be of interest and profit to scholars of Marlowe, Spenser, Shakespeare, Marvell, and Milton; to cultural historians of public ceremony and festivity; and to all engaged in the *translatio* of Roman to later cultures and empires.


Anyone interested in the “history of history books” (1) will find Dan Woolf’s fine study a treasury of information and insight. So too will those interested more broadly in the world of the “big” book (for that is what most of the volumes considered here are—thick quartos and lavish folios), in the commercial underpinnings of scholarly publishing, and in the sociocultural milieu of “history.” Indeed, while the matter of *Reading History in Early Modern England* coheres, the title seriously understates the volume’s scope. Even as the professed subject is well covered, Woolf’s other interests collectively outweigh it. His methods match the catholicity of his matter: an initial foray into genre history and a continuing interest in the material framework of history book production are joined to exemplary narratives and efforts at quantification. Opinions about the relative success of these varied approaches will naturally vary, but all will be grateful for the generous allotment of illustrations.

The nearly seventy pages of Chapter One, “The Death of the Chronicle,” take their time, as did the demise adverted to in the title. Woolf argues that by the end of the sixteenth century the chronicle had ceded pride of place amongst treatments of past time to humanist-influenced histories, but had also, in its slow terminal decline, shaped or spawned other modalities and genres, ranging from almanacs and newsbooks to history plays and verse, and the personal chronicles of diaries and journals. This supple model of transformation, rather like the fissile changes of radioactive elements, is exceptionally illuminating. Perhaps most usefully, it
re-contextualizes the emergent relationship of news and history. While it has been widely appreciated that, in the civil war and later, news was considered incipient history—and thus to be collected, archived, and (in the newsbooks) serialized—it has not been entirely evident why this was so. Woolf’s analysis compellingly adds the ur-genre of the chronicle to the expectations brought to “news.” Oddly though, Woolf undercuts his own insight. In his consideration of the place of history books in private libraries, Woolf excludes pamphlets from any consideration (see, e.g., 155 and 158 n. 58)—an understandable choice in respect of the workload, but not justifiable from the perspective of divining owners’ mentalities. Similarly, he supposes that “newspapers and pamphlets” were “not designed to be kept and bound into volumes” (275). Yet in both cases they were “kept and bound into volumes,” and by the late seventeenth century catalogues were issued to keep collectors current. Even earlier, the newsbooks’ sequential issue and volume numbers and their running pagination indicate beyond any cavil that they were conceived of as collectibles, indeed, as annals-in-the-making, a point proven again by their frequent survival in long runs. (See further, for Woolf’s reluctance on this point, “News, History and the Construction of the Present in Early Modern England,” in Brendan Dooley and Sabrina Baron, eds., The Politics of Information in Early Modern Europe [London: Routledge, 2001]).

The mandate of the title is directly addressed in the second chapter, “The Contexts and Purposes of Reading History.” Here Woolf follows paths hewed out by Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine, William Sherman, Steven Zwicker, and Kevin Sharpe (whose Reading Revolutions was published too late for use here), though often to suggest that many readers read and absorbed their history on the fly. He begins with some remarks, perhaps somewhat overdone, on the continuing aurality of history—one person read, more heard. He then proceeds to marginalia, reader notes, transcripts, commonplacings, and private journals, the now-usual loci for such work. Unsurprisingly, readers’ practices varied, from the serious and scholarly to the self-diverting and casual. Dudley
Ryder, an early eighteenth-century diarist, seems to have read history at least in part to give him “lines” with which to make his approach to women. Focused as that may have been, Ryder’s use was part of a larger picture in which, by the eighteenth century, the knowledge of history was an “increasingly important” element of “the socialization of both young men and young women” (131).

Chapter Three, “The Ownership of Historical Works,” begins a sequence that more closely characterizes this work as a whole—richly textured, remarkably far-ranging, often digressive. Predictably enough, Woolf detects a drift, from the early sixteenth to the early eighteenth century, toward increasing ownership of history books, as well as an increasing interest in post-classical history. But the statistical foundation for this is not always clear (see for example, Table 3.5 and its discussion, 141-2). An attempt to get a sense of the value of history books from wills and inventories is also fraught with peril—pace Table 3.7 and its discussion (144-5). What is available from Woolf’s evidence is not price but wild and all-but-useless guesses at valuation, which vary by a factor of 10, 20 or even 30 to 1. But these limitations are offset by general and specific examinations of library catalogues and the place of history books within them. Similarly, “Borrowing and Lending,” the subject of the fourth chapter, guides the fortunate reader into shelving, cataloguing, and “the classificatory revolution” (174) of the seventeenth century, and into the formation of institutional (often parochial) libraries, better to contextualize the place of history books within them. In a rare misstep (179), Woolf seems unaware that the 1662 act establishing deposit libraries was not the first government action of this sort; the 1610 supply agreement between the Stationers and the Bodleian (fitfully observed, like the 1662 act) was backed by the High Commission in 1613, and was ordered enforced in the Star Chamber decree of 1637. Woolf then turns his attention to “Clio Unbound and Bound,” the economics of the book trade and its implication for historical publication, reminding us, lapidarily, that “Clio was in business to make money” (254). Though sometimes only tangentially connected to reading history, the solid work on costs, publication practice, and
pricing of books (including history books) should serve more broadly as a useful survey. Woolf takes here a sounder approach on the relation of value and appraisals, and importantly comments on the “good deal of bartering” (213; presumably, in context, bargaining) routine in book purchasing. The final substantive chapter, “Marketing History,” advances booksellers’ shops as “social spaces” (263) akin to the coffee houses much beloved by Habermasians; the observation may be yet another index of Habermas’s back weighted view of the English seventeenth century, since the booksellers (and their catalogues) were notable well before the coffee houses. Much is also done with subscription lists. One of two appendices, dealing with auction catalogues, adds to the picture.

*Reading History in Early Modern England*, thus, is a smorgasbord of research and observation, as well digested as such a variety of treats may be. Some readers will especially appreciate Woolf’s thematic interest in the social construction of history books; some, the argument about the decay of the chronicle; some, the vast array of cases and individual histories Woolf has painstakingly amassed. This admiring reader learned much and expects to consult it repeatedly in years to come.


In recent years, the Puritan as the perpetually repressive, grim, and interfering stereotype has been profoundly revised and transformed into a figure who was more conservative than boisterous, more apolitical than radical, and more reactionary than revolutionary. Similarly, the distinctiveness of the Puritan