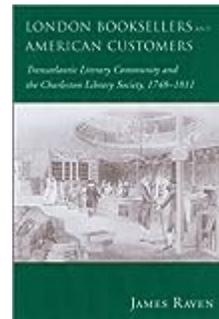




James Raven. *London Booksellers and their American Customers: Transatlantic Literary Community and the Charleston Library Society, 1748-1811.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2001. xxii + 522 pp. \$59.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57003-406-0.



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Ex Libris: The Culture and Commerce of Books in Colonial and Early National Charleston

Ex Libris: The Culture and Commerce of Books in Colonial and Early National Charleston

In 1994, James Raven encountered a letterbook from the Charleston Library Society detailing the ordering, processing, and shipping of texts from London booksellers to their American customers. The 120 letters, covering the period 1758-1811, provided unique material for understanding the business of London booksellers (for whom very little correspondence has survived) and Raven decided to publish an annotated edition of the letters. The letterbook, reproduced in its entirety, forms an appendix to the present volume, but Raven's study has blossomed from a relatively narrow examination of booksellers and their customers to a larger exploration of the role of books and institutions such as the Library Society in the formation of elite cultural identity on the fringes of empire. As a result, this meticulously researched book has much to offer scholars of gentry culture and community in the eighteenth-century British Atlantic world as well as historians of the book.

Raven's study falls into three thematic sections. The first five chapters detail the emergence of the Charleston

Library Society, its structure and organization, and its membership. The Society was founded in 1748 explicitly to preserve "civilization" in the "wilderness" that was eighteenth-century South Carolina in the minds of many of its anxious residents. "As the gross ignorance of the naked Indian must raise our pity, and his savage disposition our horror and detestation, it is our duty as men, our interest as members of a community, to prevent our descendents from sinking into a similar situation" proclaimed the Society's founding declaration (p. 43). But the Library Society was not entirely a defensive organization. Its early members were mostly young and ambitious merchants, planters, and professionals, the lesser gentry of the colony (only one founder was a member of the Assembly and none were members of the Council) who hoped to stake out their own positions in the social hierarchy. By the 1760s, the Society had attracted many of the wealthiest and most powerful members of the Carolina elite and Raven notes ironically that "a library society founded by young men keen to make their mark soon became an affirmation of distinction achieved" (p. 67). Exclusiveness remained central to the Society's mission; even as other library companies were opening up their

membership in the nineteenth century, the Charleston Society remained closed to the broader public.

Having outlined the development of the Library Society and its importance as a social and intellectual organization, Raven turns his attention to the mechanics of buying books. He explores the background of the men appointed by the Society as “bookseller” (a distinction not all of them embraced; one rejected the commission outright), the process of ordering books and paying for them, and the work involved in shipping them to the colonies. From start to finish, trans-Atlantic book buying was a complicated business. Miscommunication and delayed or unfulfilled orders frustrated Society members, and while such problems often were not the fault of booksellers who struggled to find the specific editions requested or to interpret titles from incomplete information, the Society routinely sacked one bookseller and appointed another within a few years. The letterbook serves as the foundation for these chapters, but Raven has done a tremendous amount of additional archival research to illuminate, among other issues, the London wholesale and retail book trade, discount practices, book-binding, and shipping times across the Atlantic. This material will appeal perhaps most to historians of books and the book trade, but those interested in the workings of trans-Atlantic commerce more generally will also find these chapters rewarding.

The final four chapters explore the specifics of what Library members were ordering and reading. Challenging the primacy given to religious tracts in Richard Beale Davis’s study of intellectual life in the south, Raven argues that the Society explicitly requested that booksellers avoid pieces of “polemical Divinity” (pp. 162, 252). Instead, early orders were for books of law, history, and science. Members exhibited an interest in both old and new treatises on these matters, although interestingly Christopher Gadsen’s proposal to purchase several classical texts created a minor controversy in 1764 when the Society’s librarian objected that most of the classics already in the collection went unread. By the early nineteenth century, tastes in Charleston began to shift and history, law, and politics lost their preeminent positions in the Library’s holdings, replaced by literature, which by 1811 formed the largest single category of holdings. Raven sees this change as reflecting a feminization of the Library Society: although membership remained exclusively male, the collection increasingly reflected the reading habits of the wives and daughters of members.

Raven concludes by noting that in the aftermath of the Revolution, and notwithstanding the numerous difficulties attending Anglo-American trade in the early nineteenth century and the emergence of American publishers, the Society remained committed to buying its books from London merchants and dealers. As a result, “Charleston remained a real English province” in the early national period, with stronger cultural and economic links to London and the British Caribbean than to the northern cities of Philadelphia, New York, and Boston (p. 219).

Raven’s book is a welcome and significant addition to the expanding literature on the social, economic, and cultural history of a still-neglected region in early American studies. Given the paucity of extant merchant papers for the colony, the thoroughly annotated letterbook (there are over five hundred footnotes for the letters alone) provides another window through which to explore South Carolina’s trade connections with England during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Two other appendices detail the Library Society’s membership and a catalog of its holdings from 1748 to c.1769; in an era of reduced budgets the University of South Carolina Press is to be applauded for publishing this material. Beyond the wealth of detail on the specifics of the book trade, Raven’s main arguments expand upon the portrait of elite social and intellectual life outlined by Joyce Chaplin and Edward Pearson, among others. The idea of books as part of the eighteenth-century “empire of goods” and as keys to understanding elite mentality is not new, but Raven’s discussion of the sociability of the Library Society and the social context of book buying (and reading) provides an important bridge between analyses of books as commodities in the transatlantic trade and their role as “instruments of social and cultural assertiveness” within a specific community (p. 228). Moreover, Raven usefully counters recent scholarly emphasis on the role of print in aiding the emergence of a more democratic public sphere, suggesting instead that books and print culture more broadly simultaneously fostered both openness and exclusivity. For South Carolina elites, books offered an entree into the transatlantic world of letters and learning, yet those elites also used printed materials and the Library to promote cultural hierarchy and their own authority at home. The Library Society and its collections, Raven ably demonstrates, offered “enlightenment and instruction” to its members while helping to further the famous harmony that characterized the South Carolina gentry in the eighteenth century and beyond (p. 228).

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