failed to observe (734–36). The arrival of an asteroid in the shape of Mary Tudor in 1553 drastically altered the landscape: within a matter of months, over half of the printers who had been active immediately prior to her accession stopped their presses, including “the five most prolific printers of Edward’s reign, who between them had printed more than 60 percent of the nation’s output” (757). The number of Edwardian privilege-holders also shrank markedly, although some key privileges, such as for common law books and books in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, continued; new privileges were issued and existing ones renewed (756–58, 761–62, 824–25).

Although it requires careful piecing together, Blayney’s definitive account of the development of printing privileges is the unacknowledged jewel at the heart of his history. Yet what it lacks is a consideration of how this appears to have directly shaped the company’s own ambitions. The fact that prior to 1557 no single London company “owned” printing or publishing and thus was unable to protect its members against the activities of those in other companies must have been one of the reasons why London’s printers continued to use privileges. Conceivably, a printer could seek the authority of London’s lord mayor and aldermen to protect their publication within the city’s jurisdiction as Scolar did in Oxford, but it was much more effective to secure protection from the highest authority in the land, especially once it became possible to gain privileges that protected *all* of one’s new publications for a specific period. However, the process was complex and costly, and while there was opportunity for objection (as seems to have happened with Nicholas Udall’s privilege application in 1550, which was halted presumably for its inclusion of the English Bible [730]), there was no systematic way for the

book trade to assess the commercial impact of any proposed new privilege. Printers doubtless learned about each other's privileges through word of mouth, and there were also formal mechanisms: the possibly routine verbal announcement of privileges to them as a group, the use of "cum privilegio" in some form on an imprint, and the full text of the privilege in the work itself, which became mandatory after 1538 (404–5). Even so, applicants had either to know in advance of other privileges that theirs might infringe or to seek out the intervention of senior officers of state to resolve overlaps after the privilege had been granted (as in the cases of Tottell, Day, and Wolfe mentioned above, despite the fact that they were all members of the same livery company). Moreover, there was no easy mechanism for resolution when it came to the protection of any new work covered by an existing privilege. Disputes would, ultimately, have to lead to proceedings in the Court of Chancery. Finally, such privileges were never perpetual: even if the monarch was feeling generous, the term could not usually exceed the recipient's own lifetime, and a change of monarch might well require a renewal. The ideal solution for London's printers then was a system of publishing-only privileges that: was operated by trusted members of the book trade; had sufficient authority among the trade as a whole; was reliable, easy, and relatively cheap to use; did not require the display of a statement on an imprint or in the work itself; provided a straightforward means for resolving disagreements; did not interfere with or challenge existing or future Crown privileges; and did not require periodic renewal. This was precisely the kind of trade-specific system that London's livery companies were ideally placed to establish and operate, not least because they provided a fixed and recognized hierarchy, a dependable record-keeping apparatus, a pre-existing system for arbitrating disputes between members, and a deep-seated ethos of mutual social obligation and equity that sought to balance an individual's commercial autonomy against the trade as a whole. For such a system to work, however, printing needed to be subject to a single company's jurisdiction.

The city's formal recognition of the Stationers' Company in 1403 meant that its powers extended no further than the city's boundaries. For many London livery companies a city-wide jurisdiction was perfectly adequate, but from probably the late fourteenth century, some began seeking incorporation by the Crown. An incorporated company could thus own a hall more easily, protect its rights at law, and use its own seal to make agreements with individuals or other corporate bodies. It could also govern itself without seeking approval at each year's elections from the city authorities, and its ordinances were ratified by the kingdom's chief legal officers.

Finally, and crucially, incorporation provided a livery company with the opportunity to seek powers that extended *beyond* the city's boundaries and define the crafts and trades over which it had jurisdiction: for companies such as the Goldsmiths and Pewterers, incorporation granted them national rights of search and confiscation for substandard wares.⁵⁹ For the Stationers' Company, incorporation by the Crown was the only way that it would be able to achieve formal control over printing and by extension publishing. The provisions of the company's ill-fated incorporation attempt in 1542 are unknown, but it is possible that the process was thwarted by other London companies. The fact that London's printers and publishers were scattered among the livery companies and that many of the most influential and important privilege holders belonged to livery companies right at the top of the city's hierarchy meant that any attempt by the Stationers' Company to redefine the jurisdiction regarding printing was bound to be closely scrutinized, if not outright opposed. Over the next decade, whatever hopes the company may have had for an incorporation that could affirm its relationship with printing receded as the dominance of non-stationer printers grew, and it was only with Mary's accession that the scales tipped sufficiently dramatically to make a renewed attempt at incorporation worthwhile: "[the Stationer-printers] suddenly and unexpectedly found themselves the last printers standing after the Marian purge had culled all the winners" (923). Having tied its fortunes so closely to that of its printer-members, incorporation enabled the Stationers' Company not only to assert its jurisdiction over printing as a craft but also to establish a wholly new system for managing publishing rights: what we now know as the Stationers' Register. By forbidding anyone from setting up or operating a printing press anywhere in England unless either they were a member of the company or they held a privilege direct from the Crown, incorporation transformed the Stationers' Company into a kind of privilege holder in its own right. While it did not explicitly grant the company's members a near-exclusive right to publish any new work that was not covered by an existing privilege, it did make it impossible to publish without engaging with a member of the Stationers' Company unless one was, or contracted directly with, an existing privilege holder. Blayney, who has written authoritatively about the Register elsewhere, says virtually nothing about the Register or its procedures here apart from noting that it was

