



Steam-Powered Knowledge: William Chambers and the Business of Publishing, 1820-1860

Aileen Fyfe

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With the overwhelming amount of new information that bombards us each day, it is perhaps difficult to imagine a time when the widespread availability of the printed word was a novelty. In early nineteenth-century Britain, print was not novel—Gutenberg’s printing press had been around for nearly four centuries—but printed matter was still a rare and relatively expensive luxury. All this changed, however, as publishers began employing new technologies to astounding effect, mass-producing instructive and educational books and magazines and revolutionizing how knowledge was disseminated to the general public.

In *Steam-Powered Knowledge*, Aileen Fyfe explores the activities of William Chambers and the W. & R. Chambers publishing firm during its formative years, documenting for the first time how new technologies were integrated into existing business systems. Chambers was one of the first publishers to abandon traditional skills associated with hand printing, instead favoring the latest innovations in printing processes and machinery: machine-made paper, stereotyping, and, especially, printing machines driven by steam power. The mid-nineteenth century also witnessed dramatic advances in transportation, and Chambers used proliferating railway networks and steamship routes to speed up communication and distribution. As a result, his high-tech publishing firm became an exemplar of commercial success by 1850 and outlived all of its rivals in the business of cheap instructive print. Fyfe follows Chambers’s journey from small-time bookseller and self-trained hand-press printer to wealthy and successful publisher of popular educational books on both sides of the Atlantic, demonstrating along the way the profound effects of his and his fellow publishers’ willingness, or unwillingness, to incorporate these technological innovations into their businesses.

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