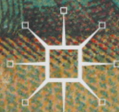
NEW DIRECTIONS IN BOOK HISTORY

Approaches to the History of Written Culture

A World Inscribed

Edited by

MARTYN LYONS AND RITA MARQUILHAS



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Approaches to the History of Written Culture

A World Inscribed

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CHAPTER 1

A World Inscribed – Introduction

Martyn Lyons and Rita Marquilhas

Approaching the History of Scribal Culture

In 1900 or thereabouts, Lorina Bulwer, an inmate of the Great Yarmouth workhouse in the east of England, produced a remarkable and extremely long letter. It was embroidered on samples of different kinds of material which she had sewn together to form a scroll of multi-coloured cloth, five metres long (Fig. 1.1). On her sampler scroll, Lorina stitched a rambling autobiography in which she spat out her anger at being confined to the workhouse, and more specifically to its female lunatic ward. She asserted her identity frequently, repeated her name many times and declared that she was free. Lorina Bulwer's sampler reminds us of the importance of writing at all levels of society, for both intimate and public purposes as well as in the process of identity formation. It also demonstrates that writing is ubiquitous, and often uses unexpected materials and unorthodox technologies. In this book, we examine the importance of writing at different

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Fig. 1.1 Extract from Lorina Bulwer's sampler scroll, circa 1900. (Gressenhall Farm and Workhouse Museum of Norfolk Life.)

social levels in a range of historical contexts across the world. As in the case of Lorina Bulwer, the discussion will take account of writing's institutional frameworks, its personal expressions and the range of material support it has adopted in past societies.

Historians have often used written documents, of course, whether produced by institutions of power or private individuals. On the whole, however, they have seen them as testimony, as windows through which we can learn more about some other aspect of historical reality. Thus we study the letters of soldiers in the First World War in the hope of understanding at first hand what life was like in the trenches, and how the morale of the belligerent armies rose and fell. In plundering documents from the past for data such as this, historians focus on the referential content of the surviving texts, rather than on the way they embody textual knowledge, writing skill, reading ability and an implicit discourse on language and communication. Historians of writing have a different perspective. They seek to understand the various expressions of this textual knowledge in order to analyse the nature and function of writing *as writing*. They study the phenomenon of writing itself in order to assess its social and cultural resonance, and the ways in which its different forms structured textual meaning and were structured by it. Written documents are not merely windows on the past; they also need to be understood in the light of the material and cultural conditions of textual production in any given historical context, and the changing material support for writing, whether papyrus, parchment or paper, stone, bark, bamboo or silk. Written documents constitute historical objects in their own right, and we focus as historians on the changing relationships between humans and these meaningful and extremely complex artefacts, which both encapsulate and testify to different kinds of discursive and linguistic behaviour. We study the social uses of writing itself, not just as evidence of something outside itself.

The insights of Armando Petrucci provided us with a valuable and succinct guide to the study of the inscribed world when he wrote:

> Every age and every society can be better understood and appreciated through studying the uses it makes of writing as an instrument, the ways in which writing and reading competence is distributed throughout society, and the functions that it attributes to scribal production and its various typologies.[1]

Petrucci's original aim was to redefine and extend the discipline of palaeography so that it focused not simply on the technical description of texts,

but also on their social context and broader significance. Writing, as his own work on late antiquity demonstrated, should be studied in the context which produces, disseminates and consumes it, taking full account of the prevailing social inequalities which may determine and limit access to writing itself. Petrucci understood that the use of writing, and the social distribution of literacy skills in any given society, provide vital clues to understanding that society's workings and its structures of power. In his view, the use of writing describes the fault-lines and divisions within society, for instance between powerful clerico-bureaucratic elites and a mass of poor peasants who lived 'on the margins of literacy',[2] or in more recent times between men who acquired literacy skills and women who were not encouraged to do so.

From authors like Petrucci,[3] Roger Chartier[4] and Donald F. McKenzie,[5] to cite just a few of the first scholars to exert a strong influence, we have developed a history of scribal culture (or *storia della cultura escrita*), focusing on the meanings that different social groups have invested in written artefacts throughout history. This history of scribal culture lies in a disciplinary middle ground, at the point where sociology and anthropology, as well as literature and linguistics, meet history. Here writing is seen as social interaction mediated through enduring signs. It is understood as a practice evolving through time, its power (or counter-power) being continually re-shaped according to the perspective of the social actors using it. The challenge we all accept as historians of scribal culture is to see those artefacts not as traditional historical sources, in the sense of transparent pieces of evidence, but rather as opaque, complex discourses, which demand a thick description of the social knowledge and shared beliefs which they embody.

