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A Scottish Printer in Late-Eighteenth-Century Philadelphia: Robert Simpson's Journey from Apprentice to Entrepreneur

IN JUNE 1788, A SIXTEEN-YEAR-OLD boy from Edinburgh left his home and family for America. Accompanied by a couple with whom he was friendly, Robert Simpson boarded the *Alexander* at Londonderry and endured a difficult journey to Philadelphia. The travelers had left home with great hopes. His companions, James Key and his wife, whose printing business and circulating library had failed in Scotland, were eager to start anew in America. Simpson himself, while unsure what he would do overseas, looked forward to adventure and to the possibility of returning home an

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established man. When he made his way back to Scotland almost a decade later, he was an entrepreneur whose business ventures had brought him a small competence and whose career as a printer, publisher, and businessman in Scotland was just beginning.

We know relatively little about how the hopes and expectations that drew thousands of immigrants to post-revolutionary America compared to the realities they met there. Surely, for many of the almost 5,000 leaving Great Britain (including Scotland) for the Philadelphia region between 1783 and 1799, "hope for better luck" was a motive driving their decision to emigrate.[1] The story of Robert Simpson's years in Philadelphia shows us how the young immigrant's ambitions changed as he learned to adjust to new circumstances. Once he learned a trade, he found that economic factors and a generally high level of competition made the traditional ladder of advancement difficult to climb. Yet he also perceived the new opportunities for enterprising members of his trade and he wasted little time in pursuing them. He learned how to capitalize on these opportunities, but shortly after his initial success, he chose, in the face of a variety of uncertainties, to turn homeward.[2]

There are two main sources for reconstructing Simpson's story. The first is a manuscript book containing copies of letters he sent home. This book served as a sort of diary for the voyager, containing reports to his parents, brothers and sister, and friends that document his journey in a chronological and journalistic fashion.[3] Although his letters are relatively spontaneous, Simpson clearly used the numerous travel accounts of the period as his model. He had devoured travel literature while still in Scotland and it fueled his desire to see the world. The other source is his memoirs, which described

[1] Hans-Jürgen Grabbe, "European Immigration to the United States in the Early National Period, 1783-1829," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 133 (1989); emigration figure drawn from table 1, p. 192; quote from p. 201.

[2] It is interesting to compare Simpson's tale with the autobiographical account of the indentured servant William Moraley in Susan E. Klepp and Billy G. Smith, eds., *The Infortunate: The Voyage and Adventures of William Moraley, an Indentured Servant* (University Park, Pa., 1992). Although the two men were separated by about two generations and the events surrounding America's break from Britain, both experienced and described the difficulties and dangers of the transatlantic crossing, the conditions found in Philadelphia, and the lives of working people in urban America. Moraley also returned home after his travels.

[3] Robert Simpson's letterbook, "Copy of Letters, &c &c, January 1st 1790," is in the manuscript department of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania (hereafter, Letterbook). The letters, however, begin in 1788 and continue through his voyage from Scotland. There are also some miscellaneous letters, accounts, and observations, dating as late as 1807, written after he had returned to Scotland.

his adventures in a more formal fashion. They were written well after his American experiences—sometime between 1828 and his death in 1845—and in a more self-conscious style than the letterbook, possibly an indication that they were intended for publication.[4] While there are some discrepancies between the memoirs and the letterbook, these are relatively minor.

Simpson was born to a master carpenter and received a solid foundation in Latin at the prestigious high school in Edinburgh. He took "the two humanity classes under Professor Hill in the College," which would have provided him with a more advanced education in Latin language and literature, as well as Roman history and culture.[5] At fifteen, he clerked for a Writer of the Signet but became restless after immersing himself in the "many volumes of voyages and travels" lent him by James Key. When Key suggested that Simpson accompany him and his wife to America in 1788, the young man jumped at the chance, and after some hard persuasion, he convinced his parents to let him go.[6] Like many immigrants, however, Simpson found life in urban America unexpectedly difficult, despite the network of fellow Scots with whom he associated in Philadelphia. He discovered that young men with useful skills and trades fared better than those who, like himself, could claim only a good education.[7] Other than his father's trade, little is known about the status of his parents, but the encouragement they gave to his education and their disapproval of his intention to learn a trade clearly suggest

[4] The memoir was published as "Narrative of a Scottish Adventurer: From the Memoirs of Robert Simpson, Esqr., Edinburgh, 1827," in the *Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society* 27 (1949), 41-67 (hereafter, "Narrative"). According to the editor, the piece was submitted by Simpson's grandnephew, L. A. Hogg, who sent it from India where he was engaged in missionary work. Although the title suggests that it was originally published in 1827, I have been unable to locate any reference to a published version, and internal evidence suggests that it could not have been written in full until after Jackson's election as president in 1828. Simpson may have had the memoirs privately printed in a small run.

[5] On the high quality of Scottish high school education, see James Scotland, *The History of Scottish Education* (2 vols., London, 1969) and Alexander Law, *Education in Edinburgh in the Eighteenth Century* (Edinburgh, 1965). On Professor John Hill and the content of his humanity courses, see Hugo Arnot, *The History of Edinburgh* (Edinburgh, 1779), 405-6. I am grateful to Richard Sher for referring me to this source.

[6] "Narrative," 41.

[7] Billy G. Smith's research on occupational mobility corroborates this point. "The development of a marketable skill," he concludes, "was a key ingredient to achieving moderate success. . . . " in *The 'Lower Sort': Philadelphia's Laboring People, 1750-1800* (Ithaca, 1990), 148.

that they hoped their son would have a future as a professional.[8]

The 1790s ushered in economic growth, large amounts of capital through trade, increased opportunities for advancement, and an atmosphere of optimistic speculation, but many urban Americans continued to feel the strains of inflation and unemployment.[9] Banks served the credit needs of established merchants, investors, and artisans, but not young tradesmen just starting out.[10] When Simpson first arrived in 1789, he noticed that many tradesmen were suffering economically while merchants flourished: "Trade at present in this part of the world is pretty brisk in the mercantile line, but in nothing else—the masons & wrights are all mostly idle, and money very scarce."[11] It is not surprising then that Simpson spent his first two years of sporadic employment collecting debts for merchants. Eventually, however, he decided to pursue a trade; he apprenticed himself to a printer. He tried to explain to his parents in one of his many letters home that the prospects for a well-educated young man in America were dismal: "In this country, [clerks] may be employed for 2 or 3 months in the year and idle the rest . . . in consequence of which, I resolved with the advice of my friends, to go to a trade which is the most . . . secure way of bread."[12] Printing was a logical choice: he was certainly literate and his friend and role model, Key, was a printer. But Simpson also believed from the start that "the printing business . . . is the genteelist and most flourishing in this country."[13] The claim for gentility would, he hoped, satisfy his parents, yet it is also clear that his own aspira-

[8] In a letter dated April 19, 1791, Simpson reacted to his parents' disapproval of his printing apprenticeship: "I am sorry to learn that the step which I have taken as the most advantageous for my own interest and as I think the fittest in this country to be taken in my situation, viz. that of binding myself to a genteel and profitable employment has met with your disapprobation." Simpson to his father and mother, June 1, 1790, Letterbook.

