CHAPTER TWO

THE PEDLAR IN THE ENGLISH DISTRIBUTION NETWORK

In this chapter the scale and structure of the English itinerant distribution network will be analysed. Although London, as the chief centre of book production in England will receive much attention, I will also give extensive consideration to provincial networks, focusing on the city of Exeter, in Devon, as a case study. Furthermore, the different types of itinerant booksellers will be highlighted in order to gain insight into their roles, functions and specialisations within the English distribution system.

The Scale of Itinerant Distribution

In seventeenth-century London the printing industry was growing steadily. There were approximately twenty printing houses in London in 1604; by 1649 there were some forty. After the Restoration in 1660, the English book industry experienced growing demand and greater diversity. London had fifty-nine printing houses in 1661–1663, seventy by 1705, and eighty by 1723.¹ In the eighteenth century there was growing diversification of genres and of the literary market. According to James Raven there were more opportunities for ‘flamboyant book sellers and authors, the first library societies and commercial circulating libraries, literary reviewers, and finer distinctions between popular, polite, and elite forms of literature, their suppliers and consumers’.²

Although the importance of London as the main English production centre in the early modern period has been widely acknowledged, the provincial trade should not be ignored. John Barnard and Maureen Bell recently stated that the ‘country trade’ in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries must be considered an ‘important element of the English book trade’, for provincial booksellers, and also pedlars and schoolboys, had an

‘essential role in the expansion of the market for books and the creation of new readers and readerships’.

It is important, however, to make a distinction between book production and book trade. Until the end of the seventeenth century, provincial book sellers were often dealing in books that had been produced in London or on the Continent. Even when the restrictions on where books could be produced were abandoned in 1695, with the lapse of the Printing Act, London remained dominant in the book trade. John Feather emphasised the significance of the eighteenth-century provincial trade, referring to it as ‘an entity in its own right’. Feather’s findings have stimulated research into local, regional and national networks of authors, publishers, booksellers and hawkers, with special attention paid to the rise of the provincial newspaper, which has been considered fundamental to the development of the regional distribution system.

In the nineteenth century, primarily between 1800 and 1850, the English book trade changed significantly, not least because of the diminishing role of the Stationers’ Company. These changes manifested themselves in matters of copyright, wholesale and retail prices of books and the development of a new and more effective internal structure to the trade. In order to get a sense of the differences between London and the provinces and to find out how production and itinerant distribution were connected in the period 1600–1850, I focus here on the national centre, London, and on a provincial centre, Exeter, and their respective hinterlands.

**Organisation and Control**

In the seventeenth century the printing and sale of books was controlled by the Stationers’ Company and, at a higher level, by repressive actions taken by the government. The Star Chamber Decree of 1637, initiated by Archbishop Laud, was such an attempt, which, among other things, aimed to ban seditious books and pamphlets. Every single book had to be licensed and registered and had to bear the name of its printer. To become

---

