

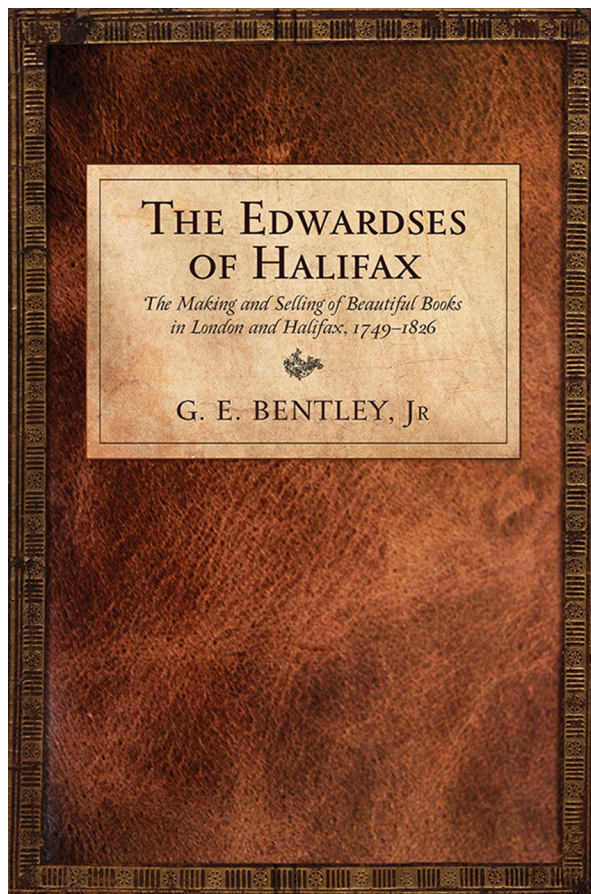
G. E. Bentley, Jr. *The Edwardses of Halifax: The Making and Selling of Beautiful Books in London and Halifax, 1749–1826*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015. \$65.00, hardcover. xxiii + 283 pp. Online supplement: <http://www.utppublishing.com/pdf/Bentley_EdwardsesofHalifaxVol2.pdf>.

Reviewed by James Rovira

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1 P. J. M. Marks said in 1998 that “the story of the Edwards family of Halifax is the stuff of a Victorian three volume novel.”¹ G. E. Bentley, Jr., tells that story in *The Edwardses of Halifax: The Making and Selling of Beautiful Books in London and Halifax, 1749–1826*, though not in three volumes and not quite as dramatically as a novel might. Bentley divides his monograph about this bookselling and book-producing family into four sections: part 1 is about William Edwards, and parts 2–4 are about his sons James, Richard, and Thomas, respectively. Of these four figures, James is the most significant: the chapter devoted to William takes up twenty-four pages and the two sections on Richard and Thomas take up forty-seven pages combined, while Bentley spends over one hundred pages on James’s career. The Edwardses as a bookselling family came to an end with the retirement and then death of Thomas. As explained in part 1, William’s books were originally noted for their fore-edge painting and for their use of painted transparent vellum bindings, which together have attracted

1. P. J. M. Marks, “The Edwards of Halifax Bindery,” *British Library Journal* 24.2 (autumn 1998): 184.



most of the published scholarship on the Edwards family. William rendered the vellum used for his book covers transparent by soaking it in water mixed with potassium carbonate and then subjecting it to great pressure. Images were then painted on the inside of the cover, often by one or more of William’s sons; the transparent vellum protected the image and allowed owners to clean the cover without worrying about defacing it.²

2 James, William’s third child and second son, was by far the most successful at the family business. In 1784 he expanded his father’s trade to London, setting up a shop in Pall Mall with his brother John, who passed away “of a decline” in Paris in May of 1793. James published a catalogue of books for sale in 1785, which immediately established him as a prominent seller of antiquarian books, and additional catalogues in 1787, 1789, 1790, 1794, and 1796. Bentley describes the first few catalogues as “not so much notices of what he had in his shop as they were advertisements of his

2. For examples of transparent vellum bindings from Edwards of Halifax, see all but the last two binding images at <<https://www.bl.uk/catalogues/bookbindings/Results.aspx?SearchType=AlphabeticSearch&ListType=CoverMaterial&Value=124>>.