[9] On unemployment, wages, inflation, and economic opportunity, see Smith, *The Lower Sort*, 142-49, 129-38.

[10] For a discussion of economic conditions and banking following the Revolution, see Thomas Doerflinger, *A Vigorous Spirit of Enterprise: Merchants and Economic Development in Revolutionary Philadelphia* (Chapel Hill, 1986), 303-4. The Bank of North America clearly catered to larger business interests, although, as Doerflinger points out, "substantial numbers of artisans and retailers also used the bank." The retailers who used the bank had high-volume businesses, however, and were already established in the world of credit when they became bank customers. For an analysis of social stratification in Philadelphia during the 1790s, see Richard G. Miller, *Philadelphia—The Federalist City: A Study of Urban Politics, 1789-1801* (Port Washington, N.Y., 1976).

[11] Simpson to his father and mother, May 1, 1789, Letterbook.

[12] Simpson to his father and mother, June 1, 1790, Letterbook. "Narrative," 47-48.

[13] Ibid.

tions ultimately to rise above artisanal status played a role in his decision.

Simpson contracted with Andrew Brown, editor and publisher of the *Federal Gazette and Philadelphia Daily Advertiser,* to serve an abbreviated apprenticeship.[14] Simpson was eighteen, older than most new apprentices, but Brown agreed to take him because of his education. Simpson quickly came to regret his contract, however. He claimed that Brown abused him and the other apprentices and journeymen. In fact, the abuse grew so intolerable that Simpson resorted to making a formal complaint against his master.[15] Simpson told the Mayor's Court that Brown "hath beaten and abused [me] repeatedly and without Provocation or Cause, but merely from the Transports of his own Rage." Brown had also, according to the petition, "torn [Simpson's] Clothes and bruised him with his Fist in the most indecent and outrageous Manner and even threatens the Petitioner's Life in Terms of the utmost Violence."[16]

Simpson went before the Mayor's Court armed with witnesses of his good behavior. He summoned "all of the journeymen of the office who swore, that they had always seen me behave soberly, diligently, and like a faithful apprentice." Further, some of the merchants for whom he had worked during his first two years in Philadelphia "swore to my good behaviour while in their service & gave me an excellent character."[17] Brown was reprimanded by the court but allowed to keep his apprentice. However, the mayor warned Brown that if Simpson should make further complaint, the apprenticeship would be nullified. In a subsequent letter home, Simpson reported a shift in Brown's behavior, noting that "since [the suit] he is so well satisfied with my conduct, and hath conceived such an opinion of my abilities, that he hath given me the charge of his office."[18] His formal education which he had found so useless among clerks, now stood him in good

[14] Most apprentices began their terms between the ages of thirteen and fifteen and served until they were twenty-one. The indentures generally called for masters to provide some measure of protection, food, clothing, and lodging, and the rudiments of schooling. Simpson's age (eighteen) and education allowed him to negotiate a short apprenticeship with Brown. On apprenticeships, see Rollo G. Silver, *The American Printer, 1787-1825* (Charlottesville, Va., 1967), 2-4.

[15] The Philadelphia Mayor's Court Dockets (Philadelphia City Archives) contain the petitions of apprentices against their masters. Almost all of the them were by older apprentices who had already served most of their years. Simpson's petition is in the first volume of the Mayor's Court Docket, 1789-92, 225.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Simpson to his father and mother, April 19, 1791, Letterbook.

[18] Ibid.

stead among printers. Brown's change of heart, Simpson told his parents, was "not owing to any thing of my merit, but to your goodness in giving me an education superior to my equals."[19]

Simpson's action against his master was bold, but he was clearly supported by his friends, most of whom formed a network of fellow countrymen. To begin with, Key, his companion from Edinburgh, helped him lodge the initial complaint and seek out legal advice. Key carried with him on their crossing from Scotland a letter of recommendation from a friend who had ties in Philadelphia. This enabled him to get immediate work in John Dunlap's printing shop, and this employment allowed the Keys and Simpson to rent an empty house. When Simpson was short on cash, he asked a Scottish friend of his father for a loan. Another Scot offered Simpson his first job, collecting debts in Maryland, and still another employed him as a clerk in his country store. When Simpson answered Andrew Brown's ad for an apprentice, it was the first time he went to work for a non-Scot (Brown was Irish). Eventually Simpson argued with Mrs. Key over money and went to board with a Mrs. Maclintock. As the years passed, Simpson himself was occasionally sought out by more recent immigrants from Scotland. In response to inquiries from home, he offered advice about settling in America for various kinds of tradesmen. And some who came brought with them his name and references from the old country.[20]

Another source of Simpson's strength came from his religious faith. He was a fervent churchgoer and often wrote of religious and ethical concerns in his letters home.[21] In fact, it appears that part of his dispute with Brown stemmed from Brown's insistence that Simpson work on Sundays. Writing to his minister in Scotland, he explained that "[i]t is no uncommon thing here for the people to work on the Sabbath, & they sometimes do it in the office in which I work, to avoid which and other abuses, I was under the necessity of going to law with my master." Simpson described further his method of recourse against Brown:

[19] Ibid.

[20] All of these relationships are discussed, in passing, in the Letterbook and in his "Narrative."

[21] Simpson to his brother, William Simpson, Nov. 27, 1793. He also conveyed his distaste for American religious customs generally. When asked by a merchant for whom he worked temporarily to "walk at a burial with a woman of bad fame which he kept in his house (the women in this country go along with the men at burials hand in hand)," Simpson refused, and this, combined with the merchant's requirement that he collect money on the Sabbath, brought their relationship to an end. Simpson to his father, Jan. 1, 1790, Letterbook.

