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From the SelectedWorks of Sidney F. Huttner

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Maraget Lock. Bookbinding Materials and Techniques 1700-1920

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This compact book was assembled for the CBBAG Home Study Programme, and it reads like a typical text book – indeed, rather relentlessly so. Typical sentences – take those that open the first chapter, “Hand bookbinding, 1700-1800”: “Before the nineteenth century, the book trade was small in scale. Until 1800, all books were typeset and printed by hand. Most books were printed in editions of 1000 to 1500 copies. A new book might have a first edition of only 500 copies.” – are short and simple, only rarely consisting of even two clauses; appear to assert a straight-forward and uncontroversial fact; and invite rote memorization. One expects a review question set at the end of the chapter (but the book happily lacks conventional text book apparatus!).

Conscientiously and consistently annotated though the text is – there are 20 pages of endnotes coordinated with nine dense pages of bibliography plus a large number of thoroughly annotated, carefully chosen, and well reproduced illustrations – the complete absence of qualification – the utter lack of nuance – makes one wonder if any of what is being said is actually true. Is it really possible to squeeze all the ambiguity and argument out of the many excellent books and articles cited in the bibliography and still be left with a largely accurate outline? Is this a garlic press that enhances flavor or is the result more like the funhouse mirror, the subject bulging here and diminishing there? How to recognize distortion without clues as to what subtleties have been jettisoned?

Of the first four sentences, one is false (more than a few fully engraved books had been published by 1800); one is doubtless true (of course some books must have had editions of 500 or fewer copies); one may be true but surely deserves lots and lots of qualifications with regard to date, subject, and place and circumstance of publication; and one turns on definition or argument (What does “small in scale” mean? Presumably that most members of the trade, pre-1800, worked alone or in small shops, in contrast to the consolidation and industrialization that characterized the 19th century. But books and the number of those involved in making them have probably always been and still are “small in scale” relative to the larger culture).

Advances in knowledge call into question large parts of the text. Reading, for example, that “Most books were left unbound (in quires or sheets) until the bookseller was reasonably sure of selling them. Binders charged the same price to bind a book whether it was in a batch of the same title or a single copy” (page 3) in light of Stuart Bennett’s recent *Trade bookbinding in the British Isles 1660-1800* suggests that enterprising historians of bookbinding can find in *Bookbinding Materials and Techniques 1700-1920* a veritable mine of research subjects: take almost any assertion as accurately
summarizing received knowledge and investigate its accuracy. The results may be surprising and rewarding.

This suggests both this book’s greatest value (extreme condensation of a large swath of research into bookbinding history) and its greatest weakness (resulting generalities that are more or less accidentally accurate). That said, the book is handsomely produced, the illustrations are of value, and unlike the typical text book, it is inexpensive. Anyone interested in bookbinding history should add a copy to her or his bookshelf – but read it (profitably) when in your most skeptical mood.

There is also, it needs be said, fresh and valuable information about Canadian binding practices distributed through the book, another reason for seeking out a copy.