

Books for the Backcountry:

Patrick Orr's Inventory,

Lancaster, 1754

by Alan Tully

Because of the longstanding interest of historians in the intellectual and cultural life of colonial Philadelphia we now have a clear idea of what the reading interests of that city's elite were during the mid-eighteenth century.¹ Moreover, because of craftsman and artisan participation in that cultural life it is possible to make some sound inferences about the kinds of books and pamphlets less prominent Philadelphians enjoyed.² Outside of the metropolis, however, it is a different matter; there is very little material available indicating what back-country Pennsylvanians read at mid-century.

It is obvious, of course, that despite comparatively low literacy rates in rural Pennsylvania many individuals did read in their leisure time for in backcountry inventories of estates are frequently listed "a small parcel of books" or some other such entry.³ Beyond that we know that large book-dealers in Philadelphia did send consignments of books to country retailers for distributikon in the hinterland. It cannot be assumed, however, that a cross-section of the well-known book stocks kept by Philadelphia bookdealers were simply sent along to the country outlets. The country retailer, operating on a closer margin than his Philadelphia supplier, could not afford to carry books in stock which were of questionable marketability. Moreover, the periodic auction sales that Philadelphia bookdealers resorted to in order to clear out unsold stock were as much an acknowledgement of their poor judgement of what volumes their country retailers could dispose of, as of their failure to read the demands of the Philadelphia market. The point is that one cannot ascertain what types of books rural Pennsylvanians read by looking at the bookstocks of Philadelphia dealers and until someone reconstructs the commercial dealings between a Philadelphia wholesaler and his country retailers there will always be some doubt as

to what the exact nature of the backcountry book market was.⁴

The one easily available indicator of backcountry reading habits is the 1762 to 1774 lending record of the Union Subscription Library in Hatboro, Pennsylvania published in the 1932 volume of *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*.⁵ There is, however, an obvious objection against inferring the reading preferences of rural Pennsylvanians from that list. The members of the library composed a very small elite group which clearly was dissatisfied with what local booksellers could provide and had the financial means that enabled them, through their subscription library, to pursue their broader interests. Like the private libraries of Philadelphia merchants the Hatboro Library record throws “. . . light on the cultural background and intellectual ambitions . . .” of the province’s social leaders;⁶ it does not, however, indicate what sorts of material most Pennsylvanians read.

It is in answer to this objection that Patrick Orr’s inventory gains its importance. Mr. Orr was a retailer residing in Lancaster town when he died in 1754. Along with a whole series of trade goods such as knives, ribbons, shoebuckles, and buttons that he had in his possession when he died, were 172 volumes of books. Here, evidently, was a stock of books chosen for their marketability among the backcountry residents of Pennsylvania.

The books that Patrick Orr had in his possession may be broken down into 5 rough categories: Belles-Lettres 80 (47%), Religious 63 (36%), School books and Guides to Practical Arts and Conduct 19 (11%), History, Travel, and Biography 6 (4%), and Unidentified 4 (2%). The heavy emphasis on belles-lettres, of course, is the most significant feature of this book list. Consisting of almost 1/2 of Mr. Orr’s supply they, undoubtedly, constituted the kind of books most frequently read by backcountry inhabitants. Even religious material, which excluding the Bible includes approximately 1/4 of Mr. Orr’s volumes and including the Bible a little over 1/3 of his stock, does not measure up well in comparison with the heavy emphasis on fine arts. One might argue, of course, that this mainly reflected the preferences of Presbyterian backcountrymen for the religious literature Mr. Orr carried was clearly intended for Presbyterian, Congregational, or Covenanter hands. Finally, in comparison to the largest two categories there was but a smattering of other kinds of reading. Apparently, there was not as much interest as one might suppose in the kind of didactic literature that school books, practical guides, and history and travel books represented.

Just as the books in Patrick Orr’s possession reveal something of the character of backcountry society so does the absence of certain kinds of volumes from his stock. Recently, colonial historians have laid heavy stress on the kind of political culture that colonists shared through their widespread acquaintance with English, radical whig literature.⁸ One such historian has gone so far as to suggest that in the

process of politicization that apparently occurred in the American colonies in the quarter-century prior to the Revolution was dependent upon an educational revolution in which colonists were exposed to and absorbed a set of liberal ideas which were to become basic "American" assumptions.⁹ In broad terms, of course, these interpretations may well be true but Patrick Orr's inventory does raise the question of true for whom. What is notoriously absent from Orr's stock of books, is a whole range of books on politics, law, philosophy, and history which apparently contributed so much to the formation of the American political culture. If Patrick Orr's inventory of books is indicative of the kinds of literature backcountry Pennsylvanians read in 1754, they had a long road to travel before they became the educated, politicized colonists who fully understood and accepted the peculiarly American whig ideology of the immediate pre-Revolutionary years.