> I in company with Mr. Key went to a lawyer who advised me to make [Brown] answer for his conduct at the Court which I did, and in consequence of the reprimand he there got, I now am the only person in the office, who does not work occasionly [*sic*] on the Sabbath, and now [even when] in the greatest hurry he never once asks me if I will assist on the Sabbath.[22]

In his letters and memoirs Simpson made much of this issue in his battle with Brown, but it was not included as a complaint in his petition to the court. Interestingly, an apprentice's petition to the court heard immediately *before* Simpson's was based on this same issue and the petition was dismissed. Simpson may therefore have perceived that this line of argument would not impress the mayor. After all, as Simpson himself understood, working on Sundays was not particularly unusual and was necessary for a newspaper that appeared on Mondays, as did the *Pennsylvania Gazette.*

If Simpson downplayed the religious reasons for lodging his complaint, it was not because they were secondary in his mind. In both the letterbook and the memoirs, Simpson described the ways in which providence had many times, and against all odds, spared his life. He sensed that he was in some way protected, which seems to have encouraged him to take risks. He also recorded portions of sermons that he found to be particularly inspiring. He wrote home about his churchgoing: "I have sometimes attended the Episcopal church, but I am disgusted with their useless ceremonies, I now attend the Presbyterian church, which being agreeable to the manner in which I was educated, is greatly to my liking."[23] Andrew Brown and his family worshiped at St. Paul's Episcopal Church where, it is likely, that Simpson, in the company of the master he despised, witnessed the "useless ceremonies." Brown was a regular worshiper at St. Paul's and apparently took his family, apprentices included, to church with him, even if he required their services in the newspaper office afterward. Simpson no doubt concluded that his master's foul behavior was matched somehow to his high form of worship. The Scot may have found more congenial worship at either the Scots Presbyterian Church between Third and Fourth streets on Spruce, or the Third Presbyterian at Fourth and Pine, where the parishioners were

[22] Nov. 26, 1791, Letterbook.

[23] Simpson to his brother, William Simpson, Nov. 27, 1793, Letterbook.

"with few exceptions of the middling class."[24] In any case, switching to a Presbyterian church was not simply a statement of ethnicity and conscience but an act of autonomy.

While his own struggles with Brown seem to have ended with his successful suit, Simpson viewed himself as the savior of his fellow apprentices and journeymen. He continued to see Brown as a "tyrant" who, "however much he may flourish in this life . . . will one day or other receive the punishment so justly his due."[25] His somewhat evangelical pronouncements on Brown's unjustness and empty religiosity translated into action when, upon the satisfactory outcome of his suit, Simpson told his fellow workers to blame all problems on him, since he was protected by the Mayor's Court order; this way *no one* in the shop would be punished. The result of this scheme, according to Simpson, was "the great mortification of Mr. Brown!"[26]

Like some other printers, Brown went through apprentices and journeymen at a rapid pace. It was Simpson's belief that Brown was "such a tyrant that no journeymen could remain long with him." He calculated that Brown exhausted 150 journeymen in the three years he was bound to him, and of sixteen apprentices during his tenure, he was the only one to complete his term. This rate of turnover, while perhaps exaggerated, was not particularly unusual in American printing shops.[27]

[24] Archibald Alexander, as quoted in Lefferts A. Loetscher, *Facing the Enlightenment and Pietism: Archibald Alexander and the Founding of Princeton Theological Seminary* (Westport, Conn., 1983), 92. It may not have been so unusual for Simpson to have worshiped at a non-Presbyterian church, even if he hadn't attended St. Paul's as his master's apprentice. Ned Landsman notes that for many Scots in America "religious affiliations . . . proved to be fluid." See his "Ethnicity and National Origin Among British Settlers in the Philadelphia Region: Pennsylvania Immigration in the Wake of *Voyagers to the West*," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 133 (1989), 173.

[25] Simpson to Frank [?], May 26, 1794, Letterbook. The Feb. 6, 1797, issue of Brown's *Pennsylvania Gazette* reported that Brown and his wife and daughters were killed in a fire only two days earlier. (His son, Andrew Brown, Jr., carried on the printing of the paper.) The obituary notice says that Brown and his family were buried in the churchyard at St. Paul's, where they worshiped. Two apprentices saved themselves by escaping out of a second-story window.

[26] "Narrative," 48.

[27] "Narrative," 48. It is impossible to count the numbers of journeymen in Philadelphia, since they were usually not heads of households and, therefore, not in the city directories or census schedules of 1790 and 1800. The large number of journeymen in Brown's shop does reflect the rapid expansion of the ranks of the printing trade in the early national period. According to the first U.S. census of 1790 and Philadelphia city directories for 1795, 1799, and 1805, there were thirty printers in 1790, forty-three in 1795, thirty-nine in 1799, and seventy-three in 1805. These were individuals whose occupations were recorded as "printer," or "printer and book seller," "printer and book binder," "printer and stationer," and so on. Yet even this 143 percent increase pales by comparison to the

Compared to the guild-oriented British and Irish printing trades, there were few formal rules and regulations governing the American trade.[28] Simpson noted that "[t]here are no established regulations here as at home in the printing business and it does not signify whether an appren-tice serves 3, 4, 5 or 7 years to the business." He further observed that in America, master printers relied too heavily on apprentice work, shutting journeymen out of the system, and that "a vast many [masters] do with nothing but apprentices, there being no rules or regulations to restrain them."[29] Journeymen were left in an untenable position: their work was dim-inishing and so were their chances of reaching master status. Opportunities for journeymen to advance without master patronage were slim, and the pool of journeymen who did not advance to master status grew disproportionately in the years of the early republic. It was increasingly common for journeymen to work their entire lives without becoming proprietors of their own businesses. They were caught in a tangle of wage struggles and job competition.[30] This lack of job security and stability led journeymen to move from one situation to another, rarely staying in one place for long.[31] In 1790, for instance, Mathew Carey, the Philadelphia printer and publisher, described the constantly fluctuating labor supply in his own shop:

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numbers of apprentices who completed their indentures and became journeymen in this period. Most master printers kept anywhere between three and six apprentices at any one time. Sources: *The Prospect of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1795), *The Philadelphia Directory for 1799* (Philadelphia, 1799), and *The Philadelphia Directory for 1805* (Philadelphia, [1805]), *The First Census of the United States*, Philadelphia County. Imprints were determined from Charles Evans, *American Bibliography* (Chicago, 1903-59); Roger Pattrell Bristol, *Supplement to Charles Evans' American Bibliography* (Charlottesville, 1961). For the period after 1800, imprints were determined by consulting Ralph R. Shaw and Richard H. Shoemaker, eds., *American Bibliography: A Preliminary Checklist, 1801-1819* (22 vols., New York, 1958-66).