The term 'thick description' derives from Clifford Geertz's suggestions about the appropriate ethnographic method to use in the interpretation of cultures. This is an interpretation based on 'extrovert expressions' formulated by the informants themselves, it is microscopic in its analysis of local behaviour and assumed truths, and it targets social discourse.[6] In this sense, all the chapters which follow contribute to a thick description of written cultures in history. Such a description combines what historical informants extrovertly expressed about their uses of writing with the close analysis of practices and beliefs (made explicit or taken for granted). The scribal practices they reveal are patent in written artefacts themselves and in the technology which produced them; the beliefs they analyse are linked

to the concept of literacy as it is interpreted in different spatial, political and chronological contexts.

This kind of history of scribal culture is based on location and contextualisation. As a result, the written artefacts we encounter here are extremely varied. They include the cuneiform clay tablets of the first millennium BC in Mesopotamia (discussed by Francis Joannès), the public writings which appeared in the urban spaces of early modern Spain and modern France (in the chapters by Antonio Castillo Gómez and Philippe Artières, respectively), nineteenth-century ego-documents of non-elite people in Finland (discussed by Anna Kuismin), the esoteric personal writings of French artisans (in Nicolas Adell's chapter), handwritten copies of novels made by women of the court in pre-modern Korea (discussed by SeoKyung Han), one late nineteenth-century Cheyenne letter (discussed by Germaine Warkentin), authors' typescripts of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries (in Martyn Lyons' chapter), and children's writings from different periods (discussed by Verónica Sierra Blas).

All the contributors treat these written objects in three dimensions: as material object, as social practice and inevitably as text. Studying and interpreting texts are the historian's conventional stock-in-trade, but the first and second dimensions just mentioned require further emphasis. Our framework firstly implies a certain focus on the material presence of texts. The support and medium of textual messages range historically from cave walls to computer screens, and the material basis of writing, as well as the content, helps us understand its social and political uses. In Francis Joannès' contribution, for instance, it is impossible to conceive of ancient Sumerian script without recognising its exclusive dependence on the medium of clay. After the second millennium, the script struggled to compete with the Phoenician alphabet, which could be written on more pliable material, and it gradually became an esoteric cultural language, rather like Latin in modern Europe. The repercussions of the material support for writing, and its associated technologies, are the focus of the chapter by John Gagné, a historian of Renaissance Europe, who raises some of the issues involved in the transition from parchment to paper. Similarly, the various ways in which the typewriter influenced writing practices are discussed in Martyn Lyons' chapter.

These authors share the scribal culture methodology which runs through this book as a whole: they discuss the materiality of writings in the past, together with the views expressed by their users and the unconscious beliefs that may have inspired them. The users' views range from

fear and mistrust of change to enthusiasm for new technologies, and their practices could be opportunistic or just matter-of-fact. The protagonists we read about here are as varied as could be expected in a 'world inscribed': they are the novelist convinced that the keys of his typewriter participate in the development of his book, the fans of typing races, and the monarchs who suspected that their law would become fragile because rag paper support had a limited life. There are children, too, whose newly acquired literacy skills gave them freedom and a sense of adventure. The protester with his pamphlet, the artisan with his autobiography, the peasant with his diary, the Native American with his letter and the policeman with his report are all actors in this colourful cast.

The history of scribal culture proposed here assumes a broad definition of writing. Writing encompasses all marks carrying significance inscribed on whatever surface they appear. Writing is by no means confined to alphabetical scripts, but includes non-alphabetical systems and pictorial scripts such as Egyptian and Mayan hieroglyphics. It includes the *khipus*, the communication system of the Inca empire, in which the knots and cords of cotton or woollen material recorded assets or embodied the genealogical memory of a village.[7] In Germaine Warkentin's chapter, it embraces the pictorial codes of Native Americans. This notion clearly contradicts anthropologists of writing like Walter Ong and historians like Ignace Gelb, who traditionally drew a clear distinction between societies using an alphabet and those which did not have a comparable 'writing system'.[8] For Warkentin, who joins a battle previously fought by Roy Harris,[9] the boundary between pictorial art and written communication is very elusive, and she proposes that we adopt the more inclusive term 'inscription' to avoid simplistic dichotomies between 'primitive' and 'advanced' forms of textual communication. Her suggestion is open to challenge and debate, but the subtitle of this book, *A World Inscribed*, implicitly endorses her idea.

