

THE ENTREPRENEURIAL CURLL

For 40 years Edmund Curll—known today as the "unspeakable Curll," "dauntless Curll," "shameless Curll," if the name is recognized at all—was a major figure in the bookselling and publishing world of 18th century London. Although his impudence, vulgarity and sharp practices early on inspired the pejoratives by which he is best remembered, in another time or with less articulate and venomous enemies—he earned the enmity of Pope, Swift, Defoe, the House of Lords, to name a few of the more powerful—he might only be characterized as the "entrepreneurial Curll."

Britannia in Kansas

an exhibition of materials from
the Kenneth Spencer Research Library
1997

EARLY CURLL. After having been apprenticed to the bookseller and auctioneer Richard Smith, he set up on his own and in 1706 issued, as the first book to bear his name, a "second edition, improv'd" of a translation of Caesar's *Commentaries*.^{item 1} "Improv'd?" The book was no more than a reissue of the sheets of the book which had been issued in 1705 by his former master, stripped of its original title-page and with a new one bearing Curll's name substituted. Curll the entrepreneur was off and running. In this his first book Curll employed two of his signature deceptive practices: 1) the touting of something as being "new and improved" when it was in no way different from its predecessor and 2) the substitution of a new (and calculatedly misleading) title-page on an old book. As time went by, he improved on both techniques.

CURLL THE OPPORTUNIST. By June of 1706 he had published *A letter to Mr. Prior. Occasion'd by the Duke of Marlborough's victory at Ramilly*.^{item 2} The gazettes and coffee houses were full of the news of this, Marlborough's most famous victory since Blenheim, almost 2 years before. There can be no question but that Curll was aware of the ready saleability of titles which celebrated popular military victories; the market was flooded with them after Blenheim and Curll hoped to cash in after Ramillies. Accounts and panegyrics continued to appear until late in the Fall but Curll had entered the market early, less than a month after the battle, and thus early on established himself as an "opportunistic" publisher. Ever after he kept an eye out for other opportunities—and found plenty of them. It seems likely that he also employed a second trick in this publication, that of gratuitously including the name of some famous person prominently on the title-page: *Letter to Mr. Prior*. Ostensibly, the poem is a plea to Prior to sing the praises of "arms and victory;" in fact it is a panegyric to Marlborough and Anne. The prominent inclusion of "Mr. Prior" on the title-page is probably a means of trading on the current popularity of the poet, Matthew Prior, and hoping that the careless buyer would not recognize until after the sale that the work was not by the poet Prior. Curll refined and reused that ruse repeatedly throughout his career.

CURLL THE PRURIENT & PIOUS. Another of his attention-getting devices was to offer works which would appeal to the prurient interests of his customers. In *Letter to Mr. Prior* he advertises *Caesar* as being currently available at his shop and *The miscellaneous works of the Earls of Roscommon and Rochester* as to be published "in a short time." The 2nd Earl of Rochester was a poet and libertine, as well-known for his amorous lyrics and obscene verses as for his drunkenness and debauchery. In Curll's first year of business, then, he already had his eye on capturing part of the gallant market. This advertisement is also an example of another of his artifices in action: establish a claim to "speedily" publishing a new title in order to stimulate interest and to warn off competitors, no matter how far in the future the true publication date is to be. In this case, the "short time" was something over a year but he had accurately targeted an audience and the book went through at least four so-called editions by 1714, as well as being published by others throughout the century. In contrast, his first year of work also found him having a hand in issuing *The devout Christian's companion*, an unexceptionable collection of excerpts from the writings of well known clerics. It was straightforward piety for the benefit of pious families—with the added advantage of having no authors to pay. Good business and the kind of advantage he sought whenever possible.

CURL THE PIRATE. He began his second year by pirating a collection of poems of Matthew Prior, the poet whose good name he had made questionable use of earlier.^{item 3} Prior responded meekly by having Tonson publish an authorized version of *Poems on several occasions* in 1709 in which he repudiated Curll's earlier collection: "the publisher has given me the honour of some things that did not belong to me, and has transcribed others so imperfectly, that I hardly knew them to be mine." (In fairness to Curll, it should be pointed out that at least some of the poems disowned by Prior are now known to be by him, even if he thought it prudent to deny them at the time.) But in his next attempt at unauthorized publication that same year, Jonathan Swift's *Meditation upon a broomstick*, he sold a good many books but in the process made an enemy of one of the masters of acid-tongued satire. The author's manuscript which Curll used as his source he had acquired by dubious means, a trick which he was not above using again. The present-day student of textual evolution is grateful to Curll because such "pre-first edition" publication can give us insights into an earlier stage of the development of Swift's text— although serving as handmaiden to future scholars was probably not one of Curll's motivations. In editing and publishing this, the first collected edition of Swift's works, Curll displayed another aspect of his innate entrepreneurial skills, that of spotting a marketable author. Curll's enterprise was so immediately successful that he followed the first issue of *Meditation* (probably the one which sold for 6d.) by a second one (which sold for 2d.).^{item 4}

