Tim Somers, *Ephemeral Print Culture in Early Modern England: Sociability, Politics and Collecting*, Woodbridge, The Boydell Press in association with The British Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies, 2021, xvi + 306 pp., £75.00 (hardback), ISBN9781783275496

Tim Somers' excellent book explores the cultures of collecting ephemeral prints and texts, from 1640 to about 1800, with a central focus on the later Stuart period. Ephemeral texts, usually printed on single sheets, are, by their nature, tricky to study: both 'the backdrop of everyday life' and widely circulated, but, as a result, often now lost or scattered. Somers' route into this teeming, scattered world is the fascinating figure of John Bagford (1650/1-1716), a shoemaker's son born in Fetter Lane who made an early living as a book runner, travelling between London, Oxford, Cambridge and Amsterdam to obtain often obscure titles for clients such as Robert Harley and Hans Sloane. Bagford worked also as an agent at book auctions (new events in 1670s England), and became himself a collector of materials relating to the history of printing, amassing thousands of fragments of title-pages, ballads, and samples of printing – often pulled from the bindings of older books – in pursuit of a history that he never wrote, but which survives as a mountain of documents in the British Library, thanks to a chain of purchase-and-transmission featuring Humfrey Wanley and Robert Harley. Bagford was a hugely important figure in the second-hand book market, and he was also what we would now call a first-rate networker in the world of the sociable virtuosi and beyond: culturally amphibious, a tradesman at home in the gentleman's library and the alehouse and everywhere between, and on good terms with Samuel Pepys, Jacob Tonson, John Somers, John Moore, Thomas Tenison, among many others. 'Honest' John Bagford fitted well in his sociable milieu. 'I converse with him often', wrote Thomas Hearne, 'sometimes in the Library, sometimes in the Fields, sometimes in the [tavern] Antiquity Hall, and sometimes in my Chamber.'

Collecting, Somers suggests, is the removal of objects or texts from their original context and the placement of those objects or texts in proximity with others of their kind. This is a starkly useful definition, and from it, Somers explores how proximity and juxtaposition affect the meaning of objects or texts, and also how a collector's ordering of ephemeral items might produce a sense of a collector's identity. Understood in this way, collections become versions of something like life-writing: the grammar of curation a way to organise and articulate experience. Somers develops this sense of meaning-through-association by tracking ballad melodies and woodcuts, noting how each might carry connotations from past texts forward into new texts. This kind of 'habitually connective thinking' – of collections of texts as 'associational assemblages' – is, Somers argues, a central feature of a Bagfordian culture.

Bagford was, it seems, adept at burying or pronouncing his radical tendencies depending on the nature of the client and occasion. If the moment demanded it, he would happily deal in controversial texts, as when he worked with the English tavern-keeper in Rotterdam, suspected of Jacobitism, who (Bagford's accounts reveal) sought polemical Tory, anti-republican newsletters. But Bagford might also keep his cards close to his chest, and Somers argues that collecting produced a cultural space in which partisan political positions could be 'de-escalated' by framing the contested past as an object of collection and curation. A lock of Charles I's hair might be a relic of royalist martyrdom, but it might also be a curiosity alongside other pieces of the past that 'lent themselves to spectacle and "divertisement"'. In a coffee house, visitors could gaze upon a skeleton of a young frog next to the band Charles II wore as a disguise; Ralph Thorseby's collection of 'Human Rarities' included kidney stones, foetuses, ‘and the severed arm of a royalist martyr’. In his excellent discussion of the medley engraving, a *trompe l’oeil* representation of ephemeral texts, depicted as if scattered on a table top, Somers shows how the often powerfully satirical content of this material was mediated by a lucid visual wit. This tendency finds expression in emerging ideals of impartiality, sometimes invoked to legitimise highly partisan printed texts – as when Narcissus Luttrell assembled notionally ‘impartial’ collections of documents to describe the rise of popery. Somers sees this use of a rhetoric of impartiality to justify particular ideologies playing out widely, including in the way in the 1700s that non-jurors and Tories might collect ‘popular’ old ballads and metrical psalms as signs of ‘pastness’ and of the collector’s present-day disaffection. More broadly, Somers traces a developing sense of historical consciousness in which newsbooks, once valued for their ‘periodicity’ and their sense of now-ness, became instead, or as well as, sources for a lost past, where ‘an old parchment MS. Chronicle’ plucked from a binding might recall a lost time. For antiquarians and virtuosi, ephemeral items became units for spelling out a sense of the past: for anyone interested in the history of printing and typography, for example, cheap printed texts like ballads or playing cards became crucial sources as ‘typographical artefacts’. Bagford’s expertise, as a super-networked supplier, and a historian and collector himself, meant he became a crucial figure amid this culture. Bagford, like other enterprising booksellers, even began selling pre-collected bundles of cheap prints (such as ‘a large Collection of tractes relating to Crom[well]’): the kinds of text that might otherwise disappear into the air.

The archival material we work with today – and also often the frameworks within which we think – were shaped to a considerable extent by the motives and practices of early collectors. This is particularly so when dealing with ephemeral texts: we lean heavily on these early acts of curation. Somers’ richly researched book should be required reading for anyone working on print culture, fragments, collecting, antiquarianism, and the workings of the book trade. It’s comes, too, at a good moment for Bagford studies – if we can announce such a field – and for the study of early modern fragments in general: Somers’ book sits sociably alongside Whitney Trettien’s *Cut/Copy/Paste: Fragments from the History of Bookwork* (Minnesota, 2022) which features a chapter on Bagford, alongside discussions of the London print trade and the ways in which texts were cut up and reassembled in sometimes radical forms. Somers’ book is illustrated with 33 images.

Adam Smyth (Balliol College, Oxford)