Back Talk--Adventures in Fine Reading

Jim O'Donnell
Arizona State University, jod@asu.edu

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T
his is the life! I sit in my office and I think of a book I’d like to read. Often in a few minutes and never more than a few days later, I’m reading that very book. For one who started out his library life in a quonset hut on an army base in the desert, this is amazing and beautiful.

If life were merely amazing and beautiful, of course, we’d have no great works of art: no Picasso’s Guernica, no Moby-Dick, and no rivetingly memorable columns in Against the Grain. Fortunately, my experience has gone beyond amazing and reached the level of “you’ve got to be kidding.”

It started this way. There came upon me a fierce desire to read a new translation of Thucydides. Hobbes and Jowett and Crawley and Lattimore and Blancco are all so other-century, so let’s see what Mynott can do. Jeremy Mynott ascended through the editorial ranks at Cambridge University Press to become the Press’ CEO and then in retirement ascended even higher, to enter the ranks of Thucydides translators. It’s a tough and unforgiving task, but his hard work has paid off splendidly, no question. I knew of his success at second hand and wanted to witness it myself.

But though the book was published in 2013, our library hadn’t yet acquired it. In these days of access over ownership, that’s no firm obstacle to the satisfaction of desire, but I still thought we should buy a copy, and so we placed an order. True to the magic of Amazon, our library hadn’t yet acquired it. In February, 72 hours earlier. How could that be? I asked my colleagues; they confirmed that they had known that The Harrumph wanted a fresh copy, and so they got it as fast as they could — from Amazon. Yes, and?

Well, it turns out that when a major publisher hands over a book to Amazon to sell, they may require the publisher also to provide Amazon with a PDF of the book. Amazon thereby acquires the right to produce what I will now call “Print-on-Discretion” copies. For whenever Amazon decides that their commitment to deliver the goods as quickly and cheaply as possible requires, they have the right to produce a print-on-demand copy of the book and send it whizzing on its way. Never mind that the publisher, formerly an important link in this chain, has an abundant supply of copies in their U.S. warehouse, for those can all stay on the shelves, while Amazon runs off another one and sends it skittering down the supply chain.

When I learned this, gentle reader, I’m sorry to say that I harrumphed again. Bring me the hard copy of Alfredo García Lach, and with it a copy of this book that was actually produced by its publisher! More scurrying ensued, and soon I had what I asked for.

This time I smiled. The actual book published by Cambridge University Press had the same trim size but was only 1.25” thick. The Amazon blow on-demand edition was fully 40% bulkier at 1.75”. The CUP cover was better printed, the binding was better (actual signatures), the paper color was easier on the eye (slightly off-white), and there was less bleed-through of text from the verso of a given page on the slimmer, lighter weight volume than on the Amazon copy.

So where had the original “hardcover” POD copy full of speeches come from? That. I was now truly interested to learn, had come via Coutts, our old reliable distributor, and had come into being at Lightning Source’s Tennessee home. I learned that the print run of hardcover copies had run out. (This book is in a textbook-ish series published simultaneously in hard and soft covers, with a very short run of the hard covers. Unless you have the book coming on an approval plan or pre-publication

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Elementary School and Sumner Elementary School in Topeka, Kansas.

“Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site is the subject of an online lesson plan produced by Teaching with Historic Places, a National Register program that offers classroom-ready lesson plans on properties listed in the National Register.”

Civil Rights Laws


The following Websites are places on the Internet where these laws can be found.

FindLaw — http://civilrights.findlaw.com/enforcing-your-civil-rights/civil-rights-laws.html — which is a Thomson Reuters product, “provides legal information online.”

Find the list of the Civil Rights laws. The laws can be viewed alphabetically or by subject. The database provides a link to each law. When clicking on the link, such as Civil Rights Act of 1964: Title VII (Equal Employment Opportunities), the code and various subsections Title VII appears.

HG.org — http://www.hg.org/civilright.html — is an “online law and government.” HG.org provides background information on the Civil Rights laws. The Website is divided into informative sections such as “Excessive and Police Misconduct” to “Information Civil Rights Lawyer.” Further on the page is information about Civil Rights law. The Civil Rights section is not only civil rights laws in the United States, but international laws as well. At the top menu bar is the “Articles” tab. Once this tab is selected, the articles are listed alphabetically by subject. HG.org has 535 articles about Civil Rights.