[28] On the rules and regulations and the structure of the American trade, see Silver, *American Printer*; Mark A. Lause, *Some Degree of Power: From Hired Hand to Union Craftsman in the Preindustrial American Printing Trades, 1778-1815* (Fayetteville, Ark., 1991); and Rosalind Remer, *Printers and Men of Capital: Philadelphia Book Publishers in the New Republic* (Philadelphia, 1996), 39-52. On the role of guilds in the British trades, see Marjorie Plant, *The English Book Trade: An Economic History of the Making and Sale of Books* (London, 1965); and M. Pollard, *Dublin's Trade in Books, 1550-1800* (Oxford and New York, 1989).

[29] Simpson to his father, Oct. 1, 1792, Letterbook.

[30] Ibid. and Edwin J. Perkins, "The Entrepreneurial Spirit in Colonial America: The Foundations of Modern Business History," *Business History Review* 63 (1989), 171; W. J. Rorabaugh, *The Craft Apprentice: From Franklin to the Machine Age in America* (New York, 1986). On contraction in the printing trade, specifically, see Lause, *Some Degree of Power*, chap. 1.

[31] Lause, *Some Degree of Power*, 40-41.

> Business goes on pretty well, though Lang has gone to [Thomas] Dobson—Haswell to New York—and Tate has quit in a fit of drunkenness. Davis, who formerly worked at Mr. James's is on the Bible, with an apprentice whom Bailey turned over to us. They can easily execute a half sheet a day. I have engaged one Springer, a decent, quiet, industrious pressman & Brackstone I have been once more obliged to employ. I have taken two apprentices since your departure—both very decent lads . . . we have therefore six apprentices in the house.[32]

All these personnel changes suggest a significant level of mobility among journeymen as well as a heavy reliance on apprentices, even in the shop of a fair and genial master.

Simpson was a keen observer of the Philadelphia scene and he understood the problems that he would face when his apprenticeship expired. He believed that competition among journeymen was so high that constant and profitable employment would be impossible. While bound to Brown, Simpson discovered that the journeymen in the shop were so jealous of their positions that they were unwilling to help another into their ranks. Despite the fact that journeymen working for Brown were willing to vouch for Simpson's character before the Mayor's Court, Simpson reported in his petition that Brown was "neither willing nor capable to instruct him [in the trade], and the journeymen refuse to do it alledging [*sic*] that it is no part of their contract."[33] This is consistent with the trend, beginning in the 1790s, toward labor organization among journeymen printers.[34] While journeymen were still barely organized enough to strike for higher wages, the first two decades of the nineteenth century would see efforts to restrict entry into the

[32] Carey to James H. Stewart, June 6, 1790, Carey Letterbook for 1790, Lea and Febiger Collection, Historical Society of Pennsylvania. In 1793 Ebenezer T. Andrews, of Thomas and Andrews in Worcester, expressed similar disgust with journeymen and their increasing demands when he wrote, "I am almost sick of Journeymen, they are in general so poor workmen. We have got a very good set of lads [apprentices], and I think I shall be able to do all our work without any, or with very few Journeymen—we have 12 lads in the office." Quoted in Silver, *American Printer*, 10.

[33] Mayor's Court Docket, 1789-92, 225.

[34] Lause, *Some Degree of Power*, chap. 2; Ethelbert Stewart, "A Documentary History of Early Organizations of Printers," United States Department of Commerce and Labor *Bulletin* 11 (1905), 857-1033.

trade, something that clearly reflected the tensions brought about by a rapidly growing pool of journeymen.[35]

Simpson also fretted about the huge influx of immigrant tradesmen who made work harder to get, drove wages down, and, in his estimation, brought about skyrocketing inflation.[36] He surmised that "at the close of the [Revolutionary] war, . . . this was really a good country for tradesmen of every description, when there were high wages and provisions cheap; but the knowledge of this has brought tradesmen of every description to this country in such numbers, that time is now gone."[37] Simpson's assessments of such economic conditions as unemployment and inflation tended to change as often as his own circumstances. Ignoring the irony of his negative views of new immigrants, Simpson cast about for a way to attain a competence when his term expired.

At the end of his three-year apprenticeship, he worked for a number of master printers in Philadelphia as a journeyman printer. After leaving Brown's shop, Simpson found that he could make six to seven dollars per week at most shops and eight dollars as the overseeing journeyman in the office of John Fenno, Federalist publisher of the *Gazette of the United States and Daily Evening Advertiser*. The contrast with Brown's shop was marked, and he wrote to a friend that "I have been always in good employ, ever since I left Brown, which I did the moment I was free, & return thanks to God for preserving me in the midst of so much villainy, wickedness, and cruelty, as I labored under, whilst in the clutches of that vile Monster, whose name alone fills me with horror."[38] Initially, he was pleased with his employment in Fenno's shop, saying that his employer "is very much of a gentleman, and I am extremely happy."[39] Once happily employed, his view of the economic indicators of the times became more optimistic. He now believed that

[35] In an 1810 list of wages and rules established by a meeting of journeymen printers, it was stipulated that "no pressman shall teach an apprentice press work without the benefit of his work 13 weeks nor shall he teach an apprentice who is more than 18 years old, and who is bound for less than three years." These rules were recorded in a memorandum book by Lydia Bailey, a Philadelphia printer. See Bailey Memorandum Book, HSP. Simpson would certainly have been excluded from instruction if these rules had been in effect during his apprenticeship.

[36] Simpson to his father, June 1, 1793, Letterbook.

[37] Ibid.

[38] His correspondent, coincidentally, was named Andrew Brown, and Simpson's comment about Brown's name may have been a rare (for Simpson) joke. Simpson to Andrew Brown, Dec. 29, 1794, Letterbook.

