In the early 1970s Asa Briggs was approached to write a history of Longman, then looking forward to celebrating the 250th anniversary of its foundation in 1724. Longman was perhaps the most successful independent publishing house of modern Britain. Unexpectedly, 1974 was overshadowed for Longman by the death of its last family chairman, Mark Longman, and, although he did not then know it, Asa Briggs had embarked on a 35-year project that inspired and drew its inspiration from a growing number of scholars interested in the broader social and economic history of books.

On his return to Oxford as Provost of Worcester College (and following the publication of the latest volume of his history of the BBC), Asa Briggs acted as a patron and impresario for the fast-developing study of communications and book history. The history of the book aspired to examine the history of the production, dissemination and reception of written and printed texts across all societies and in all ages. Briggs notably established a pioneering day-long seminar that met once or twice a year, bringing together historians, bibliographers, librarians, literary scholars, book collectors, book designers, printers and publishers. Many of the Worcester College participants have since contributed energetically to the debate about the origins and scope of the history of the book as understood by its various practitioners worldwide. They continue to question and probe its theoretical and practical underpinnings. Asa Briggs’ *History of Longmans* appeared in 2008, a much larger undertaking than originally envisaged and a significant contribution to publishing history. The aim of this essay is to recall the academic sociability fostered by the Worcester seminars of 1983–1993 and celebrate an enterprise fundamental to the advance of new bibliographical scholarship and the planning of collaborative
and interdisciplinary research. Such discussion broke down boundaries and brought together people from different disciplines and professions, who did not know each other, but who benefited hugely from focused argument. The seminar launched various national history of the book projects (including the seven-volume *Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*). The success of these projects is evident, but so also are new challenges and certain obstacles created by the initial terms of reference. Following Briggs’ example, historians continue to explore problematic examples of relevant historical investigation in bibliography, literature, communications and the media.

An anecdote to begin – and one that illustrates the convivial development of what, for better or worse, has become known as the history of the book. In September 1985 I had just begun as a young research fellow of Pembroke College, Cambridge. One evening, as I passed the college lodge, a porter rushed out and said he had an Asa Briggs on the phone for me. Astonished, I took the call to hear the Provost of Worcester describing a series of seminars in publishing history that he had just established at the college. Would I come and talk to the group and stay in the lodgings? On arrival, Asa interrupted a college dinner to greet me and then, very early in the morning, memorably brought in a breakfast tray to my bedroom. Hospitality, informality and the unexpected grounded proceedings. The seminar that followed, built round a sumptuous lunch, was an opportunity to meet a whole assembly of new scholars and to discuss the direction of new work in publishing and communications history.

Thirty years later, I am sceptical of the more inflated claims for the history of the book, but remain devoted to the proposition that the sort of academic sociability fostered by the Worcester seminars is fundamental to the advance of scholarship and the planning of collaborative and interdisciplinary research. Development of book history has helped to break down barriers and bring together people who did not previously know each other or understand or even know each other’s work or approaches. The term ‘history of the book’ is now in general and common use and has transformed the range of and interest in historical bibliography and bibliographical history, productively improving communication and collaboration between historians, literary scholars, book conservationists, book collectors, book designers and librarians. The new endeavour has revealed new archival holdings, encouraged new types of archival interrogation, and shared as well as developed specialist interpretative techniques.