



# James Raven

## On the book world of 18th-century London ... and Bishop Pontoppidan's sea monsters

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### Is there anything in your background that would have suggested that your academic career was inevitable?

I came from a family that worked on the land for generations in north Essex and south Suffolk. I was surrounded by relations who were forced to leave school to work (both my parents left at 14) – nobody had taken A-Levels or earlier equivalents, nobody had gone to university – but they were deeply committed to the area and community in which they lived. I grew up with this intense knowledge of my own family and of life in that part of the world. I was taken, for example, by a great-uncle to a beach in Suffolk to see where, according to oral memory, his many-times great-grandfather had fought the Dutch in the late 17th century. So I was involved in the past from an early age. I then went to an unusual but wonderful and stimulating state school, where the teachers had many varied experiences before teaching. It was they who furthered my interest in history, and encouraged me to apply to university – to Cambridge, because it was local.



James Raven's diminutive great-great-grandparents leaving their farm labourers' cottage in south Suffolk to appear in their Sunday best, c. 1870.

Before going to Cambridge, I had a year off. Indeed, I had to because, having no familiarity with entrance exams or interviews, I was turned down at my first attempt. My teachers were so annoyed that they told me to go to somewhere that would be 'more appreciative'. That seemed a bit rude to me and so I simply applied again to the same college. In my year off I wasn't sure what to do, so saved up to advertise in the *New York Times* for any Americans who wanted to trace their ancestors in East Anglia, and I spent part of that year working in local record offices. In those days, you could handle the actual birth, marriage and death registers, Poor Law Records and other documents, and that and talking to the archivists provided a wonderful experience to have before coming to study history as an undergraduate.

And it was probably that, together with inspirational teachers at Cambridge that led me to research in social and cultural history. Historians such as Roger Schofield FBA, Peter Burke FBA, who arrived at Cambridge during my time, and Peter Laslett FBA were beginning to look at history from the bottom up. This was very exciting, and through my own family experience I could relate to oral history and to the experience of ordinary people.

#### **What was the focus of that first research work?**

I looked at attitudes to business and wealth creation in the 18th century through popular literature. I had always been interested in the relationship between history and the writing of fiction. But I was also very politically engaged, concerned about social issues and inequalities – I have stood for Parliament three times. And at the time when I was doing my research, debates raged about Thatcherism, and in particular about whether Britain had an enterprise culture. There was an argument that, at the end of the 19th century, a cultural *cordon sanitaire* had been established around business values: as David Cannadine puts it, the greatest achievement of success in business was to leave it; people went 'county', their sons became MPs, and so forth. But for several reasons I was troubled by the thesis about cultural causes of British relative economic decline: Britain's competitors

at that time – France, Germany and the United States – also produced literature that was anti-business; and in any case, such sentiments can be found earlier, in the 17th and 18th centuries. But I was particularly interested in how representation and behaviour might actually be linked: if an anti-business ethos is conveyed through literature, does it really have an effect?

To explore this, I looked back at the popular literature of the 18th century. I did not want to use a literary canon of books that were selected for their literary merit: I wanted to understand what was published and why it was popular. Before the digital age, this was a huge archival challenge. I became a self-trained historical bibliographer, and after my PhD thesis I did a lot of work compiling bibliographies of what had been published, particularly novels. And to do that you have to look beyond the great copyright libraries – the Bodleian, Cambridge University Library or the British Library – which disdained to collect popular fiction. I travelled far and wide to novel collections in special collections and in private hands, and as a result was also invited to an extraordinary library at Schloss Corvey, near Paderborn, in Germany. At the end of the 18th century and in the early 19th century, the then Duke of Corvey collected every novel that was published in London, Paris and Leipzig for his two unmarried aunts. Until this private collection was sold to the local *Land* in the 1990s, nobody had looked at it. Notably also, book collectors in the United States saved what are now extraordinarily rare books, so I visited there a lot. I would guess that about 20 per cent of fiction published in the second half of the 18th century survives in only one or two copies worldwide; another 7–8 per cent that I know was published, because we have book reviews of the titles, does not survive in a single copy – it is lost.

At that time, my work was contributing to something which is now called 'the history of the book'. This includes the history of printing, of publishing and of readership. I continue to try to broaden its ambit – and very much from the perspective of the social and cultural historian, anxious that 'book history' is no academic ghetto but addresses wider questions of intellectual, political, economic, religious and social change and continuity.

