

The Book of Technology: Representations of Print in Print and The Harper Establishment; or, How the Story Books are Made (1855)

For historians of books and technology, *The Harper Establishment; or, How the Story Books are Made* (1855) has long been a valuable artifact of nineteenth-century U.S. book manufacturing, printing, and distribution. In lucid prose and illustrated by fine engravings, Jacob Abbot describes the establishment's two fire-proof, iron-beamed buildings, and guides the reader through a tour of the entire cycle of book production that takes place on the premises. With clear, visceral representations of elusive historical objects, people, and processes, *The Harper Establishment* seems to open a window to the technological past.

In this paper, however, I explore *The Harper Establishment* not as a self-evident artifact about technologies past, but a technological artifact of the past. Why was there a profusion of print about print in the mid-nineteenth century? What particular forms did these representations take? How did representations of print differ from representations of other technologies? How did books about print technologies function in contestations over emerging conceptions of books, reading and print culture?

I argue that *The Harper Establishment* participated in the conceptual production of "print culture" by aligning it with a seemingly inevitable set of material conditions. It promoted a vision of print culture implicitly through explicit technological representations. In the story that it tells about book production, *The Harper Establishment* argued for a unified, consolidated print culture over more localized print cultures of the previous decades. Printing and publishing, writing and reading, according to *The Harper Establishment*, come together as singular narrative. Books, magazines, and newspapers are not disparate products of fragmented processes, but diverse examples of one coherent, centralized process. Rather than a site of ongoing contestation, print culture emerges as the technological denouement. The book about books quietly confirms the story that it sells.

*The Harper Establishment* also situates products of print technology an emergent taxonomy of manufacturing and manufactured goods, elevating printing above many other industries. *The Harper Establishment* marks a key moment in this elevation and even sacralization of publishing and books, accomplished in part, I argue, through a simultaneous invocation and repudiation of the technological nature of print.

"Sectional View of the Cliff Street Building," *The Harper Establishment*.