Chapter 2

Selling by the Book: British Scientific Trade Literature after 1800

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Introduction

In 1951 the businessman and scientific instrument collector Robert Stewart Whipple published John Yarwell, or the Story of a Trade Card. The paper, a lively mix of history of science, antiquarianism, and speculation about Isaac Newton, centres on the scant evidence presented by an apparently unique 1683 Yarwell trade card acquired by Whipple in 1937. The card had been used by Newton “for scribbling paper”, hence its unlikely survival, and Whipple’s analysis of it jumps between a translation and study of Newton’s Latin notes recorded on its reverse, and the enticing images of Yarwell’s optical instrument manufactures provided on its obverse (Pl. 3). As Whipple noted, the extreme rarity of surviving Yarwell instrumentation makes the trade card an important historical resource, offering a rare window onto the diverse range of items produced by and/or available from one of London’s few preeminent seventeenth-century opticians.1

Many subsequent historians of scientific instrumentation and its trade have faced the same problem of sparse source material, against which trade cards have proved to be invaluable aids. As Michael Crawforth has shown, behind their elaborate designs and meticulous illustrations lies important information about instrument design, industry trends, commercial demands, makers’ techniques and specialisms, and even clues to the instrument business’s social context.2 For curators, trade cards help pinpoint places and dates of object manufacture.3 For historians of the trade, they are one resource amongst many

that help trace the genealogy of a business or guild. By revealing the advertising techniques employed by proprietors, trade cards also open up a window onto the commercial dialectic between maker and user/consumer, helping delineate the myriad and often subtle variations in instrument uses and markets. It is not surprising, therefore, that descriptions and illustrations of trade cards are relied upon as a resource in many works on the history of early modern and Georgian scientific instrumentation.

Yet in 1990 the authors of the Handlist of Scientific Instrument-Makers’ Trade Catalogues 1600–1914 were driven to lament that “many institutions […] care little for this type of material, and many curators give it only casual attention.” The ephemera of science was treated as trivial, they argued, and scholars too often ignored it as an historical source. Despite the great gains made in the discipline of instrument studies over the preceding four decades, much of it dependent in part upon the information supplied by trade cards, ephemeral material appeared to be falling out of fashion, and with it out of favour with the archivists, librarians, and curators charged with its collection and preservation. Certainly, as the discipline grew historians of science in general turned their attention away from instrumentation and trade ephemera, in favour of


6 A useful overview of this literature, focused on the British scene, is given in Morrison-Low, op. cit. (n. 2), pp. 6–12. A good recent example of the use of trade cards as sources is: Brian Gee, Anita McConnell and A. D. Morrison-Low (eds.), Francis Watkins and the Dollond Telescope Patent Controversy, Aldershot, 2014, which reproduces eleven trade cards and bill heads of various London makers.