**About 20 per cent of fiction published in the second half of the 18th century survives in only one or two copies.**

### What was changing in the book world of 18th-century London?

It was transformational in terms of the number of books published, and in the increasing breadth of interests. There was what we now think of as niche marketing: almost starting from nothing. In the second half of the 18th century, for example, there was an extraordinary demand for magazines and publications aimed specifically at women or children.

The fascinating thing is that this transformation in terms of scale, quality, breadth and specificity all happened within the technological constraints of the manual wooden printing press. I often say to students that, if Caxton had somehow magicked himself forward from the late 15th century to the late 18th century, the workplace would have been fully recognisable to him. The technology was basically the same. A workable iron press powered by steam was not commercially adopted until 1814. Instead, the transformation in the course of the 18th century came about through the use of larger numbers of wooden presses, responding to an increase in consumer demand for print. A gentle increase in literacy led to more people buying books, periodicals and newspapers – and a much enlarged second-hand market and more borrowing from newly established libraries. But even more significantly, the proportion of the population that was already buying books was now able to buy more.

In addition, the colonial expansion and growth in overseas trade at the end of 18th century produced a booming market for the export of books from Britain. Even in the 1830s and 1840s, the young United States was not really self-sufficient in printing and publishing, and was still importing a huge amount from Britain.

As I developed my work from my first books (*Judging New Wealth*, bibliographies of the novel and *The Business of Books*), I then published a book called *Bookscape*, which used taxation records in order to look at the sites of printing and publishing in 18th-century London. I also collaborated with the Computing Department at the University of Essex to create a digital on-line model, using illustrations and photographs, to walk again down Paternoster Row as it was in the early 19th century (the Row – which had been the most concentrated street of publishers and booksellers anywhere in Europe – was completely destroyed by bombing in the Second World War). In a room in the university you can put on 3D glasses to make the walk seem even more real. This is very stimulating for thinking about and understanding space: the proximity of one business to another and the size of premises. A possible further on-line development will enable you to go into certain shops and link up with publication data, so that you might know exactly what, where and how Longmans or Rivingtons published in a particular year.



Paternoster Row, c. 1820.



**You have a wider – indeed, more global – interest in the history of the book.**

I recently published a small book called *What is the History of the Book?*, which looks at the subject generally – from clay tablets in ancient Assyria to digital tablets in our own time – and asks what a book is. A bigger overview will be coming out next year as the *Oxford Illustrated History of the Book*.

I am also, for the first time, researching a global history of *one* book, looking at Erik Pontoppidan's *Natural History of Norway*, and its reception around the world in the Enlightenment. He was a Danish intellectual who fell out with the king and was dispatched to be Bishop of Bergen, and this is where he wrote this history of the flora, fauna and traditions of Norway. It was translated from Danish into German and then into English, and it became a big hit: copies were owned by Benjamin Franklin, by maharajahs in India, and by all the great institutions. It was right at the centre of the Enlightenment, as a contribution to science: All Souls College, Oxford, ordered it in a tranche of other natural-history books. I am examining every surviving

copy of all three language editions around the world, looking at differences between them and what their owners wrote in the margins as they read.

Pontoppidan was interested in both historical and scientific methods, and in being able to verify and prove what he was writing about. Therein lies an important twist because, in the second half of the book, he put forward claims for the existence of mermaids, mermen and sea monsters. In the large folio English version, which has beautiful illustrations and engravings, most of the marginalia and annotations in those sections are about sea snakes: that is what fascinated people, and that is what the book reviews were interested in. Extraordinarily, a hundred years later, in *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville writes about the appearance of a giant squid, and asks whether such a creature might be the same as 'the great Kraken of Bishop Pontoppidan'. Who, in the 1850s, would have recognised that reference? No one recognises it now.