The Social Practice of Literacy

Warkentin's discussion raises fundamental questions. What is writing? And following that, what is literacy? Returning to the third dimension of our formula above, we may interpret writing as a social practice, embedded in everyday life, although it is only recently that cultural historians and social anthropologists have adopted this approach. In the 1960s and 1970s, historians approached the study of writing as one aspect of the

measurement of literacy. The statistics of literacy rates, which historians customarily accumulated in Europe and North America on the basis of a signature test, or a religious examination in the case of Lutheran Sweden, never clearly distinguished the twin skills of reading and writing from each other.[10] In Europe until the nineteenth century, these were distinct literary skills, taught independently, and writing competence was always rarer than reading ability. There were in fact two literacies,[11] and the social distribution of each was distinctive in terms of its geography, social class and gender. In many parts of Europe and America, reading was taught verbally, as students were made to identify letters and syllables by chanting them, but an apprenticeship in writing was more demanding. A student who graduated from writing in a sand-tray or on a wax tablet required skill and practice in handling a goose quill. He or she had to master a new technology and a new body posture, and learn how to form evenly sized characters, keep a straight line and avoid smudging the paper with ink. Often the student never reached this stage, if his or her schooling was cut short by more demanding activities like working to supplement the family income. Reading came first in the curriculum, and writing followed. At a higher level still, arithmetic would be taught. The three 'Rs', then, formed a pedagogical hierarchy, with reading at the base, writing in the middle and numerical literacy at the summit.

The gap between reading and writing competence was for a long time disguised by official literacy statistics, which never gave us equally good information about reading and writing, and hid from view many readers who could not write. Many women in particular were readers who never crossed the writing threshold. Women were taught by the churches to read the Bible (if they were Protestants) or rehearse the catechism (if they were Catholics), but they were not encouraged to learn to write. The act of reading was conceived as passive and receptive, whereas writing seemed to confer independence and creativity, and from the authorities' point of view it could be dangerous. For these reasons, writing was considered a male prerogative. Many women who delegated their signature to others or who signed with a mark may thus have been competent readers even if they did not know how to write. The records of poor Irish women who arrived in Australia in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries reveal just such a gap between female reading and writing abilities. In Deborah Oxley's sample of Irish-born convict women deported to Australia, 43 per cent could read only, and only 21 per cent could both read and write.[12]

In our approach to the history of scribal culture, we no longer conceive of writing as a cognitive skill to be learned once and never forgotten, as historians tended to view it when they counted the statistics of literacy. Writing, rather, is a social and cultural practice, and our questions commonly ask: what uses did people in past societies make of writing? What was writing's function and purpose in any given society? Writing may have an active and performative role, as emphasised by Béatrice Fraenkel, who considers 'acts of writing' in the same way as the philosopher of language J.L. Austin analysed 'speech acts'.[13] So far, however, this approach has been confined to contemporary usage and has not developed a historical dimension. Other scholars isolate 'literacy events', in which one or more individuals are engaged in generating or understanding a given text. As the protagonists of the New Literacy Studies argue, there are many different kinds of literacies, which today include home literacy, school literacy and workplace literacy, to name a few.[14] Literacy practices, in other words, must be situated within specific social structures and they are contingent on specific historical contexts.[15] Barton and Hamilton place strong emphasis on vernacular literacy practices, which are learned informally and thus are independent of institutionalised schooling, and which are not regulated by the rules and procedures of dominant social institutions.[16] They refer to literacy practices which enable ordinary people to organise their life at a very pragmatic level (as in writing shopping lists) and to give it some meaning (as in writing up one's war experiences), as well as enabling them to participate in social organisations outside the home (such as the local school or a babysitting group). Here the historian of vernacular literacies is inevitably lending new value to forms of writing which were previously trivialised or simply invisible, like Lorina Bulwer's sampler scroll already mentioned.

