

Preface

IT is dangerous for any collector, whether of biographical materials or postage stamps, to believe that his specimens are of more general interest than they in fact can command. Courtesy as well as prudence point the need of an explanation for the writing of this book about an eighteenth-century tradesman.

It was and is no ordinary trade in which William Strahan exercised his abilities. It is practised by men no more intelligent than those engaged in other lines of business; its rewards are, commercially, trifling in relation to the industry and shrewdness it calls into play; as an occupation it entails fully as much of the humdrum drudgery, the pettiness of detail, as is exhibited in any manner of earning a living. But the book trade is distinguished from any other by the fact that its fundamental staple is ideas, even though the tangible expression of those ideas is bought and sold much like other commodities. This is the reason for its intrinsic interest and for the fascination it exerts upon those who work in it and so rarely desert it; this is what gives the market place its curious atmosphere, in fluctuating proportions, of idealism and commercial practicality.

The mid-eighteenth century was not distinguished in Great Britain by its fine printing, with such few exceptions as the work of Baskerville and the Foulis brothers. No technical advances were made until the end of the century and in consequence printers were generally faced with a demand

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for output rather than quality; as Strahan told Benjamin Franklin, 'Here all our Pressmen are spoilt by the hasty and slovenly manner in which our numerous Newspapers and Magazines are printed; nor is there the least Encouragement for any one to carry the Art to any farther Degree of Perfection.' In the history of the book trade as a whole, however, it was a formative period. It inherited from the seventeenth century a lively tradition of the expression and circulation of general ideas. It produced a growing middle class with the means and the leisure to buy books and read them, and it put very little restriction on what the trade could print and sell to this new public. It saw the final emancipation of the writer from the position of an amateur or a hack to that of an often highly paid professional. In response to these needs and pressures the book trade developed an efficient organization. As a result, incidentally, it was equipped to exploit to the full the expansion made possible by the increase of literacy and by the steam press in the next century.

The trade was still sufficiently fluid to enable William Strahan to engage in several sides of its work. He was of course primarily a printer, and one of the leading men in his craft even before he became King's Printer. He was the publisher of some of the most notable books of the century and, more, was in many cases the friend of their writers. As a wholesaler and exporter of books he had large interests in the American market. His letters inform us of problems that still vex the trade—discounts and prices, books that 'stick' and others that sell too fast for the stock, payments to authors, rival or pirated editions, the iniquities and the loyalties of fellow-printers and publishers, anxieties over capital and credit.

Reynolds's portrait of him when he was sixty-five shows the successful man of business; a face without humour, rather insensitive, firm to the point of sternness, with a bold eye and a not ungenerous mouth. Unlike most of his rich contemporaries in the City, he owed his wealth to a craft

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of which he was himself a master. The somewhat podgy hands in the painting had set many thousands of ens before they kept account of the profits made from organizing other men's handiwork. His life displays a talent for friendship as well as a propensity to quarrel, even within his own family, over what seemed to him points of principle; a 'good hater', he was slow to forgive an injury. He had few intellectual pretensions, often seeking the advice of others on the publication of new works, but once his mind was made up he was loth to admit an error of judgement.

His life, from 1715 to 1785, spanned an era that can too easily from this distance look like a golden age; he was born after the Hanoverian succession had been settled and he died before revolution swept the old Europe away. But to him the times were anything but easy, with almost constant war or alarm of war, faction and rioting at home and the convulsion of the War of American Independence abroad. Long before he became a member of Parliament his interest in public affairs was intense, and his political correspondence provides a background to his business.

As King's Printer and M.P., as the publisher of such works as *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and *The Wealth of Nations*, as the close friend of men so disparate as Samuel Johnson and David Hume and Benjamin Franklin, Strahan was much more than an ordinary tradesman.