PATRICK ORR'S STOCK OF BOOKS

| | <u>£</u> | <u>s</u> | <u>d</u> |
|---|----------|----------|----------|
| 1. 3 Large Bibles | | 2 | 8/0 |
| 2. 3 Robison Cruesoes | | 0 | 2/6 |
| 3. 4 Labelle Assamblee | | 1 | 0/0 |
| 4. 2 Newfairy Tayles | | 0 | 8/0 |
| 5. 5 Speling books | | 0 | 5/5 |
| 6. 2 dozen Comides & 2 doz Tragedies | | 1 | 15/0 |
| 7. 3 Boston on the covenant | | 0 | 8/0 |
| 8. 2 do: on four fold State | | 0 | 8/0 |
| 9. 4 Dun-Quixote | | 1 | 0/0 |
| 10. 1 Tour throu Ireland | | 0 | 3/0 |
| 11. 20 Shorter catechisms | | 0 | 2/0 |
| 12. 1 mare's Book-keeping | | 0 | 5/9 |
| 13. 4 Abernatheys Sermons | | 1 | 12/0 |
| 14. 3 Willisons Sacramentall Cathechism | | 0 | 8/0 |
| 15. 3 Tom Joanes | | 0 | 13/0 |
| 16. 11 Fishers Arthmaticks | | 2 | 15/0 |
| 17. 6 Psalters | | 0 | 5/0 |
| 18. 3 Willison on the Sabath | | 0 | 8/0 |
| 19. 3 Peregion Pickle | | 0 | 15/0 |
| 20. 4 Pamela | | 1 | 0/0 |
| 21. 4 Female Spectors | | 1 | 0/0 |
| 22. 8 Spectators | | 11 | 0/0 |
| 23. 1 Salmon Gazater | | 0 | 5/0 |
| 24. 4 Gilt Bibles & 4 common do | | 1 | 11/0 |
| 25. 1 Art of pretching | | 0 | 1/6 |
| 26. 11 Testements | | 0 | 14/8 |
| 27. 2d, 3d, & 4th Volumes of military history | | 0 | 12/0 |
| 28. 1 Reflection on redicule | | 0 | 2/6 |
| 29. 1 Clevlands life | | 0 | 5/0 |
| 30. 1 Ansons Voyages | | 0 | 5/0 |

BIBLIOGRAPHY OF PATRICK ORR'S BOOK STOCK

1. _____
2. Defoe, Daniel. *The Life and Strange Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*. London, Various editions.
3. Unidentified.
4. Brooke, Henry. *A New Collection of Fairy Tales*. London, 1750.
5. _____
6. _____
7. Boston, Rev. Thomas. *A View of the Covenant of Grace From the Sacred Records: Wherein, the Parties in the Covenant . . . and the Administrations Thereof are Distinctly Considered . . . to which is Subjoined, a Memorial Concerning Personal and Family Fasting and Humiliation, Presented to Saints and Sinners*. Edinburgh, 1742.
8. Boston, Rev. Thomas. *Human Nature in its Fourfold State . . . in Several Practical Discourses: By a Minister of the Gospel in the Church of Scotland*. (?). 1720.
9. Cervantes Saavedra, Miquel de. *Don Quixote*. Various editions.
10. *A Tour Through Ireland. In Several Letters, Wherein the Present State of that Kingdom is Considered and the Most Noted Cities, Towns, Seats, Rivers, Buildings, etc. are Described. . . to Which is Prefix'd, a Description of the Road from London to Holy-Head, By Two English Gentlemen*. (W. R. Chetwood?) London, 1748.
11. Westminster Assembly of Divines. *The Shorter Catechism of the Reverend Assembly of Divines, with the Proofs Thereof Out of the Scriptures in Words at Length. Which are Either Some of The Former Quoted Places, or Others Gathered from Their Other Writings: All Fitted Both for Brevity and Clearness, to This Their Form of Sacred Words. For the Benefit of Christians in General, and of Youth and Children in Understanding in Particular; That They With More Ease May Acquaint Themselves With the Truth According to the Scriptures, and With the Scriptures Themselves*. Philadelphia (?), 1749.
12. Mair, John. *Book-Keeping Methodiz'd; Or, A Methodical Treatise of Merchant Accompts, According to the Italian Form . . . to Which is Added, A Large Appendix . . . Second Edition With Additions, etc*. Edinburgh, 1741.
13. Abernethy, Rev. John. *Sermons on Various Subjects . . . With a Large Preface [by James Duchal] Containing the Life of the Author*. 4 vols. London, 1748-1751.
14. Willison, Rev. John. *A Sacramental Catechism: Or a Familiar Instructor for Young Communicants . . . to Which are Added, an Action Sermon on Revelations xxii.17, and Sacramental Speeches, etc*. (place of publication and date unknown).
15. Fielding, Henry. *The History of Tom Jones, A Foundling*. London, Various editions.