This leads us to a favourite theme in the history of writing – we might even call it a master narrative – which concerns changes in the social distribution of literacy skills, as they ceased to be the prerogative of clerical and bureaucratic elites and were increasingly adopted by courtiers, merchants and commoners. There is a gendered dimension to this story of the onward march of literacy, as literacy skills became less exclusively monopolised by dominant male elites, and were increasingly acquired by women, too. Lorina Bulwer's scroll is one small but dramatic part of women's conquest of literacy. The history of writing is usually told as a narrative of gradual progress, leading up to the acquisition of mass literacy in the West at the end of the nineteenth

century, when writing had become an indispensable, everyday necessity for all.

Nevertheless, the focus of the history of writing, as the discipline is practised today, has lost the teleological bias implicit in this master narrative of the advance of literacy. We no longer think of such history as the tale of an ever-advancing triumph of civilisation, a chronicle of high cultures, closed elites and powerful individuals. The democratisation of writing was an undeniable, multi-secular process, but it was not always a smooth one. The traumatic beginnings of the Industrial Revolution, for example, were probably a temporary setback for the advance of literacy in Western countries.[17]

In consciously challenging the 'triumph of civilisation' approach to the history of literacies, this book prepares the terrain for a comparative study of both elite and subaltern literate communities. It investigates aspects of bureaucratic literacy in Babylon, and the uses of writing in the Korean script for refined secular purposes by the ladies of the Chosŏn court. At the opposite end of the spectrum, it considers one of the last social groups to achieve full literacy – peasants, viewed by Anna Kuismin through a Nordic lens. At the same time, it shows how both those in power and their humble subjects had a long history of action through public writings, using the outdoor spaces of the city to exercise or to challenge authority through written messages (in the chapters by Antonio Castillo Gómez and Philippe Artières).

'Re-purposing' and the Question of Genre

One salient conclusion to be drawn from these and other studies in the history of scribal culture is that they shed new light on a well-known phenomenon – namely, the stability of writing systems, the enduring continuity of their material supports, codes and visual traces.[18] Such stability and continuity are normally invoked in order to explain why spelling reforms are always so difficult to implement, for instance, or to explain why certain kinds of texts (religious, administrative, funereal or laudatory) get more readily studied than others in histories of written cultures.

In this book we can discern a hidden consequence of this stasis. Because of its endurance and stability, writing becomes transformed at a pace that is always much slower than that of the various uses attached to it, whether they are interactional, political, intellectual, recreational or anything else.

Such a mismatch between the slow rate of change in writing systems and the rapid transformations that may occur in social and linguistic contexts produces a paradox which demands a remedy, and the remedy is often the *re-purposing* of the very functions served by writing. The process inevitably triggers the investment of new values in old written symbols, in former writing systems and in traditional literacy practices.

A clear example of re-purposing in the history of writing is found in Francis Joannès' chapter. Joannès shows us the historical process in which the same cuneiform technology, originally designed for the Sumerian language and which only clay could embody, was progressively adapted by the Akkadian, the Hurrite, the Hittite, the Canaanite and the Ugaritic languages. Writing cuneiform characters in clay was a practice that stretched all over Mesopotamia to the point where no more stretching became possible in the face of a competing system, that of the Phoenician script, in its Aramaic derivative, embodied in parchment. The response in the Mesopotamian context, as Francis Joannès explains, was to re-purpose cuneiform script as the proper form for scholarly usage, thus guaranteeing its survival for many more centuries in a new function, and its appropriation by one specific group, more scholarly than the preceding ones.

In Germaine Warkentin's chapter the dynamics of re-purposing are overtly acknowledged, although the author prefers to speak of the 'adaptive uses of media' when she mentions the use of paper. Cases like the Cheyenne letter she presents witness the complex contacts between the indigenous inscription traditions of North America, and Western uses of writing introduced by Europeans.