[39] Simpson to Frank [?], May 26, 1794, Letterbook.

tradesmen were flourishing. "[T]radesmen of all description get pretty good wages," he wrote, "generally from 3 to 6 shillings Stlg. per day." But he complained about the hard work. Laboring was "peculiarly distressing in the warm months," he wrote, and hours "in the printing [shop] . . . [are] generally from 6 in the morning till dusk, and in the winter from 7 in the morning till 9 in the evening." Inflation also took its toll on his income, since "provisions are more than double the price they were when I first came . . . [and] boarding and lodging is from 9 to 14 shillings Stg. per week."[40] In only six months he began to express doubts about his new employment.

On a more personal level, Simpson was a self-confessed bird of passage, hoping to return to Scotland an established man. Like many Scots who emigrated to the Americas, he never seemed to have considered leaving Scotland forever; he only intended to be away long enough to see the world and to earn an independence for himself.[41] His letters indicate that he disliked Philadelphia and that the sooner he could return home with a competence the better. He never got used to America and, speaking for himself and his Scottish friends, wrote that "none of us like it, and it is by no means a country that I would wish to settle in; however as journey work in the printing business is a little more profitable here than at home, I shall remain a few years till I see how things turn out."[42] He waxed nostalgic about his homeland, noting that "[t]he people of this country are by no means what they are at home; a mixture of all nations under the Sun, there is no trust nor confidence to be put in them, every one trying to cheat each other; and religion does not flourish here as at home."[43] Toward the end of his stay, his impressions had not improved: "I am no admirer either of the people of this country or their manners."[44]

On top of his homesickness and financial insecurity, Simpson worried that he might never be able to reach master status in America *or* in Scotland, and this led him to make alternate plans for his future. While some American printers set up trusted journeymen in other parts of the country, this generally required a long and favorable association with a master printer,

[40] Simpson to his father, Feb. 1, 1793, Letterbook.

[41] On the ambitions and intentions of a class of educated, professional Scots—"sojourners"—see Alan Karras, *Sojourners in the Sun: Scottish Migrants in Jamaica and the Chesapeake, 1740-1800* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1992).

[42] Simpson to his father, June 1, 1793, Letterbook.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Ibid., May 24, 1796.

something Simpson clearly had not had with Brown. In Scotland, moreover, trade rules and regulations might have prevented him from becoming a master, or even a journeyman, on account of his short apprenticeship. He wrote to his parents that in Scotland "... I would probably be despised as a person, who not having served an equal term of years, was unworthy of employment."[45] He concluded that under these adverse conditions, the only solution was to return to his native country with enough money to establish himself above the trade altogether. In order to accomplish this goal he embarked on a publishing scheme, "wishing to better my situation if possible, and thinking the time of youth the best."[46]

Ironically, Simpson may have been emboldened by his experiences and observations in Brown's shop. As much as Simpson had come to detest his master, he could not help but admire his unflagging commitment to his newspaper and his keen competitiveness. These qualities inspired a kind of awe in the young Scot and taught him the value of calculated risk or, put simply, entrepreneurship. While Simpson served the publisher, the "paper was enlarged three times, as Brown was most active in hiring boats and going down the river to meet the Captains as soon as he heard of their arrival from Europe." Brown was thus able to get access to overseas newspapers and immediately print from these sources. Scooping his competitors was essential for building up Brown's largely commercial readership. Simpson witnessed the success of the method and noted that "the merchants in the Coffee room ... were so highly pleased both with such dispatch and attention, that many additional subscribers and advertisements were the consequences."[47]

Brown was also able to make use of his educated apprentice to boost his political readership. He was among the first to report congressional speeches in his newspaper, and he sent Simpson to Congress to take notes on the proceedings there.[48] Every hour another apprentice would collect copy from Simpson and by five o'clock, an hour after Congress adjourned, the evening newspaper would be ready for members of Congress to review.[49] Despite his hatred for Brown, Simpson clearly took pride in the fact that this scheme

[45] Ibid., Sept. 22, 1794.

[46] Ibid., July 25, 1795.

[47] "Narrative," 49.

[48] Ibid. On Brown's congressional reporting, see Donald H. Stewart, *The Opposition Press of the Federalist Period* (Albany, NY., 1969), 25-26.

[49] "Narrative," 49.

gave Brown's paper "the advantage over the Morning papers; in consequence of which our subscribers increased daily."[50] Simpson watched as Brown even managed to capitalize on a catastrophe. During the yellow fever epidemic of 1793, Brown was the only printer in the city to continue his newspaper, forcing his workers to stay in town and work right through the plague.[51] Brown's competitiveness and ingenuity, while hateful in some respects, impressed Simpson and may have influenced his decision to try his hand at publishing.

Simpson and two other young printers agreed that publishing a book would advance their ambitions "much better than working journey work, and if it does not, we have at least the consolation that it was an honest endeavour to do for the best."[52] This was a risky proposition. He chose to leap ahead to uncharted territory, leaving behind the familiar, if increasingly unsure, path of apprentice to journeyman to master. The structure of the trade was breaking down, leaving him few options; he could continue as a journeyman for an undetermined length of time, or he could step outside the structure and act as an entrepreneur. The latter choice enabled him to exercise at least some measure of economic autonomy. By making his stint as journeyman brief, and by skipping the stage of master altogether, he was molding himself after the many master printers in the 1790s who began to act as publishers.[53]

Simpson and his colleagues, James Key and J. H. Dobelbower, a young German immigrant, decided to publish by subscription an eight-volume work in octavo titled *The World Displayed, or A Curious Collection of Voyages and Travels*. The book first appeared in London in the 1760s and was published in parts through the early 1780s. Edited by Christopher Smart, Oliver Goldsmith, and Samuel Johnson, it is an anthology of travel writing,

[50] Ibid.

[51] Simpson to Frank [?], May 26, 1794, Letterbook. His correspondent was either an apprentice or journeyman who had worked for Brown and had run away. Simpson wrote: "I congratulate you on your safe deliverance from the infernal clutches of one of the greatest Tyrants that ever the World contained . . . " On Brown's newspaper publishing, see Clarence S. Brigham, *History and Bibliography of American Newspapers* (2 vols., Worcester, Mass., 1947), 2:905-6.

[52] Simpson to his father, July 25, 1795, Letterbook.