⁵⁹ Ian Gadd and Patrick Wallis, "Reaching Beyond the City Wall: London Guilds and National Regulation, 1500–1700," in *Guilds, Innovation and the European Economy 1400–1800*, ed. S.R. Epstein and Maarten Prak (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 288–315.

established after incorporation (860–3).⁶⁰ Yet, it is the Register rather than the printing monopoly that became the Company’s greatest legacy—and its existence is entirely a consequence of the 1557 incorporation.

“TO TAKE UP ARMS AGAINST A SEA OF MUDDLES, AND BY EXPOSING, MEND THEM”

I cannot overstate the importance of Blayney’s history for our understanding of the Stationers’ Company and the development of London book trade up to 1557. No one else could have written this work, and the company is unlikely to have a better or more diligent historian. It utterly transforms how scholars—even those of us in textual and literary studies—should understand the company and the early book trade. While it is tempting to acknowledge the significance of this work by declaring that all future studies of the sixteenth-century London book trade will be a footnote to it, I suspect that Blayney’s *Stationers’ Company* will instead become the footnote upon which such scholarship will depend. In saying this, however, I am striking a cautionary rather than celebratory note, and not just because the Blayney quotation that heads this final section paraphrases the words of a tragic hero. The Stationers’ Company may have been inadequately served by many of the historians, bibliographers, and literary scholars who have written about it, but at least they have taken an interest. One of the most sobering facts about the historiography of the Stationers’ Company is that between 1930 and 2000—a period that saw the publication of the revised *STC*, editions of the company’s court books, lists of apprentices and freemen, and more scholarly publications relating to the company than ever before—the *Oxford Companion to English Literature* reproduced *exactly the same entry* for the Stationers’ Company across six successive editions. Another is that neither the third nor fourth volumes of the *Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, which together cover the period from 1400 to 1695, include an essay specifically on the Stationers’ Company, despite the fact that the volumes take 1557 as their dividing point.⁶¹ A third is that 4,985 of the 5,435 references to the Stationers’ Register in the *English Short-Title Catalogue* place the apostrophe in the wrong

⁶⁰ “The Publication of Playbooks.”

⁶¹ Volume 5 does include an essay analyzing the membership of the company between 1695 and 1830: Michael L. Turner, “Personnel within the London Book Trades: Evidence from the Stationers’ Company,” in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain: Volume V 1695–1830*, ed. Michael F. Suarez S.J. and Michael L. Turner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 309–34.

place. The Stationers' Company, it seems, has long represented something of a blind spot for literary studies, bibliography, and the history of the book.

Edward Arber's experience is instructive. Arber was, in a way, the Peter Blayney of his generation: an indefatigable and idiosyncratic scholar of prodigious talents, who wrote with a distinctive and robust style, and who approached each scholarly project in his own individual way. His work on the Stationers' Company was radical and innovative, and remains a standard reference tool for scholars, almost a century and a half later. Arber also anticipated the *STC* in his compilation of what is very probably the first genuine short-title catalogue of English printing. He wrote of the "months, even years, [that] were patiently spent at the great Libraries in the personal inspection of the original editions . . . hundreds, and even thousands, of books passed through one's hands [and on] one occasion, more than eight hundred volumes were thus examined at the British Museum in a single week."⁶² Arber's back-breaking, if not ground-breaking, "Bibliographical Summary of English Literature" between 1553 and 1603 takes up over half of the fifth volume of *The Transcript*—and yet was destined to be completely ignored by later scholars, including Pollard and Redgrave themselves.

By drawing a parallel here I am not suggesting for a moment that Blayney's *Stationers' Company* is likely to be forgotten, but instead I worry that, like Arber's *Transcript*, it may seem more as a monument of individual scholarship rather than a map to guide further study, as an archive to be raided rather than a library to learn from. Readers may come seeking only information about a specific printer or book and so overlook not only the exposed myths but also the valuable new perspectives about censorship, copyright, and the company itself. This may well, of course, change with Blayney's next installment, which promises to take the account through to 1616 as this will focus on a period, and on records, that are of direct interest to far more bibliographers and literary scholars, and we eagerly await its publication. In the meantime, *The Stationers' Company and the Printers of London, 1501–1557* is to be saluted as a work that scholars interested in the history of the sixteenth-century English book trade have long needed, as a work whose findings should be championed to mainstream literary and historical scholars, and as a work to be read carefully rather than merely checked. It may not be the popular, accessible account first proposed in 1842, but it is nonetheless an essential reminder that the

⁶² Arber, *Transcript*, 5:xix.

Stationers' Company ought to be considered as one of the most important cultural institutions in British history.