The Legal Information Institute (LII) — https://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/civil_rights — is small research engineering and editorial group housed at the Cornell Law School in Ithaca, NY. LII’s collaborators “include publishers, legal scholars, computer scientists, government agencies, and other groups and individuals that promote open access to law worldwide.” LII created WEX, which is a free legal dictionary and encyclopedia.

The encyclopedia defines a civil right as “an enforceable right or privilege which if interfered with by another gives rise to an action for injury.” The Website provides information on civil rights laws.

United States Commission on Civil Rights (CCR) — http://www.usccr.gov/ — is a federal government agency. The CCR was created as a result of the “Civil Rights Act of 1957.” The Civil Rights Act of 1957 fortified the federal government’s commitment to civil rights. CCR was “established as an independent, bipartisan fact-finding federal agency to improve the development of national civil rights policy and enhance enforcement of federal civil rights laws.” The Website is sectioned by highlights, recent reports, recent correspondence, recent congressional reports, and testimony. At the bottom right of the page are recent meeting transcripts.

Voting Rights Act 1965

The Leadership Conference Website — http://www.civilrights.org/voting-rights/vra/history.html — included the history and sections as well as the Supreme Court’s relationship to the “Voting Rights Act of 1965” (VRA).

According the Website, Section 2 prohibits discriminatory practices of minority voters. Section 5 “requires federal ‘preclearance’ before covered jurisdictions.” The covered jurisdictions have historically discriminated against minority voters. However, in June 2013 the “Shelby County v. Holder” the “preclearance” was deemed unconstitutional. This act not only benefitted African Americans, but Asian and Latino Americans were also barred from voting in various places of the United States before the law was enacted.

The United States Department of Justice

Civil Rights Division — http://www.justice.gov/crt/about/vot/intro/intro_b.php — has a voting section on its Website. This section includes links of the “History of Federal Voting Rights Laws.” In addition to the history, the Department of Justice provides the “1965 Enactment” of the VRA. According to the site, two events occurred that impacted the passage of VRA, “the use of civil right activists and the attack by state troopers on peaceful marchers on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama.” These acts “persuaded...President [Johnson] and Congress to overcome Southern legislators’ resistance to effective voting rights legislation.”

The National Initiative on American History, Civics, and Service — http://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=true&doc=100 — sponsored a Website entitled “Our Documents: 100 Milestone Documents from the National Archives.” The Website is comprised of 100 primary, digitized documents that had an impact on American history. As a result, the actual VRA of 1965 is included as one of the one hundred documents. The date stamp of August 6, 1965 can be seen. The Website noted the purpose of the VRA was to enforce the Fifteenth Amendment, which was to allow everyone the right to vote.

Endnotes

1. https://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/ourdocs/14thamendment.html

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firm order and are lucky, your chances of getting the washable edition are very high.)

I draw two lessons from this epic saga. First, the “who knew?” lesson that the physical manufacture of the books we buy nowadays is a far more complicated process than I realized. How many mass market paperbacks sold through Amazon are printed by them in this way? Sure, many readers today get a book in their hands and if they take a moment will sniff at it and grumble about how books aren’t made the way they used to be, but Henry Adams was right, “The world grew cheap, as worlds must.”

It’s just bad luck when one of those books falls into the hands of a pig-headed university librarian with time on his hands.

But second, I draw the conclusion that more transparency is needed. If I go back to the CUP Website, I find that the U.S. pricing for this title is $89.95 hardcover, $29.95 paperback. All evidence indicates that those prices are the same whether you receive a well-made artifact from the oldest university press in the world or a junky substitute manufactured by a vendor. I harrumphed about that to a non-Cambridge publisher I know, suggesting I should get a discount for the tacky version, and she was kind enough to explain to me patiently that I am getting that discount, because if the publisher can’t count on switching to POD at a certain point in the print run, the paperback copy would probably have to cost $39.95. That might very well be true, but as our presidential candidates repeatedly teach us, just because something is true doesn’t mean I have to believe it.

Now, I do have a six year old Cambridge Press Print-on-Demand title on my private shelves that is a perfectly serviceable book, good paper, vividly clear printing, soundly bound. Quality is possible. The problem is not new technology but cheap people — publishers, vendors, and readers who all think that second and third quality objects are quite good enough for “mere” reading. The old Roman fell into the hands of a pig-headed university librarian with time on his hands.

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