I am interested in seeing what themes we can reveal from looking at one particular publication. For example, it is becoming increasingly evident that the reason why Pontoppidan's scientific methods wobbled was because

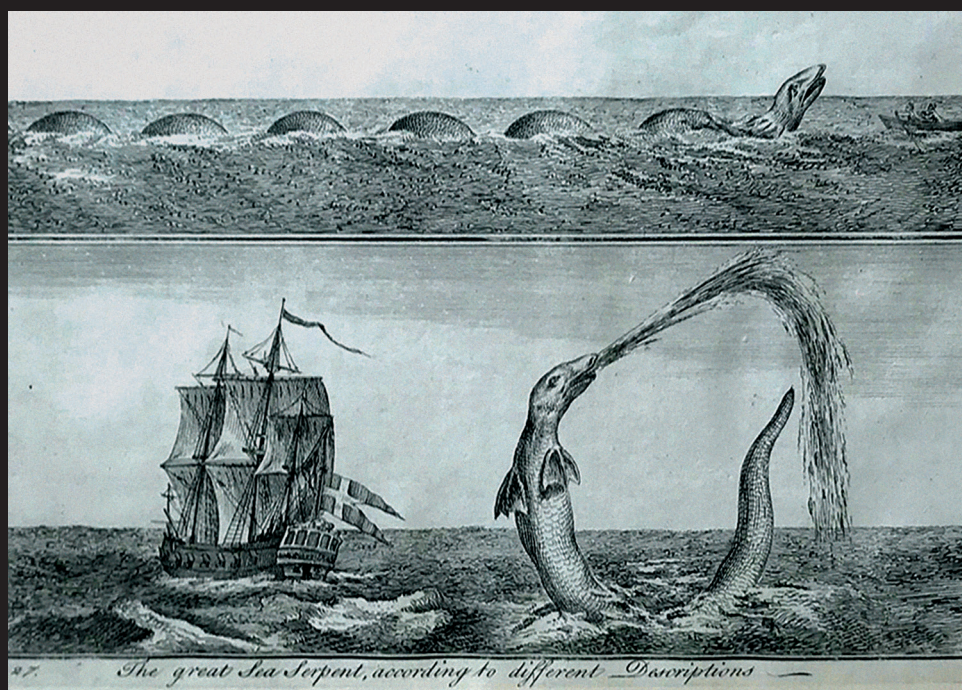


Plate illustration of a 'great Sea Serpent' from the 1755 English edition of Bishop Erik Pontoppidan's *Natural History of Norway*. On the facing page of text, Pontoppidan talks of 'the extraordinary works of the great creator. Amongst these the Kraaken, which I am going to describe, is to be considered as the most extraordinary in length. But here I must again, as I did of the Mer-man, first give the reader proper authorities for the real existence of this creature, before I come to treat of its nature and properties. ...'

of the prevalence of Nordic myth – of the great myth of the monster that wrapped itself around the world. There is a complex and powerful tradition which I am tracing back in terms of the residual influence of myth upon new scientific method.

But the study of a book such as this one can also break down false national barriers. Books are, quintessentially, *livres sans frontières* – they travel. One of the weaknesses of some of the early contributions to the history of the book has been that they looked at what was published in a particular place in a particular country, without thinking that books circulate, both in space and in time. It is not just what was new but also what was available from ancient times. If you were in Edinburgh in 1760, at the time of Adam Smith, you wouldn't just be reading what was being published in Scotland or even in London at the time, you would be reading books that were coming in from the Continent. And they might be old books as well as new ones. Studying Pontoppidan's *Natural History* is a way of understanding both the geographical and temporal horizons of publication.

I came across the book quite by chance, because I was doing some work on one of the London sellers of the English edition, John Nourse. Serendipity is very important in scholarship.

### What particularly interests you about your research work?

It goes back to my love of archives. It is about being able to hunt for things, discover them, and then bring them to the attention of others, so that historical agendas are changed – whether that is changing the perspective of what was being written about Britain in relation to industrialisation and an industrial spirit, or to changing our understanding about what popular literature was in the 18th century, or gaining a more global understanding of the circulation of ideas through literature and publication in the 18th and 19th centuries.

It is about posing historical questions. It means asking different questions about a body of work to those that have been asked for critical and aesthetic reasons. I am interested in why particular images, thoughts and ideas were popular at the time. How was the original work reinterpreted and reused? And there are a number of different questions when you look across space and time.

It is also about a willingness to revisit some of your past work – that is very important. When a student trots out something I have said in one of my books or articles, I sometimes say, 'I don't really believe that anymore, I have changed my mind. What do you think?'

### Talk about your involvement with the Marks Hall Estate in Essex. Is that related to your personal interest in the local history of the area?