Similarly, the re-purposing shift in written cultures and the symbolic innovation anchored to it are demonstrated by Anna Kuismin, but this time the focus is on written genres. In her chapter, she examines the case of ordinary people gaining access to written communication at a time when reading and writing became generalised practices in the West, even among the under-privileged. Kuismin shows us Finns producing ego-documents in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as modern social actors re-directing writing for purposes that were non-bureaucratic and non-scholarly, although they did not develop new textual genres for such uses. They clung to the traditional epistle, the diary or the account book, but re-invested them with new meanings of their own; the genres now served as tools which they could mould like plastic to adapt them to the complex self-image they were trying to project.

We use the word 're-purposing' here, but it should be noted that specialists in language change draw on several alternative terms that would serve just as well. Human language is the most complex symbolic system in existence, and its history abounds in examples of re-purposing. Depending on the level at which linguistic symbols change their value, linguists customarily refer either to 'semantic change' – a change in the denotation of a word that remains phonetically stable – or to 're-analysis' – the creative interpretation of ambiguous constructions, with the same word order but different assigned values, giving rise to innovations at the morpho-syntactic level. When semantic change occurs, new meanings are given to old words, especially by means of metaphor and metonymy, and these new meanings later become conventionalised. In time, semantic changes can leave their original departure point very far behind: an original Proto-Indo-European root like *bhel – to shine, flash, burn – can become the remote etymon of a word denoting 'white' in one descendant language (cf. Russian *belyĭ*), and of cognates denoting 'black' in others (cf. the English *black*).[19] Re-analysis may refer to many linguistic changes, especially syntactic changes: new determiners, auxiliary verbs and conjunctions, for instance, appear in this process. The word order remains stable at first, but the syntax of the words involved shifts to give them a new status.[20]

A whole new area of linguistic studies, namely the study of 'grammaticalisation', has developed from the observation of such diachronic processes.[21] To take one example, consider the various verbs for 'to be', such as *seer/ser* and *estar* in Spanish and Portuguese, respectively. These verbs, which once referred to body postures, equivalent to the English *sit* and *stand*, give rise to different kinds of auxiliary verbs in many languages. The best-known case is that of the evolution of the Latin *sedere* (to sit), *stare* (to stand) and *iacere* (to lie) into medieval Romance auxiliary verbs. They occurred frequently in front of other, non-inflected verbs (e.g. *siia comendo*, '(he) sat eating', *estava pregando*, '(he) stood praying'), but were re-analysed as auxiliary forms, retaining the features of inflection but completely losing the reference to body postures. This process of the auxiliation of what were originally posture verbs is not exclusive to Romance languages, but it can be observed today in other European languages, such as those in the North German family (Norwegian, Danish and Swedish), and in Bulgarian in the Slavic family.[22]

At another level, that of discourse, specialists in discourse analysis find the terms 'entextualisation' and 'resemiotisation' increasingly useful. They

can describe the empowering through discourse of social groups in today's multi-cultural societies. The groups concerned create new meanings for alien discursive practices, and in this way they manage to claim a new cultural identity, especially in the context of increasingly wider access to technology, as is the case of the environments of Facebook, YouTube or web forum discussions.[23] Human beings therefore constantly shift the purposes made available to them by the symbolic systems within their reach, whether this happens through well-known processes of change and variation in spoken language, or in the process of social interaction magnified by technology. The role of the scholar is to spot the shifts and analyse their possible significance, while avoiding getting trapped within the canons that are being broken.

This raises the question of challenges to literary or canonical genres. The historian of writing seeks to comprehend a broad range of writings in *non*-literary genres. Not all forms of writing considered in this book fall easily into familiar categories like 'autobiography', 'correspondence' or 'novels'. We find instead a range of hybrid genres, like the fictionalised Buddhist sutras mentioned by SeoKyung Han in the Korean court, or the collections resembling 'memory books' discussed by Anna Kuismin. Memory books, also known in Europe as *libri di famiglia* or *livres de raison*, often consisted of a heterogeneous mixture of historical chronicle and practical information connected to agricultural work, as well as a family record of baptisms and deaths.