[53] For a discussion of master printers becoming publishers and the distinctions between printers and publishers, see Remer, *Printers and Men of Capital*, 49-68.

with essays on voyages of discovery both ancient and modern. It was an appropriate choice, since it was just the sort of book that had fired Simpson's imagination about travel in the first place.[54]

Subscription publishing was enormously popular throughout the early years of the decade because it offered a relatively risk-free way for would-be publishers with little or no capital or credit to publish.[55] Indeed, without the option of subscription publishing, these entrepreneurs would have had little chance to print their edition of *The World Displayed.* The partners advertised their proposed work in the major newspapers, requesting interested patrons to reserve their copies by signing up at any of "the principal booksellers in this city."[56] No payment was required in advance; payments would be taken when each weekly number appeared. In all, there would be forty-eight parts, consisting of eighty pages each. The payments received for early numbers would be used to finance the subsequent parts.

Once the partners had gathered enough signatures—they vowed not to proceed with less than four hundred—they could begin production. Armed with the assurance of their subscribers' names, they could then obtain the necessary materials and labor for their project. The list of subscribers served as a sort of collateral for the papermakers, engravers, and printer. Simpson, Key, and Dobelbower recognized that the cost of buying a press and materials and renting a shop would be prohibitive. Like true publishers they hired a printer, young John Thompson, who had just arrived from England and who already had the required equipment. That three immigrant journeymen saw no utility in buying their own equipment suggests that *The World Displayed* was an investment in the beginning of a publishing career, not a

[54] Published travel narratives could have a powerful effect on impressionable readers. Simpson claims that they fueled his desire to see the world and surely his friend Key, who supplied him with the travel books from his collection in the first place, was an avid reader of them as well. Washington Irving, eleven years younger than Simpson, discussed the effect that romances and travel books had had on him, recalling that the *World Displayed* and many others "were more delightful to me than a fairy tale and the plates by which they were illustrated are indelibly stamped on my reccollection [*sic*] . . . " As quoted in Andrew B. Myers' chronology of Irving's life in *Washington Irving: Bracebridge Hall, Tales of a Traveller, The Alhambra* (New York, 1991), 1051.

[55] For a general discussion of publishing by subscription, see Donald Farren, "Subscription: A Study of the Eighteenth-Century American Book Trade," D.L.S. diss., Columbia University, 1982.

[56] Their ads appeared in the summer of 1795 in the *Aurora,* published by Benjamin Franklin Bache's widow and William Duane, John Fenno's *Gazette of the United States,* and Dunlap and Claypoole's *American Daily Advertiser.* The ads listed the terms of the proposal to publish, the price to subscribers, and information on where to subscribe.

stepping stone to a printing career. It further suggests that they did not view Philadelphia as their permanent home.

The publishers obtained 1,463 subscribers and probably printed at least 1,500 copies. The work attracted the attention of a variety of luminaries: Governor Mifflin, Chief Judge McKean, Mayor Clarkson, U.S. Treasurer Samuel Meredith, Aaron Burr, Tench Coxe, and a number of members of the House of Representatives and Pennsylvania's General Assembly. Clearly, Simpson's greatest coup was obtaining John Adams's signature. He reported that Adams, then vice president, "received me in the kindest manner, enquired what countryman I was, subscribed his name, and desired his steward to bring a bottle of wine." Adams then "politely drank my health and great success to our undertaking."[57] In his later memoirs, Simpson also claimed to have called on Jefferson, Monroe, Madison, and Jackson, "all future presidents," and all of whom apparently expressed interest in the book.[58]

If most of the subscribers were less well known, however, they were no less important for Simpson's purposes. All of the major publishers and booksellers in Philadelphia subscribed, giving their approbation to the would-be publishers' project. Simpson himself took to the road to deliver books to subscribers and to sell the unsubscribed copies. Feeling that his partners were not unloading their shares energetically enough, he bought them out and headed south to promote the book in Baltimore, Annapolis, Alexandria, Georgetown, and then went north to do the same in New York. He found collecting and selling more difficult than he had imagined and certainly more difficult than obtaining subscribers had been. "There is not a week," he wrote to his brother, "but some [subscribers] run off, some go to jail, some die, & a thousand other events take place, impossible for us either to foresee or prevent, all tending to diminish the profits . . ."[59] Ultimately, Simpson must have consigned some remaining copies to auction, for Mathew Carey's salesman, Mason Locke Weems, reported from Virginia that the book "was

[57] "Narrative," 53-54.

[58] Ibid. He also claimed to have secured Washington's signature, but his name and the names of the "future presidents" do not appear on the printed subscription list. John Adams's name does. There is no particular reason to doubt the veracity of Simpson's claim, however, since he did call on and secure subscribers from the House of Representatives and other government offices. Subscription lists were printed early in the process and were bound with the first volume, and it is likely Washington and the others subscribed afterwards. In his letters home he did not mention meeting *any* of the famous or soon-to-be-famous men.

[59] Simpson to his brother, William Simpson, Jan. 1, 1796, Letterbook.

tried here at Alexandria the other day and the ballance of the edition was sold very readily."[60] The book was a modest success and the publishers delivered what they promised: an elegant, handsome, illustrated work. Simpson had projected that they would spend almost £2,000 sterling ($8,800) in production. The subscribers' price for the whole work was a rather hefty twelve dollars (just under three pounds).[61] If the partners sold the entire edition of 1,500 at full retail price, they would have shared a maximum total profit of around $9,200 (approximately £2,100). However, their profits were almost certainly smaller. The publishers likely provided discounts to the booksellers who subscribed for multiple copies. Copies sold at auction would also have brought lower prices, and travel expenses and auction consignments would have eaten away at their profits. Simpson reported to his brother that "if after all we are able to make near 1000 pounds amongst us (a matter at present very doubtful) we shall be very well satisfied."[62]

Encouraged by their modest success, Simpson and Key published another book by subscription in 1796: *Carver's Travels*. It was a logical extension of *The World Displayed*, which consisted of travels from all around the world, North America excepted. The new work consisted of Captain Jonathan Carver's travels "through the Interior Parts of North America, for more than five thousand miles . . . ," making it the appropriate companion or bookend to their first publication.[63] If *The World Displayed* brought the Old World to American readers, *Carver's Travels* added America to that world. The second project also made sense because the publishers could have easily advertised it and raised subscriptions while they were delivering the numbers of the first book, thus working to reinvest their earnings as they brought them in. *Carver's Travels* was an eighth of the size of *The World Displayed* and therefore required a much less substantial investment. It was a proven seller: three

[60] Emily Ellsworth Skeel, *Mason Locke Weems: His Work and His Ways* (3 vols., New York, 1929), 2:58.

