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Back Talk--Adventures in Fine Reading

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Back Talk — Adventures in Fine Reading

Column Editor: **Jim O'Donnell** (University Librarian, Arizona State University) <jod@asu.edu>



This 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 **Blanco** 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 he has carried it 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 the times, the book showed up a few days later, 761 pages, with translation, notes, index, and the like.

I was disappointed. The book that arrived was a hardcover copy that had clearly been "printed on demand," as the cover was that kind of shiny washable plastic stuff that gives PTSD flashbacks to the textbooks we so loathed in seventh grade. Some publishers have decided, you see, that the way to keep a place for the print book in the digital age is to make those books as cheap and ugly looking as possible. Big, too: trim sizes bloated beyond all recog-

niton. Do they think that the reader will be more likely to spot the book in a bookstore if it's the size of the **Sears Roebuck** catalogs of my childhood? When I buy one of those, I always go looking for the bicycle tire valve on it, hoping that I can let all the air out and shrink it down to the size of a classic **Modern Library** edition, which is the right size for human hand and eye. Doesn't work very often.

POD packaging is a success in taking ugly to the next level. Ugliness didn't surprise me about my new **Thucydides**, but what did surprise me was trouble reading the book. One of the things **Thucydides** is famous for in his books is all the reported orations by distinguished statesmen, who explain exactly how they mean to take opportunity for glory and turn it into the shabbiest, bloodiest war of all antiquity. What does it mean, then, when I find that this copy of the book calls them speeches? Cost containment I can understand, but just how much do we save eliminating the cross-bars on the letter "e"? The vanishingly faint print of this badly made copy rendered the artifact nearly unreadable.

I harrumphed. Yes, librarians are too genteel to harrumph, but I was trained differently. Harrumphing is one of the core competencies inculcated in Provost School, and there I did very well indeed. Word of my harrumphing went out through the library staff, who heard me say that we should send this book back and get a better copy. A small number of days later another copy arrived, this time a paperback. It too was big — 1.75" thick, to be precise. I sat it next to my old **Signet** paperback of *Moby-Dick* and realized that if I'd had this **Thucydides** when I read **Melville** at 16, it wouldn't have been so hard to imagine just how immense the white whale was.

And so I began to read. This copy was better than the last, containing actual speeches and no speeches, though to my bifocular eyes it was rather faintly printed and in type rather smaller than necessary for something as, well, bloated as this. The "perfect" binding cracked

the first time I opened it, not a good sign for a book meant to be a college textbook for diligent readers. I grew grumpier, uttered a few imprecations, and talked to a few people, whom I will preserve with anonymity from being immortalized in a rivetingly memorable **ATG** column, and I discovered a remarkable thing.

Sitting quietly in my office on February 19th, looking closely at the inside back cover of this second copy, I discovered a small logo there confirming that this book had been printed in San Bernadino CA on the 16th of February, 72 hours earlier. How could that be? I asked my colleagues; they confirmed that they had known that The Harrumpher 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 so 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 head of **Alfredo Garcia**, I cried, 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** bloat-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, because the original 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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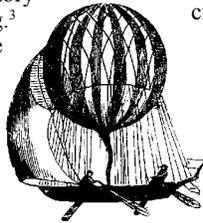
“Brown v. Board of Education National Historic Site is the subject of an online lesson plan produced by Teaching with Historic Places, a National Register program that offers classroom-ready lesson plans on properties listed in the National Register.”

Civil Rights Laws

The United States has various Civil Rights laws. The most recognized laws are Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1968. Civil Rights Act of 1964 forbade discriminatory practices in aspects of employment.² The Civil Rights Act of 1968, also known as the Fair Housing Act of 1968, prohibited discriminatory practices in regards to housing.³ 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.” **FindLaw** provides a 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/civilrht.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 **Cornel 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.⁴ **CCR** was “established as an independent, bipartisan fact-finding federal agency.” Its mission is to “inform 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 in *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 murders 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>
2. <https://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/civil-rights-act/>
3. <http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/fair-housing-act>
4. <http://civilrights.findlaw.com/enforcing-your-civil-rights/civil-rights-laws.html>
5. <http://www.cnn.com/EVENTS/1997/mlk/links.html>
6. <http://www.civilrights.org/resources/civilrights101/chronology.html>

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 senators, when their turn came in debate and they wanted to express dissent, sometimes confined themselves to a two word speech: *ceterum censeo*. “I think otherwise.” I do. 🌍