other rare books and manuscript librarians might wish to consider organizing a one-time book club—even inviting other librarians outside their department or unit—to read this educational and entertaining treatise and discuss it together over several sessions. It is, by far, one of the most significant library-related books I have read in many a year; I cannot recommend it highly enough. Enjoy!—Norman D. Stevens, Director of University Libraries, Emeritus, University of Connecticut.


Expanded from a series of three lectures given in 2007, Hall describes the political, social, and cultural forces that influenced modes of authorship, publishing, and dissemination in 17th-century New England. Separate, but not wholly apart, Hall delineates how writing in New England developed along a different trajectory from the center of the English-speaking world in London. Hall begins by asserting that two keys to understanding New England’s text-making culture have been under-valued. The first is the essentially collaborative culture of how texts were written, spoken, shared, transcribed, annotated, and rewritten. The second is the fundamentally handwritten or scribal practices that were perpetuated by authors. Perhaps a counterintuitive claim, Hall insists that for the purposes of understanding New England during the 17th century, scribal publication must be interpreted as tantamount to print publication within the social context and means of production available. Each of the three forces—political, sociological, and the Puritan vernacular tradition—facilitate the succeeding explanations and arguments for evidence of a vast and complicated culture of writing in early English-speaking America.

The political aspects of writing, often indivisible from religion in 17th-century America, influenced a variety of choices authors made about what they did with their work. Central to the authorship of works was the distinction between making them public or private. Although never explicitly diagramed, Hall generates several concentric, local to trans-Atlantic, circles of readership, such as the home, the church, the Boston area, New England, London, and the English-speaking world. Hall in turn details the numerous genres of works, sometimes directly related to these various social and political circles, such as church controversies, religious experience, poetry, prose compilations, textbooks, and secular political tracts. Paradoxically, attempts to make writings private, particularly controversial or aesthetically admired works, could accentuate their movement and penetration into other circles. Sometimes authors or disputants legitimately feared works of controversy or dissent being more widely distributed. At other times, their secrecy might have been a feint of modesty or divinely inspired truth, purity, and anticommunalism, in turn used as evidence of their righteousness.
Hall compares the social and technological production of Elizabethan England observed by contemporary Shakespeare studies with similar modes of production in America. This technique blends the many separate stages of production as texts are used, reused, and changed as they move through different social contexts. This method of interpretation deemphasizes the importance of provenance and authority in favor of coming to terms with the entire lifecycle of texts as fluid, discursive, and interrelated. Scholars need not search for a definitive version of any work but, instead, investigate the individuals who surrounded and interacted with authors. Each individual in turn, whether close confidant, parishioner, or printer, used texts to his or her own ends, from quietly adding to a personal collection to going so far as to publish them in England without the consent of the author. Hall gives numerous examples of what today we may feel are confused and mismanaged marketing campaigns. Hall makes clear that, from decade to decade, authors’ relationships to their works differed, depending on their gender, the political circumstances, their congregation, their relationships with their friends and fellow scribes, and the genre in which they were working. An extreme but telling example of this is illustrated in the case of John Cotton, who discovered that copies of his sermons, annotated by a parishioner in his midst, were being printed and sold in London, with a preface by the plagiarist. Hall identifies how supplementary materials between different editions of texts often reveal the multiple interests and individuals involved in each portion of a printed text. Often, authors were resigned to simply accepting the repurposing or corruption of their texts, incapable of overseeing the production of complete volumes.

Finally, Hall argues that the literary traditions all stem in one way or another from the Puritan vernacular conventions, often set apart and intentionally breaking from the Catholic liturgy and systems of patronage and perceived excesses of Catholic kings and noblemen in England. This third point seems manifestly true, at least in the sense that it is nearly impossible to understand Hall’s examples of interactions between text, reader/listener, and author without including some sort of contention with particular Puritan beliefs about divine revelation, the purity of the community, and the salvation of individuals. Since many of the literary genres in early New England were a mixture of oral and textual transmission, they are especially relevant to techniques mentioned in Hall’s second argument. Text-making was the seed bed for both doctrinal experimentation between close friends and proclamations from the pulpit.

Hall infrequently, though effectively, contrasts these three interpretive particulars of 17th-century New England with the more familiar setting of London and practices of legal and financial documentation. In the first case, we are aware of a sort of alternate history in which printing presses are exploding with pamphlets and
documents of all kinds because of vastly different economies of scale in London. The fact that similar kinds of developments are not occurring in New England makes the confluences of political and social forces all the more peculiar and interesting. In the second case, adherences to perfect copies of texts were still understood as extremely important in New England courts and monetary agreements. New Englanders understood that justice and equity depended on the accuracy of statutes and the exactness of financial documentation. Hall’s point here is that New England may not simply be dismissed as more provincial in its textual and literary developments when contrasted with England. Developments in New England text-making practices were special in a way that made them marketable throughout the English-speaking world, many of them reprinted and still read today for religious inspiration.

While reading Hall’s book, it is impossible for contemporary readers to avoid having the vast open decentralized shameless global postindustrial context of today’s publishing options in mind. New England’s desire for ethical and moral principles of divine inspiration being unsullied by economic interests and the resulting emphasis on scribal publication can be compared and contrasted with contemporary publishing and ideals of openness and participative text-making on the Web. Other
pieces of Hall’s arguments can be tweaked and extended for understanding today’s assumptions about what publishing in print actually means. As a result, the book extends its utility beyond questions of text-making and authorship in 17th-century New England.—*Wade Garrison, Digital Humanities Consulting Librarian, University of Kansas.*


In *Scribes, Script and Books,* Leila Avrin has provided the rare book world with a nearly comprehensive review of the history of writing and hand-bookmaking, from the earliest evidence of logographic symbols up to the eve of letterpress printing in Europe. The text is lavishly illustrated with 350 black and white photos, figures, and maps, and has an extensive bibliography. The work was originally published in 1991 and is now available as a reprint.

In the introduction, Avrin clearly states that her intent is to synthesize the work of the many historians preceding her, not to present original research. This is not, however, a popular treatment written in a light journalistic style. (In fact, the sheer amount of detail can be daunting; it is best appreciated one chapter at a time.) Avrin, who died in 1999, was a faculty member at Hebrew University’s School of Library and Archive Studies, with a doctorate in art history. She published widely in the fields of art and antiquarian book studies.

In the opening chapters, Avrin addresses early writing systems and their evolution into the phonetic alphabets of the Western world. She then follows the history of writing, record-keeping, and the flowering of written literatures in the ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia, Egypt, Israel and the Jewish Diaspora, Greece, the Roman Empire, and the Islamic world.

In each section, Avrin provides a wealth of detail on how the physical materials of bookmaking were produced: local practices in the making of papyrus and parchment, the composition of inks, the type of stylus or pen used to produce various scripts, even the scribes’ seating arrangements. Along with these basics, Avrin touches on a dizzying array of related subjects: the economics of papyrus production, the role of the Egyptian climate in preserving materials from antiquity, the evolution of the Semitic alphabet, scribal training, Hebrew and Arab scripts as art, Arabic contributions to mathematics, and a great many other topics. Avrin’s prose is rich with etymologies for scores of ancient and specialized terms.