Vernacular Writing

Dutch historians labelled a variety of autobiographical genres 'ego-documents', originally defined in the 1950s by Jacques (or Jacob) Presser as 'those documents in which an ego deliberately or accidentally discloses or hides itself'.[24] Since then, Dutch and other historians have shown an increasing interest in the autobiographies, memoirs, diaries and personal letters which interested Presser.[25] They have used self-writing as a means to trace the historicisation of the individual self between the eighteenth century and the present, from traditional manuscript sources up to the confessional culture of Facebook and today's blogs and social media.[26]

In this context, both literary historians and educationalists have expressed their faith in the transformative power of writing and its fundamentally creative aspects. Ursula Howard's recent investigation into what learning to write meant to the poor of nineteenth-century England is

profoundly penetrated by such convictions. Through writing, according to Howard, the poor could become historical actors; writing made them visible and gave them a new power.[27] Writing therefore had a subjective significance, since it was part of the process of self-realisation and the formation of an individual identity.

The search for the author's inner self in writings of the lower classes, however, is not always fruitful, partly because peasant writings tended to be very laconic and pragmatic rather than introverted or soul-searching. Because they only intermittently reveal the inner self, they do not fully correspond to the diaries and autobiographical writings which we label 'ego-documents'. In fact, peasant writings had many practical purposes other than an exploration of the ego. The French peasant autobiographer Henri Norre was not untypical: he filled his notebooks with information about crops, agricultural equipment and the wonders of super-phosphate fertiliser.[28] There are of course notable exceptions to this lack of emotional depth, as Kuismin clearly illustrates. In Nicolas Adell's contribution, too, we find embryonic autobiographies emerging from an unlikely source: the songs of French artisans.

The importance of songs is one reminder of the close connection between vernacular writings and oral culture. The continuing relationship between written and oral culture is demonstrated by Antonio Castillo's chapter on the Hispanic world in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. He descends to street level to show us the importance of oral communication in the composition of texts, as well as in their diffusion in the public spaces of the city, and in appropriation by their readers. The popular culture of early modern Europe was what Marina Roggero called 'an amphibious culture', in which verbal communication, print and writing all nurtured and reciprocally influenced each other.[29]

Some anthropological theory, however, has posited a clear dichotomy between written and oral culture. In oral cultures, it is argued, people tell stories differently from the way they are told in a literate society. In Walter Ong's analysis, oral storytellers are prone to repetition and redundancy. They rely on memory, which may be prodigious, but needs signposts in the story ('mnemonic clues') to guide the narrator and jog his or her memory about what comes next. Only in writing, Ong argues, which is inherently more analytical and reflective, can distance and critical rationality be fully accomplished. There was an assumption here that literacy tended to drive out verbal communication, so that Ong even talked about literate societies which retained an 'oral residue'.[30] Historians of writing,

paradoxically enough, would be among the first to question this rather dismissive attitude towards oral cultures, since they know that in vernacular writings the presence of the oral in the text is persistent and pervasive and by no means residual. The self-taught Sicilian labourer and road-mender, Vincenzo Rabito, born in 1899, showed us this when he sat down in 1967 to write his autobiography. Half a million words poured out, described in the words of his presenter David Moss as

> a mix of semi-literate Italian, Sicilian dialect and idiosyncratic coinings, covering 1,027 pages without a single break by chapter, section or sentence but punctuated by semi-colons, commas, question marks or exclamation marks between almost every word. The only divisions were the physical distinctions between the typewritten and numbered sheets of paper.[31]

The continuous stream of prose which made up his 'book' *Terra Matta* thus remained close to oral speech patterns, which in no way prevented its publication in 2007 by Einaudi, the rapid sale of 15,000 copies and its adaptation into a film screened at the Venice Film Festival in 2012. The abiding orality of ordinary writings continues to offer both historians and historical socio-linguists a rich territory in which to explore the informal registers of language usage and the interface between oral and scribal culture.

In spite of the different perspectives which separate anthropologists and historians, ethnographic influences remain important in the history of writing. Nicolas Adell's chapter outlines the anthropological approaches which have inspired work on the history of scribal culture in France, for example. Adell believes that the insights of Jack Goody are crucial, especially in his definition of writing as a 'technology of the intellect', which changes thought patterns and produces new forms of rationality.[32] Writing, Goody argued, changes the way we think, and it changes the writer as well as the reader. Goody's arguments about the formation of a specifically 'graphic logic' have made him a more popular thinker in France than even in his native England.