[61] Simpson to his father, July 25, 1795, Letterbook. In one newspaper ad the partners asked to borrow a portrait of Columbus: "COLUMBUS: The publishers of the World Displayed, being desirous of ornamenting the first numbers of that work with a handsome Frontispiece, would be very thankful to any person in possession of a Portrait of COLUMBUS, if they would oblige them with it for a few days to copy from—The greatest care will be taken not to soil it." *Aurora*, June 19, 1795.

[62] Simpson to William Simpson, Jan. 1, 1796, Letterbook.

[63] Captain Jonathan Carver, *Three Years of Travels, through the Interior Parts of North-America* (Philadelphia, 1796). The first London edition of Carver appeared in 1778. Dobelbower also went on to publish with James Thackera, the engraver, William Pain's *Carpenter's Dictionary* (Philadelphia, 1797) and William Alexander's *History of Women* (Philadelphia, 1796).

other Philadelphia editions had appeared and sold out in the 1780s and in 1792. There is evidence, however, that this book was somewhat more difficult to sell. "When the work was done printing," Simpson wrote to his father, he and Key "divided what were on hand, and I went to Virginia with my share, and after a great expence (being three months absent at about 9 shillings per day) and trouble I got them sold." Key apparently did not do so well with his share.[64]

As he distributed his final copies of *Carver's Travels*, Simpson began to hatch his plans to return to Scotland. He had tired of America and his only wish was to convey his earnings to his homeland in order to have enough money to buy a farm. He was also concerned about the threat of war with Great Britain and the increasing hostilities between France and England. By way of justifying to his father his retirement from a successful business in America, he explained that the economy of the new nation "has undergone a strange alteration since I last wrote, [with] . . . a scarcity of cash to an alarming degree, business of every kind at a stand with the war, so many American vessels being captured by both French & English, [and] provisions and living of all kinds treble their former prices. . . ."[65]

All Simpson's trepidations about staying in America were underscored by several realizations about the nature of the early national publishing trade.[66] The only way to make substantial profits in the publishing trade was to sustain a steady level of publishing activity, something that Simpson was simply unwilling to do. As he readied for his journey back to Edinburgh, he wrote to his father of his dampened hopes: "when I first landed in this country it was . . . to endeavour . . . to better my fortune and embrace the first opportunity of returning to my native country . . . I have no doubt but if I were to continue in the line I am at present of printing books & being successful in getting subscribers but in a few years I might get something handsome . . ."[67] Simpson was correct to assume that perseverance in publishing—"printing books & being successful in getting subscribers"—would require more time than the year he had allowed himself.

Successful publishers of the 1790s drew much of their capital and credit

[64] Simpson to his father, Jan. 3, 1796, Letterbook.

[65] Ibid.

[66] The following discussion of the economics of publishing is drawn from Remer, *Printers and Men of Capital.*

[67] Simpson to his father, May 24, 1796, Letterbook.

from their retail and wholesale bookselling concerns. Keeping a good assortment of books to sell and, more importantly, to exchange with other publishers, was a way to stay afloat between publishing projects, as well as a method of financing publications. Simpson apparently had no interest in general bookselling. He could have begun in a small way by printing overruns of his two publications for the purpose of exchanging them for other titles from around the nation. Without this cushion of book stock and the credit options it would have opened for him, his business as an early national publisher could only be described as limited.

Publishers had to maintain a steady level of financing in order to keep producing books to sell. Sales from a first book helped them finance and get credit for a second, and so on. For credit in early national Philadelphia, publishers regularly turned to friends, family members, and even competitors to endorse their notes.[68] Some publishers, like Mathew Carey, had access to bank credit as well.[69] The only way for Simpson to finance publications was through subscription publishing. Yet by the middle of the 1790s, subscription publishing had come under fire and the public, tired of financing proposed books that never saw the light of day, rebelled by refusing to sign for books in advance.[70] Simpson recognized this problem when he described to his father the glut of subscription books. He believed that his example was in no small way responsible: "[E]ven the report of our little success has set all the printers into the way of publishing proposals for books, till such a time as they are become a perfect drug, and nobody will hardly look at them, having been so deceived by a fine description in the proposals and when the books came out, they were often not worth half the money."[71]

In addition, the effects of the structural problems experienced by the trade in the early 1790s were beginning to compound by the second half of the decade. The printing trade as a whole was "never at such a low ebb,"

[68] For a discussion of the intricate credit networks and the fragility of the system of note endorsements, see Remer, *Printers and Men of Capital*, chap. 5.

[69] Mathew Carey, *Autobiography* (Brooklyn, N.Y., 1942), 48.

[70] Farren, "Subscription," 5-6.

[71] Simpson to his father, Jan. 3, 1796, Letterbook.

according to Simpson, "chiefly from so many young men setting up."[72] Journeymen who set up printing shops quickly came to realize that there was not enough work for them all. This situation forced these new master printers to "go out (rather than stand idle upon expences) and procure work upon any terms, [and] by this means they undermined each other, and worked so low that a great many are breaking." Finally, if setting up as a master was a bad idea, *working* for one was equally disastrous: "This [glut of printing shops] likewise hurt the journeymen by preventing their wages from being raised, and it is now with difficulty they can support themselves."[73]

Simpson was discouraged. His former master was obviously of no help as a patron; his family was thousands of miles away and of limited means; those who had been journeymen for years would have felt little sympathy for the upstart; and even his closest associates seemed to pursue the publishing dream in fits and starts. He was unwilling to invest the time required to open a shop and to gather an assortment of books. And the quick and easy way to publish—by subscription—was no longer a wise option. Yet even then the door was not entirely closed to him. If Simpson had support from other members of the publishing community, if other, more established publishers agreed to endorse notes for him, giving him access to the important credit networks developed in the trade, he might have been able to continue to publish. After his two publications had earned him credibility, this is exactly what happened. He "received offers of partnership from several of the principal Booksellers" in Philadelphia, but "having a strong desire to return to my native country, I declined to accept them."[74]

Simpson's publishing ventures may have been successful in the short term, but steady publishing and steady credit were essential to flourish, and this meant a long-term investment in life in America that he was unwilling to make. If Simpson was affected by the spirit of speculation, risk, and competition that he observed around him, he professed to be more comfortable with a sort of romantic republicanism that seemed more

[72] Ibid. Simpson may well have had in mind some other journeymen who had embarked on subscription publishing ventures. In 1796 a group of journeymen printers published by subscription a copy of William Burkitt's *Expository Notes, with Practical Observations on the New Testament.* It soon proved to be a bad risk, failing after the first part was published. See James Green's discussion of the publication of Burkitt in the *Annual Report of the Library Company of Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, 1990), 24-26.