SACHEVERELL AND POPE. It seems as if every publisher in London capitalized on the Sacheverell Affair in 1710, Curll included. He was responsible for publishing perhaps a dozen contributions, five of which he wrote anonymously. That he wrote them himself suggests not that he was unable to hire a hack to produce grist for his mill (he was ever able to do that on demand) but, more likely, that he sincerely wished to contribute to Sacheverell's defense. He obviously also wished to contribute to the Curllian enterprise so he produced some of his typical frothy attempts to cash in on the name and the controversy, as for example, his *Some account of the family of Sacheverell*, a "mere gathering of scrappy information" and "extracts of speeches in Parliament made by William Sacheverell [a putative relative of the famous Henry]." He took this opportunity to employ for the first time a device which he continued to use, even in his last year of business, that of gathering together unsold pamphlets, attaching a new title-page, and selling it as a new book. His first use of this device, *Tracts relating to the impeachment of Dr. Henry Sacheverell*, was more honest than subsequent ones; he became much more artful in concealing the fact that the *new* book was merely a collection of *old* books.

The year 1716 was one of his most eventful. March saw the first major battle in what was to become his life-long war with Alexander Pope: Pope took revenge for Curll's involvement in publishing *Court poems*^{item 5} by physically administering an emetic to Curll and then widely noising the event abroad; although the emetic was surely uncomfortable for the man, for the entrepreneur, the publicity was a tonic.

LORDS, BLANKET AND PILLORY. Then, for his hand in the publication of *An account of the tryal of the Earl of Winton*, which the House of Lords reckoned a breach of privilege, he was taken into custody by the Lords, not to be released

until 3 weeks later, after he had apologized on his knees and the Lord Chancellor had administered a reprimand.

A little later, in trying out one of his embryonic entrepreneurial projects—that of quickly getting a memorial into print after a notable person's death—he ran afoul of the students of Westminster School: he published the oration spoken at the funeral of the Reverend Dr. Robert South in College Hall. The Westminster boys took offense at the "false Latin" printed by Curll and enticed him into the schoolyard, where he was tossed in a blanket, whipped, and made to ask pardon on his knees.^{item 6} Otherwise, 1716 was a good year for cashing in on the deaths of well known people. Thomas Tenison and George Hickes, who died in December 1715, were each memorialized within weeks of their deaths by what was to become a Curllian stock-in-trade, *The last will and testament of* [fill in a name] *or Memoirs of the life of* [name]. In 1741 he advertised over 30 such works still available in stock; appropriately enough, the advertisement appeared in his latest publication of the type, one on the death of John Barber, printer and Lord Mayor of London.^{item 7}

Also in 1716 he first employed the ruse of using a pseudonym confusingly similar to the name of a well-known person. In this case the well-known person was the poet John Gay; the title-page was *The petticoat by Mr. Gay*; the real author was Francis Chute, one of the hacks in Curll's stable.^{item 8}

Curll remained in the trade for another 30 years, during which time he was in and out of King's Bench prison, figuratively pilloried by Pope in *The Dunciad*, literally pilloried at Charing-Cross for publishing *The memoirs of John Ker of Kersland*, attacked by a righteous Defoe for the sin of "Curlicism" (see Case 2 "Bonds with Britain," item 16) and generally denigrated by his contemporaries. Since reputations have a kind of inertia, even after his death in 1747, that inertia seemed to carry his along a downward path.

YET, ALL IN ALL . . . For an entrepreneur to be successful he cannot rely solely on gimmicks and deceptive practices; he must provide items of genuine value along with the attention-grabbers. Although Curll is not today remembered for publishing books of value, they nevertheless constituted one of the key elements of his success in the market; without them it would have been impossible for him to have survived 40 years in a trade littered with bankruptcies. He carefully balanced the scholarly, the pious, the political and the salacious and, for the most part, he required of his printers that they execute his commissions neatly and legibly, at a time when typographic appearance was not generally a matter of great concern.

SPENCER LIBRARY'S CURLL COLLECTION, although sizable and growing, is by no means "complete." In fact, no one can say what would comprise a "complete" collection of the works with which Curll was connected, for the corpus itself—although we know it must be finite—seems to be ever growing. The Collection is large and varied enough, however, to give a tolerable picture of this consummate entrepreneur bookseller. As it happens, that picture is almost the only "picture" we have of him for, aside from a few caricatures images, we have no portrait. Two of those caricatures appear in the *Grub Street Journal*^{item 9} and are reproduced on the end-panels of this case. The Janus-faced figure, although it may be an imperfect representation, certainly seems to catch the spirit of the man perfectly.

WM L. MITCHELL