As a boy I was taken by my father to this rambling ruin in the middle of Essex, to see where his great-grandfather, William Raven, had been a gardener in the 1820s. I can remember this extraordinary, overgrown wilderness. Thirty years later, I heard that the Marks Hall Estate was looking for a new trustee.

In the early 17th century, the Honywood family turned the estate into a vast deer park, with its 200 great oaks, and they remodelled the manor house to make it a Jacobean mansion. In the late 19th century the Honywoods sold the estate to a philanthropist called Thomas Phillips Price, who had fallen in love with its oaks and its great mansion. He determined to leave the estate to the nation. But when he died in 1930, his much younger widow was furious that he had not left her much of a legacy. The first thing she did was to pull down the church, then she took out most of the great oaks, and after the War she had the whole mansion pulled down.



Marks Hall mansion in Essex, during its demolition, c. 1952.

I must have visited the estate in the mid-1960s, just around the time she died. That was why it was in rack and ruin, with its great lakes silted over.

The estate was duly left to the nation after her death. The new trustees did an amazing job, clearing the lakes, bringing in a landscape gardener, and opening the place irregularly to the public. When I saw the advertisement for a trustee, I could not resist, because I remembered the family connection. I brought in teams of archaeologists to look at the site of the mansion house site. We cannot physically reconstruct the house, of course, but we can plant the outlines of the exterior and interior walls. And we have fantastic photographic evidence: *Country Life* took photographs of the mansion in the 1920s, and the resolution is so extraordinary that you can look at it brick by brick. So we can recreate it photographically and digitally. We also looked through sales catalogues to find out where all the interiors that Mrs Price had sold had gone. For example, we found

that two of the great fireplaces were installed in the local boys' grammar school. We found the original great staircase, which had been sold to a gallery in Suffolk, and whose owners have kindly given it back to us; it is now stored in a barn. We have found a few records relating to staff issues that give a sense of the social history of a large local estate. And we have gathered wonderful oral history, from local people who remember the mansion coming down.

I am just retiring as a trustee after 12 years, and Marks Hall is now a flourishing estate, with 45,000 visitors every year. Programmes such as *Downton Abbey* have raised public interest in country houses. We have invited visitors to play the Mrs Price game: you are Mrs Price in 1952 – why do you pull down the mansion? We still do not quite know: was it vindictiveness, or was it because of taxation at the time? I have been fascinated by the history of this country's lost mansions, and have edited a book on the loss of mansions in the 1950s and 1960s.

### **You have also been involved with the English-Speaking Union.**

The English-Speaking Union of the Commonwealth (and its sister E-SU in the United States) was set up after the First World War by Evelyn Wrench and Winston Churchill. Among its many activities, it ran – and still runs – a public speaking competition, which I won, and the local branch sent me to the US for a month before I went up to university. I had never been abroad before, and I made extraordinary friends in the US. I just wanted to put more back into the E-SU, and I have worked for it for coming up to 40 years. We work with primary and secondary schools, and particularly in recent years in disadvantaged communities, to build confidence through debate and public speaking. In December 2019 I take over as Chair of the E-SU and look forward to promoting its work to unlock potential among young people across the Commonwealth – and in these times of often crude public discourse to encourage civility in debate and the re-learning of how to agree to disagree.

### **What are your next projects?**

I am still interested in business history and particularly the social aspects of business. I am writing a book on the history of the state lotteries from the late 17th century to the early 19th century, called *Lottery Lives*.

As a social-cultural historian, I have had an interest in film, television and radio for a long time. I am launching a new course for undergraduates in Cambridge on film and society in Britain and France from 1948 to 1969.

And when I have finished the global biography of Pontoppidan's *Natural History of Norway*, I will go back to a book that has been uncompleted for many years. It will be called *Making the Novel*, and it will revisit my work on published fiction in the 18th and 19th centuries, trying to look at novel production and reception in the context of broader cultural products. I will go back to it with relish.

James Raven was interviewed  
by James Rivington.

### **Further reading**

Some of James Raven's books mentioned in the interview

1992 book: *Judging New Wealth: Popular Publishing and Responses to Commerce in England, 1750–1800*.

2007 book: *The Business of Books: Booksellers and the English Book Trade 1450–1850*.

2014 book: *Bookscape: Geographies of Printing and Publishing in London before 1800*.

2015 edited book: *Lost Mansions: Essays on the Destruction of the Country House*.

2018 book: *What is the History of the Book?*