[73] Simpson to his father, Jan. 3, 1796, Letterbook.

[74] "Narrative," 55.

consistent with rural life at home and his Scottish upbringing. He envisioned living the rest of his days on a Scottish farm and hoped to take his earnings from his American business ventures home for that purpose. How he went about achieving the financial means to do this indicates that he had not given up entirely his entrepreneurial bent. He went to New York in search of "articles . . . proper for the Lieth [*sic*] Market." After investigating tar, flaxseed, barrel staves, and pot and pearl ash, he determined that the last two commodities would be best and he "endeavour[ed] to get these on as good terms as possible, and be content to take my chance of the Market at home."[75] As he readied to sail for home, he warned his father not to expect him to return a wealthy man, despite reports to that effect.

> I suppose before this reaches you you will have heard of my coming home with a *fortune*. If you depend upon this intelligence I am afraid you will find yourself very much deceived, for although I have got some little, which with a little of your assistance may serve to put me in some way of bread; yet it is very far short . . . indeed unless I had stolen or robbed it is difficult to be conceived how I could have amassed a fortune from the 3d part of the profits of a business of only one year's duration; especially when I had hardly ten pounds in the world when I began.[76]

Simpson had no idea just how difficult getting his earnings back to Scotland—whatever their magnitude—would be. After loading himself and his investment cargo on board the *Ohio*, Simpson set sail for Scotland in May of 1797. A month later, having gotten so far as the northwest coast of Ireland, the *Ohio* was taken by French privateers. Simpson hid some gold in a handkerchief, which he wrapped around his body under his clothes and later transferred to a trunk. Once they arrived in France, he cleverly sneaked his trunk in with others that had already been examined by the customs officials. He was forced to leave $2,000 hidden on board the *Ohio*, under the floor, so he crept aboard one night to try to recover it, but everything was locked up tight. This left him with about £1,000, including the £200 in gold he had smuggled ashore. When he was finally able to catch another vessel to Dover, he once again hid his money, mixing silver pieces with wine in a small barrel, and other money in a teakettle, bags of fruit, and some small

[75] Simpson to his father, Jan. 3, 1796, Letterbook. Leith is Edinburgh's port city.
[76] Ibid.

jars. Finally, safely back in Leith in the middle of September, Simpson was reunited with his family after almost ten years. One of his first orders of business was to make an insurance claim on his losses, taking advantage of a policy that he had instructed his father to take out in advance of his voyage.[77]

When he wrote of his experiences years later, Simpson seemed disinclined to analyze the social and economic opportunities he had encountered in Philadelphia and the ways in which he acted on them. Yet Simpson's American career had much to do with his subsequent life in Scotland. He may have looked forward to a retiring life away from the speculative bustle of Philadelphia publishing, but even if this is what home offered in the ideal, this is not what happened. He remained an entrepreneur, putting to good use his experience at working for American merchants, as well as his own shipping fiasco. He is sometimes listed in directories as a spirit dealer and merchant, and he also became active in real estate speculation, beginning, it seems, with property owned by his father and expanding his holdings from there. He lived to the age of seventy-three. At the time of his death in 1845, he owned seven residential properties, a factory, and a warehouse, all of which were rented to some 113 individuals.[78]

But Simpson's identity and the greatest portion of his career remained in the world of the book. He established himself as a printer upon his return home, and he printed and published abridged editions of Goldsmith's histories of England, Rome, and Greece, each designed with questions following the chapters, specifically for Scottish students. He also wrote and published his own highly nationalistic history of Scotland for school use. Each of these books went through numerous editions over a period of some thirty years, although Simpson appears to have retired from the business in 1823 (at the age of fifty-one), when he sold his copyrights and remaining stock to the firm of Oliver and Boyd.[79]

[77] The journey to Scotland is detailed in "Narrative," 55-67.

[78] "Inventory of the Personal Estate of Robert Simpson, sometime Printer in Edinburgh afterwards residing at Gibraltar House Edinburgh and who died at Broughton street on the 18 day of September 1845," Scottish Record Office; Robert Simpson to Oliver and Boyd, Feb. 20, 1823, and "Assignation by Robert Simpson to Oliver and Boyd," April 1, 1823, Business Records of Oliver and Boyd, National Library of Scotland, Accession 5000.

[79] Robert Simpson, *The History of Scotland, from the Earliest Times to the Beginning of the Nineteenth Century* (Edinburgh, 1808) is the earliest edition on record. It continued to be updated and revised regularly. The 28th edition appeared in 1854. He also edited for Scottish schools and published Goldsmith's standard English school texts: *Dr. Goldsmith's Abridgement of the History of*

Although Simpson published only two books in Philadelphia, the fact that both were travel books, fueling a sense of adventure, makes them appropriate to his existence in America. They were also books that, in their time, had obvious appeal to others in early national Philadelphia. The handful of books he chose to publish once back in Scotland were also close to his heart, as well as astutely chosen. In his Scottish publishing career, Simpson managed to combine all aspects of his life experience, including the entrepreneurial leap he made as a young journeyman printer. He had been well educated in his native country; he had learned a trade and a profession in America; and the love of Scotland that drew him back from the United States, as well as his subsequent Scottish publications, reflected his commitment to the improving power of education. The competence that sustained him for the remainder of his adult life represented a synthesis of his Scottish upbringing and his coming of age in the commercial and cultural capital of the early American republic.

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England; *Dr. Goldsmith's Roman History Abridged, with Exercises*; and *Dr. Goldsmith's Grecian History Abridged, with Exercises*. These too went through multiple editions and were published regularly into the 1850s.