


This important study engages the ground between the study of how history is written and the “nature” of historical texts. Following Robert Darnton’s lead, Woolf views history writers as part of “a complex ‘communication circuit’ including
printers, publishers, booksellers, and readers (79). Previous historiographical studies have focused on major history-writers and their intellectual contexts. Woolf convincingly opens the field to the processes that make books of written histories.

Chapter 1 outlines the seventeenth-century death of the chronicle as newsbearer, supplanted by "politic" history, diary, newspaper, and "parasite genres"—broadside ballads, chapbooks, almanacs, tracts, local histories, chronologies, versified national history, and history plays. Woolf credits this transition to a shift in temporal perception focusing on the remote past, and to saturation of the market by popular chronicles such as Holinshed. Chapter 2 concerns readers reading history, studying annotation, cross-reference, commonplacing, emendation. "Why did people read history?" For moral and political example, cautionary tales, emotive response, or contemporary resonance. Gradually the older sense of the present as replicating the past shifted to a sense of the present coming from the past, thus transforming the notion of history's uses. Chapter 3 investigates evidence of ownership of historical works in wills, inventories, private library catalogues, and recommendations for book purchase, and the topical distribution of books in various collections. Here Woolf's approach to books as objects of material culture is cautious, thorough, and rewarding. Acknowledging the limits of inventory-based deduction, he still detects substantial patterns, offered in graphs and "snapshot" studies. Seventeenth-century collections snubbed modern historians, but eighteenth-century collections were more inclusive, marking the "promotion of modern historians into the 'must-read' category" (150).

Chapter 4 covers changing patterns of borrowing and lending and the rise of college, school, parochial, circulating, and community libraries, as well as the arrangement of knowledge (shelving by topical classification or sequence of acquisition). Chapter 5, "Clio unbound and bound," brilliantly applies the methods of the history of material culture to history-book production. "Those who made or sold books played a critical role in the dissemination of historical knowledge" (203). Many factors affected book sales, from seasonal patterns in book-buying to censorship, licensing, and copyright. Woolf reviews the costs of labor, capital investment, press depreciation, payments to authors, illustration, proofreading, correction, and binding, and explains the economics of piracy and the collaboration of publishing syndicates. Chapter 6 covers marketing, commercial strategies for selling books, expanding the industry once restricted to London and the universities. The premises of booksellers served as social spaces in the public sphere, nurturing civilized discourse (263). Some publishing ventures brought financial disaster to the projectors; there were also notable successes. Other topics include booksellers' catalogues, importation of foreign histories, translation, serial publication, antiquarian compilations, and publishing by subscription.

In Reading History, Woolf establishes that the history of historiography cannot be limited to historians and their texts, but must extend to the other participants in textual production, including readers. Historians contribute talent, intellectual background, and polemical framing to their writings—but books must sell, so the transmission from manuscript to reader merits closer attention. Historical texts are not produced by authors in a vacuum, but arise out of a complex collaboration, "the joint fabrication of several hands in an on-going process of collective creation;...and communication in which... readers were active and important participants" (318). The details of this process, supported by definition, analysis, statistical overviews and case histories, are laid out in Woolf's study with admirable clarity, making the book an original and indispensable contribution to the field.—Kevin Joel Berland

