

records ("Country Book Trades 1784–85"), and the development of a great collection ("Edward Clark Collection..."). On the other hand, the reader might benefit from contemporary currency conversion—to better understand financial accounts from previous time periods—and brief translation of some of the Welsh titles.

This collection emphasizes the research value of publishers' records, computer analysis of trade patterns, and review of older research in light of newly noted resources. More important, the book inspires introspection that leads all professionals to consider the concept of the funnel: Each person contains knowledge and experience, much of which is unique (large part of the funnel), and unless it is shared (flow-through factor), it is lost when the flow is blocked (corked, as in death, stroke, etc.).

Useful as it may be for these reasons, this book certainly achieves its purpose of providing a *Human Face of the Book Trade*.—*Jim Presgraves, ABAA, Bookworm & Silverfish.*

Williams, Julie Hedgepeth. *The Significance of the Printed Word in Early America: Colonists' Thoughts on the Role of the Press.* Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Pr. (*Contributions to the Study of Mass Media and Communications*, no. 55), 1999. 298p. alk. paper (ISBN: 0-313-30923X). LC 98-41689.

As its title indicates, this is not a book shy about making claims for itself. Professor

Williams intends to reveal all concerning print culture in colonial America: what was printed, how it was received, and what its impact was. A hefty agenda. How does she fare?

First, the good news: Williams has immersed herself in a wide variety of primary source material from colonial America. She wants to write history from the document up. From her journey through archives and libraries from New England to the Carolinas, she has turned up an interesting and occasionally provocative series of episodes and anecdotes concerning print culture in early America. This is a book with voices, as its subtitle advertises—the voices heard through the printed word. And those voices, from the personal through the commercial and the political, are rich and evocative. The author wears archival dust well. Indeed, stripped of all commentary, the quotations in the book would make for a lovely sampling of colonial Americans and their struggles to get on with life in a difficult and foreign environment.

She also makes heavy use of newspapers and almanacs and so reminds us of the extraordinarily rich sources they are for documenting everything from daily life to publishing strategies. The personal ads that dot colonial gazettes—and many early modern newspapers abroad—evoke the ups and down of family and commercial life in British North America.

Williams covers some well-trodden ground: the literature of settlement, Puritan publications, practical advice guides, government documents, local culture, etc. She is not so much concerned with making the case for printing and the Revolution as she is for simply documenting the abundance of ways in which this unusually literate society used and abused print.

That said, it is difficult to recommend this book. Yes, it can be evocative and suggestive. A graduate student might find a dissertation lurking in some or other chapter. But as a piece of historical scholarship, the book has little to offer. It is one scholar's report from wide reading in

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primary sources. It offers no real perspective, has no discernible architecture, and argues solely by assertion. The author has assumed the importance of the printed word in colonial America and proceeds to march through all of her note cards documenting her assertion. What is one to make of: “[William] Byrd loved the printed word, and he was not alone. Americans of the colonial era enjoyed reading.” Or, “The press helped put people in touch with one another. Americans did not have to have a high level of education or certain personal friends in order to tap into vast storehouses of wisdom. Through books and similar materials, they had a link to knowledgeable people no matter who those people were.” Or, “As odd as it may sound to media-saturated audiences of the later twentieth century, early Americans were children of the mass media.” These passages are but a small sampling of some of the *bons mots* to be found in the book. Anyone who truly wants to assess “the significance of the printed word in early America” probably should turn elsewhere, for example, to the new History

of the *Book in America* series coming from the American Antiquarian Society.

The principal problem with the book is its apparent lack of familiarity with the formidable body of secondary literature on the book in early America that could have given Williams’s doctoral dissertation perspective, context, and an argument. The author certainly followed protocols in rummaging through the archives, but she was short of questions to ask her sources: she is not an adroit interrogator. The result is a book that shares largely analyzed data with the reader but does little else. There is no real argument here. What we have here is clothesline history, so many chapters hung out to dry on a line. The one thing most history graduate students learn early on is the need to situate their work in some historiographical context: How does the student see her contribution in relation to those who have gone before her? Alas, the major lacuna of Williams’s book is its naïveté about its place in contemporary scholarship. There is no “anxiety of influence” here!—*Michael Ryan, University of Pennsylvania.*