

THE OXFORD COMPANION TO THE BOOK



Edited by Michael F. Suarez & H.R. Woudhuysen

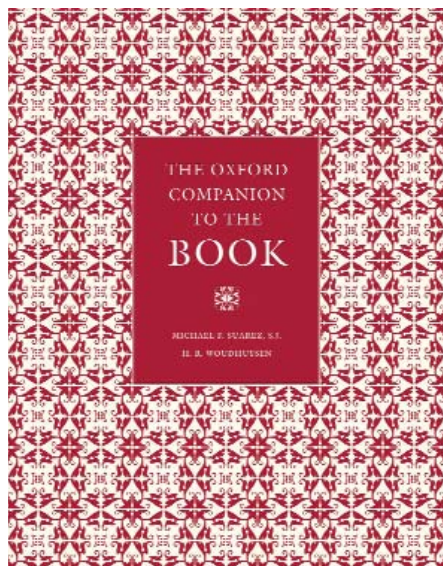
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Reviewed by Andrew Robinson

THE ONE MILLION words and five millennia of civilisation enshrined between the covers of the two heavy-weight quarto volumes of *The Oxford Companion to the Book (OCB)*, immaculately published by the world's leading university press to its highest standards of design, printing and binding, provoke in me feelings of awe mixed with melancholy. Like all readers of *Book-dealer*, one assumes, I relish well-written, well-produced books, and have collected hundreds, which threaten to take over the house. As a writer who has published over twenty books, I devote the lion's share of each passing year to reading and writing. Yet, at times, I cannot quite shake off the uneasy feeling that life should take precedence over books. As the admirable *OCB* essay on 'The sacred book' reminds us bibliophiles: 'a sacred Buddhist text possesses no intrinsic value. It is only valuable if someone uses it as a guide. Once such a person attains enlightenment, the sacred text can be abandoned and even rejected because it possesses no further utility.'

Albert Einstein expressed the same thought wonderfully well – a quotation not in the *OCB*, which is not as well known as it deserves – while he was helping to raise money for a student fund in memory of a New York Jewish friend, a published philosopher best known as a brilliant college teacher. Einstein wrote: 'Knowledge exists in two forms – lifeless, stored in books, and alive in the consciousness of men. The second form of existence is after



all the essential one; the first, indispensable as it may be, occupies only an inferior position.' Somewhat ironically, Einstein's entry in the *OCB* is not for the man but for a book – the physicist's seminal work on relativity.

Mahatma Gandhi, whom Einstein so much admired, unsurprisingly agreed with his view of written knowledge. After all, Gandhi's most famous remark is probably: 'My life is my message.' Yet, as the *OCB* entry on Gandhi – dedicated to the man not one of his works – revealingly notes, ►

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the great Indian teacher and activist amassed over 12,000 books, primarily in English, Gujarati, Hindi and Sanskrit: a collection that remains largely intact at his ashram in Gujarat. Gandhi and his personal secretary – whilst in and out of prison – ‘routinely shared and annotated books, many yielding evidence of multiple readings.’ Moreover, Gandhi established and edited influential journals. Whatever his rhetoric about books may have been, the printed word was undoubtedly of exceptional importance in his life and work.

Enough of preamble. I know I am evading the primary duty of a book reviewer. But how on earth is one to assess the monumental achievement of this magnum opus in a mere review? Obviously, one cannot sensibly read every word; instead, a reviewer – at least this reviewer – is compelled to dip and sample the contributions in his areas of expertise.

Volume one of the *OCB* consists of 48 essays, each written by a specialist or specialists. The first 19 of these cover subjects such as ‘Writing systems’, ‘The ancient book’, ‘The European printing revolution’, ‘Paper’, ‘The economics of print’, ‘Children’s books’, ‘The history of illustration and its technologies’, concluding with ‘The electronic book’. The remaining essays, beginning with ‘The history of the book in Britain, c. 1475-1800’, tackle the history of the book in every significantly literate part of the world, country by country, or in some cases by region, for example the Nordic Countries, the Muslim World and sub-Saharan Africa. The essay covering the Indian subcontinent, twelve pages in length, packs in an astonishing amount, without any inaccuracies I could detect.

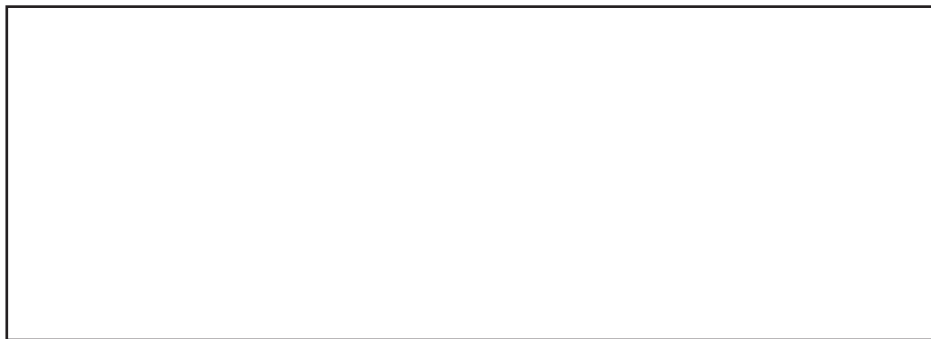
After the essays comes the Companion proper, beginning in the last two hundred or so pages of volume one and occupying the 650 pages of volume two, with entries of very varying length in alphabetical order. These include general topic entries such as ‘Anonymity’, ‘Book burning’, ‘Copyright’, ‘Engraving’, ‘Height and weight of type’, ‘Interactive fiction’, ‘Law book’, ‘Map’, ‘Net Book Agreement’, ‘Paperback’, ‘Reading and reception’, ‘Scholarly publishing’, ‘Science fiction’, ‘Textbook’, ‘Variorum edition’ and ‘World Wide Web’. However, the majority of entries deal in impressive and remarkably up-to-date detail with institutions worldwide – booksellers