Philippe Artières' contribution takes a similar approach, although his chapter can be seen as part of a tradition of Foucauldian studies, focusing on new methods of control and surveillance in contemporary societies. The proliferation of writings and graffiti in late nineteenth-century Paris aroused police concern, which leads Artières to study repressive attitudes and vocabulary, and to pose questions about the policeman's 'gaze'. He

approaches the history of writing from the archives of repression, in this case those of the Prefecture of Police, just as others have done, notably Antonio Castillo, whose discussion of writings in the street relies heavily on the records of the Inquisition. Following his previous studies of prison writings and convent writing, Artières views the streets of late nineteenth-century Paris in the looming shadow of Foucault's symbol of the all-seeing, all-knowing panopticon.[33]

Like historians of scribal culture, historians of language change have recently shown a strong interest in vernacular writing. Conventional versions of language history have tended to trace the development of a standard national language and the process of its legimitisation, basing their analysis principally on the relatively formal language of printed sources. Historical socio-linguists, however, propose alternative language histories which focus more on spoken language and its informal registers. They have sometimes shown great ingenuity in constituting their corpus, like the research group in Leiden which studied the language of Dutch correspondence found in ships captured by the English during the conflicts of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[34] They study the interface between the oral and the written to develop a new history of language 'from below'. Language change can sometimes be prescribed 'from above', by educational institutions or academies, and become enshrined in grammar books and school manuals; but the forms of spoken language may continue just as before, 'below the level of awareness'.[35] One result of this new emphasis is to blur traditional dichotomies between written and oral culture, and indeed between literacy and illiteracy, in which vernacular forms are liable to be classified as 'deviant', 'non-standard' or even 'sub-standard'. Instead of borrowing these potentially derogatory labels for popular speech and writing, it is preferable to accept the blurring of boundaries, and to think in terms of a continuum of literacy along which ordinary writers may be situated.

The Visibility of the History of Writing

The history of written culture is suffering from relative neglect and it has a problem of legitimacy. Peter Burke's *What Is Cultural History?*, for example, had nothing to say about the history of written culture, although it did treat the history of reading.[36] Burke followed a familiar pattern, in which the history of writing is frequently absorbed within the history of reading and publishing, or treated as a footnote to it.

The history of reading, however, has a tendency to concentrate on the history of books, to some extent neglecting other textual forms, whether manuscript, print or electronic, which are more fragile, intimate or ephemeral. In 2015, for instance, on the 500th anniversary of the death of Aldus Manutius, scholars widely celebrated the innovations of the great Venetian printer/publisher in typography, *mise en page* and business modelling. Even though we now study a much wider range of print and manuscript objects than was once the case, it was clear that it is above all the bound and printed volume that captures scholars' attention. This volume seeks to banish the 'book fetish' currently prevalent among specialists in the history of reading and publishing, especially in the English-speaking world.[37] Like the authors of *Comprender el pasado* (who incidentally included Peter Burke, mentioned above), we believe that the importance of the history of writing needs to be recognised, and that its future lies 'at the cutting-edge of the discipline'.[38]

The contributions gathered here demonstrate the value of interdisciplinary approaches to the history of writing. This history engages archaeologists, palaeographers, anthropologists, social and cultural historians, historians of education and historical socio-linguists as well as cultural historians. Although this collection of studies only represents a selection of current scholarship and cannot pretend to be comprehensive, it includes examples of many of these approaches. In 10 chapters, presented by leading historians of scribal culture, we investigate the history of writing as a cultural practice in a variety of contexts and periods. We seek to analyse the rituals and practices determining intimate or 'ordinary' writing as well as bureaucratic, religious and courtly writing. From the inscribed images of so-called pre-literate societies, to public inscriptions and the democratisation of writing in the modern era, access to writing technology and its public and private uses by men, women and children will be analysed. Our objective is to explore the uses and functions of writing in non-alphabetical as well as alphabetical script, in societies ranging from those of Native Americans and ancient Mesopotamians to those in modern Europe.

Many of the studies collected here emerged from a panel on The History of Writing Practices and Scribal Culture, selected for the 22nd International Congress of Historical Sciences which met in Jinan, China, in August 2015. We would like to thank all those who participated on that

memorable occasion. Martyn Lyons is responsible for the translation of several chapters, namely Chapters 2, 6 and 10 from French, and Chapters 5 and 9 from Spanish.

Notes

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