

Moveable Type Mobile Nations: interactions in transnational Book History

Books have never respected national borders. Whether distributed throughout the Islamic world from Timbuktu (C.15)¹ or imported from outsourced centres in Chindia (C.21),² the primary characteristic of ‘the book’ is to be “produced in one location to be used in another”³ But, as demonstrated (Bornstein, Hofmeyr, Fraser, Fraser and Hammond), the mobility of moveable type allows border crossings that are both geographic and interpretive. Not emanating from an un-contextualised ‘point-zero’, instantiated writing must inextricably involve both place *and* meaning – space contextualising; border-crossing re-contextualising.

Transnational book history – history conducted not between nations but notwithstanding them – should consider the terms nation, state and nation-state (Schulze). All three are less-than stable; even in Europe, the colonial homeland of national stability. Europe’s medieval State conceptualised as an interlocking system of personal obligations becomes, in the EU, a state that is both national and Continental. As for nations, “France is Celtic, Iberian, Germanic; Germany is Germanic, Celtic and Slavonic.”⁴ Should manuscripts from Gdansk be Danish (*dansk*), German or Polish; (similarly Bruxelles, Strasbourg / Silesia, Schleswig etc.)⁵? Neither can location bestow nationhood: writings adopted by state or nation may once have been ‘foreign’; international boundaries may move under the author’s desk (or her lap top across them); and national literatures may be written by natives ‘abroad’.

Moving on from imagined communities, the presentation, not a research but a position paper, will use essays from the forthcoming number of *Angles on the English Speaking World* (2010), *Moveable Type, Mobile Nations*, to suggest that forces which created nation states, like other juridical, technological, economic forces, have driven and been driven by the book’s history. Methodologically, the national is an accomplice and not a court. From contextual background to participatory foreground, the national in Book History becomes an additional unit in much larger grand-regional histories of human mentality.

¹ Cf. Shamil Jeppie and Souleymane Diagne (eds) *The Meanings of Timbuktu*, Human Sciences Research Council, 2008; and Micheal Albin (2008) “The Islamic Book” in Eliot, Simon and Jonathan Rose (2008) *Blackwell Companion to the History of the Book*, Blackwell, Singapore, pp. 165–176.

² Cf. From *The Bookseller*, see Abbott, Jez, (2008) “A Passage to India”, *The Bookseller*, 13 June, Issue 5336, pp. 24–28; Holman, Tod (2007) “The Great Indian Takeaway”, *The Bookseller*, 11 May, Issue 5280, pp. 29–30; Ward, Victoria (2004) “Going Subcontinental”, *The Bookseller*, 7 May, Issue 5127, p.13. For corporate entrepreneurial efforts see Book Project Management <http://www.brookpm.co.uk/printing-distribution-singapore.htm>, and Wiley Blackwell Offshore Publishing Solutions <http://www.wiley.com/bw/offshore/>.

³ William St Clair (2009) *Afterwords* on the Edinburgh History of the Book in Scotland in TLS, 10 April 2009, p.7–8.

⁴ Schulze, Hagen (1996) *States, Nations and Nationalism*, Blackwell, p. 97. The historical unification of a geopolitical unit called Germany after 1848 provides a wonderful case in point.

⁵ The region of Pomerania provides a good example. Gdansk (one of its ports) was a meeting place for Nordic, Slavonic and Low German languages. Religious works such as the Colbaz Annals (in Latin, first scripted in Lund, then Denmark now Sweden) were continued at Kolbacz Abbey, near Gdansk. The changing identity of the region (at various points belonging to a Danish realm), successively Prussian, Polish, German (and Russian) complicates questions of national ownership for such manuscripts.

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