(including AbeBooks), encyclopedias (including Wikipedia), journals, libraries, museums, prizes, publishers, series imprints, universities and so on – and with individual authors, booksellers, editors, illustrators, librarians, publishers, scholars and typographers of real note, including some still very much alive and kicking, for instance the former Penguin publisher Peter Mayer and the book historian Robert Darnton. In addition, there are entries on a highly select number of works pivotal in the history of ideas and publishing, ranging from *On the Origin of Species* to *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*.

While I can think of regrettable omissions, there are amazingly few that stand out, so comprehensive is the *OCB*’s coverage. Surely, the American Philosophical Society, founded by Benjamin Franklin in 1745 should be in; its press is the oldest press in continuous operation in the United States. If Maxwell Communications gets in, as it should, so should News Corporation, whatever one’s opinion of Rupert Murdoch (who has no personal entry), given its ownership of major book publishers. The British Film Institute and its publishing are missing. Less importantly, it is a pity there is no entry for the film director Satyajit Ray (unlike his grandfather Upendra Kishore Roychowdhury, who was an outstanding jacket designer, typographer and book illustrator, as well as being the editor of a magazine for children famous in Bengal founded by his grandfather).

The two editors, Michael Suarez (a Jesuit, formerly a tutor in English at Oxford, now director of the Rare Book School at the University of Virginia) and Henry Woudhuysen (a professor of English at University College London), have understandably taken six years over the task, helped by 28 associate and assistant editors and a further 33 scholars who wrote the essays. Another 335 specialist authors contributed to the A-Z section. Overall, note the editors, 398 scholars from 27 countries, spanning the globe from Helsinki to Dunedin and from Tokyo to Nuuk, have contributed 51 essays and 5,160 entries. ‘Animate with the labours of scholars both living and long deceased, the *OCB* seeks to represent in a single work the world of the book as it is known at the close of the first decade of the 21st century.’

If this makes the *OCB* sound academic



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and solemn, it emphatically is not. Verbosity, unnecessary jargon and appeals to authority are banned – along with typos (I spotted none) and sloppy indexing – but not well-informed opinion. Thus, the entry for ‘Airport novel’ describes it as ‘usually a long, winding tale involving political or military intrigue, business machinations, technological wizardry, multigenerational joys and sorrows, and, often, a great deal of heated romance and sex. The term has been around since the late 1960s, and, like “potboiler” or “schlockbuster”, is invariably derogatory.’ There is even what reads like an in-joke: the entry for ‘Alcoholics Anonymous’, a major private publisher, is signed with the contributor initials ‘TT’ (which actually stand for Trysh Travis, an academic in Florida).

There are not many illustrations, yet they are intelligently chosen and often strikingly unfamiliar (though all are monochrome and not always as sharp as one would like). Thus, to illustrate ‘Accordion book’, the Dresden Codex, a Mayan book from Mexico now in Dresden, is shown in its entirety, partially folded up, rather than as the more usual single leaf. For the entry on Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*, there is a page from the third edition of 1938 set in the Fraktur (black-letter or Gothic) type associated with Nazism, showing the strange use of letter spacing for emphasis – a sort of typographic equivalent to its author’s notorious ranting. But as the caption notes, in 1941 Hitler decreed that roman type should replace Fraktur type. (He now claimed Fraktur was a Jewish invention.)

Given the seismic impact of electronic publishing, especially in the past few years with the internet and eBook readers, one cannot avoid asking if the *OCB* is the last gasp of massive reference books published in ink on paper – or whether such printed books can coexist with digital books. As the two authors of the fascinating essay on the electronic book point out: ‘After Gutenberg’s revolution, the various forms of book production – MS [manuscript], block printing or movable type – coexisted for almost two centuries with no readily apparent fitness of any one mode to survive the others.’ They go so far as to compare the hand-crafted, difficult-to-sustain websites of today with ‘the MSS scattered in monastic libraries throughout Europe that the humanists sought to recover and transform into standardised print before they disappeared’. Personally, after using the *OCB* for some hours, the thought came to me that what I would really like is to have a printed copy for serious reading – and also because it is an object of beauty; and in addition an electronic version that I could consult and search on my laptop, especially while travelling. Book lovers are unlikely to fly with a set of the *OCB* in their luggage.

One thing is certain about the publishing future. I shall never again have the opportunity to review a book like this. It is hard to over-praise the qualities of *The Oxford Companion to the Book*. To contemplate through its pages the creations of the human mind out of the written word is an invigorating, sometimes transcendental, experience. ■

Andrew Robinson wrote the first essay, ‘Writing Systems’, in *The Oxford Companion to the Book*, but had no other connection with its publication. He is the author of *The Story of Writing; Lost Languages: The Enigma of the World’s Undeciphered Scripts*; and *The Man Who Deciphered Linear B*, all published by Thames & Hudson.