16. Fisher, George. *Arithmetick in the Plainest and Most Concise Methods Hitherto Extant. With New Improvements for Dispatch of Business in all the Several Rules. As Also Fractions Vulgar and Decimal . . . The Seventh Edition, With . . . Additions, and . . . Improvements, etc.* London, 1748.
17. _____
18. Willison, Rev. John. *A Treatise Concerning the Sanctifying the Lords Day . . . Second Edition, With Additions.* (An Help for Prayer, etc.) Edinburgh, 1722.
19. Smollett, Tobias George. *The Adventures of Peregrine Pickle. In Which are Included, Memoirs of a Lady of Quality.* London, 1751.
20. Richardson, Samuel. *Pamela; or Virtue Rewarded, in a Series of Familiar Letters From a Beautiful Young Damsel to Her Parents etc.* London, 1741.
21. *The Female Spectator.* By Eliza Haywood. 2nd edition, 4 vols. London, 1748.
22. *The Spectator.* By Addison, Steele, and others. London, various editions (possibly one of the 8 vol. editions published between 1744 and 1750).
23. Salmon, Thomas. *The Modern Gazetteer: Or, A Short View of the Several Nations of the World, etc.* London, 1746.
24. _____
25. Smalridge, George. *The Art of Preaching, in Imitation of Horace's Art of Poetry.* London, printed. Philadelphia reprinted, 1739.
26. _____
27. Rolt, Richard. *An Impartial Representation of the Conduct of the Several Powers in Europe, Engaged in the Late General War; With an Account of Their Military and Naval Operations, From the Commencement of Hostilities, in 1739, to the Treaty of Aix la Chapelle, in 1748.* 4 vols. London, 1749.
28. Morvan de Belle-Garde, Jean Baptiste. *Reflections Upon Ridicule; or, What it is That Makes a Man Ridiculous; and the Means to Avoid it . . .* London, 1706.
29. Cleveland, Monsieur. *The Life and Entertaining Adventures of Mr. Cleveland, Natural Son of Oliver Cromwell, Written by Himself, etc.* [Actually written in French then Translated by A. F. Prevost d'Exiles]. London, 1734.
30. Anson, George. Baron Anson. *A Voyage Around the World, in the Years MDCCXL, I, II, III, IV, by George Anson, Esq. . . . Compiled from Papers . . . of Lord Anson . . . by Richard Walter (and Benjamin Robins) . . . Illustrated with Forty-two Copper-Plates (including a Portrait).* London, 1748.

NOTES

¹ Frederick B. Tolles, *Meeting House and Counting House, The Quaker Merchants of Colonial Philadelphia, 1682-1763* (Chapel Hill, 1948), 144-229; Carl Bridenbaugh, "The Press and the Book in Eighteenth Century Philadelphia," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 65 (1941), 1-30; Carl and Jessica Bridenbaugh, *Rebels and Gentlemen, Philadelphia in the Age of Franklin* (New York, 1942); Edwin Wolf, 2nd, "Franklin and His Friends Choose Their Books," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 80 (1956), 11-36.

² Bridenbaugh, *Rebels and Gentlemen*, 87-90, 95-96, 98-99.

³ Alan Tully, "Literacy Levels and Educational Development in Rural Pennsylvania, 1729-1775," *Pennsylvania History*, 39 (1972), 301-312; Kenneth A. Lockridge, *Literacy in Colonial New England, An Enquiry into the Social Context of Literacy in the Early Modern West* (New York, 1974), 72-101.

⁴ Peter J. Parker, "The Philadelphia Printer: A Study of an Eighteenth Century Businessman," *Business History Review*, 40 (1966), 30-31.

⁵ Chester T. Hallenbeck, "A Colonial Reading List," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 56 (1932), 289-340.

⁶ Edwin Wolf, 2nd, "The First Books and Printed Catalogues of the Library Company of Philadelphia," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 78 (1954), 45.

⁷ Patrick Orr's Inventory, 1754, Lancaster County Historical Society Public Records Archives.

⁸ Bernard Bailyn, *The Origins of American Politics*. The Charles K. Colver Lectures, Brown University, 1965. (New York, 1968), 3-58.

⁹ Lawrence A. Cremin, *American Education, The Colonial Experience, 1607-1783*. (New York, 1970), 415-563.