- acquisition of whole libraries” (49). His catalogues were often divided into two categories, “Ancient” (illuminated manuscripts, Caxton’s letterpress publications, books printed on vellum, etc.) and “Modern” (“illustrated books on birds, insects, shells, vegetables, vases, ... and fine art”) (49). James’s catalogues of 1789 and 1790 expanded to include books acquired in Italy, listing “the rarest and most esteemed Articles collected in various Parts of Europe” (50). Bentley conjectures that the turmoil created by the French Revolution contributed to the ease with which James could acquire libraries in continental Europe.
- 3 He associates James’s shop with George Cumberland, Hester Thrale (as an enthusiastic customer), and Joseph Johnson, as well as a number of other London booksellers and figures, such as Henry Fuseli and Horace Walpole. James ordered hundreds of copies of *The Castle of Otranto* from the printer Bodoni to bind and sell in his shop. He did extensive business with Bodoni, with some disputes about money that were eventually resolved, but by 1795 he complained that “present events in Europe are not very favourable to literature & the considerable enterprises in which I find myself engaged do not permit me to enter into new speculations” (70). James registered real problems with the book trade in Europe while also using those problems to leverage better prices for Bodoni’s printing work. By April 1797, he started talking “more and more firmly of retirement” (85).
 - 4 Bentley then records that James as a publisher sold 167 books in 307 volumes that took up over 5700 sheets and 2370 plates (88). He published books in French, Italian, German, Latin, and in translation. About twenty-five percent of his published books were reprints. James first started publishing jointly with his brother Richard in 1794, and was listed as a seller on a prospectus for Richard’s edition of *Night Thoughts*, illustrated by William Blake. Because English goods were being seized at French-controlled ports, trading across the Channel became increasingly difficult, so he essentially retired from business in 1800. However, his activities on the Continent put him in touch with French officials and allowed him to travel in France. After returning from his first trip to Paris of 1800, he reported extensively on conditions there to Lord Grenville in a letter dated 12 August. His second trip, Bentley records, was intended to conduct further business but was also carried out with “more than one political purpose” (132). He was asked by Lord Spencer to collect information of interest while abroad and report it to the British government. James died 2 January 1816, distributing his estate among his wife and children, with some gifts to his surviving brothers, Richard and Thomas, and his sisters, Sarah and Mary. Bentley estimates from annuities paid out of his estate that James amassed a fortune of £30,000 during his fifteen years conducting independent business (148).
 - 5 Richard arrived in London in 1789. Bentley speculates that he initially began working with his brother James to learn how to conduct himself in London and to become acquainted with the London book market. Richard’s first catalogue was “printed integrally with the first edition of De Coetlogon’s *Human Reason* (1792)” and included “Foreign Books of Prints, and Antiquities, and Books of History, Science, &c. in all Languages” (154). Bentley observes that “almost all Richard Edwards’s publications advertise their Church and King fervour, many of them using history to support the status quo” (162). Richard’s most ambitious projects, however, were editions of Merigot’s *Views and Ruins in Rome* (1796–98) and Edward Young’s *Night Thoughts* (1797). It should be noted that Richard was taking on his most ambitious projects just as James started thinking about retirement. Richard very likely knew of Blake—an odd choice of illustrator for a church and king publisher—through Fuseli and Johnson; having acquired “a set of first and early editions of the nine parts of *Night Thoughts* ... with ‘the Author’s signature’ on ‘the blank leaf,’” Richard may have initially intended to “make an elaborately extra-illustrated copy” (173).
 - 6 Blake spent over two years on his drawings for *Night Thoughts*, averaging five designs a week for that period. He asked Richard for £105 but was paid £21 for his work. Bentley suspects that Blake worked far beyond his initial commission while “Richard Edwards stuck to his original bargain for payment” (174), largely because Blake continued to work for Richard and did not grumble about him as he did about some other patrons. Thomas Edwards said of Blake’s designs that “a more extraordinary, original, and sublime production of art has seldom, if ever, been witnessed since the days of the celebrated *Mich. Agnolo*, whose grandeur and elevation of style it greatly resembles” (174). However, Richard’s ambitious project was ill timed and did not come to a good end. When this edition of *Night Thoughts* was published in the autumn of 1797, “there was no review of any kind, and the work may scarcely have been published” (186). Henry Crabb Robinson reported thirteen years later that it “is no longer to be bought, so excessively rare has it become” (186). By 1798, Richard was out of business, and his brother James, who would have taken up his trade, was contemplating retirement and experiencing his own difficulties. Richard’s brother Thomas attempted to sell the drawings in 1821 for £300 but found no buyers, and there were no buyers in auctions of 1826 or 1828, even when the price was reduced to £52.10.0. Thomas Edwards’s career was carried out in his father’s shop in Halifax, which he took over after his father’s death in 1808, continuing the production of books bound “in Etruscan calf, in transpar-

ent vellum, and with painted fore-edges” (195). Starting in 1812, Thomas published a number of catalogues. The last shop catalogue was issued in 1821 and listed over 3000 works. (This catalogue is the one that listed Blake’s *Night Thoughts* drawings for sale for £300.) The last of Thomas’s stock was sold in London in 1828, and the drawings remained in the Edwards family for some time after Thomas’s death in Southport in 1834.

- 7 Bentley carries out his account of the Edwardses of Halifax with his usual scrupulous attention to detail and care to document his sources.³ The study is accompanied by a 405-page second volume, freely available in PDF on the publisher’s website (see above), which lists publications by William and his sons James, Richard, and Thomas, as well as lists of publications by a James, Richard, and John Edwards who were not members of the Edwards of Halifax family, concluding with a 27-page bibliography of works about the Edwardses of Halifax and sample illustrations. All kindred spirits will recognize the Edwardses of Halifax as fellow bibliophiles rather than just merchants engaged in the business of making and selling books, and there is much in Bentley’s work to gratify the sensibilities of lovers of eighteenth-century books. He does discuss Blake where appropriate, as expected, contributing to our knowledge of Blake’s work on *Night Thoughts* and the conceptual and visual background of *The Four Zoas*, but he does not allow his discussion of Blake to overshadow this book. He is focused instead on a more comprehensive and equally significant contribution to our understanding of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century book history, extending our knowledge not only of the industry but of books as material objects and the way the economy of books was affected by events of the 1790s and early 1800s. The only addition to this work that I would have liked to see is a reception history of the Edwardses of Halifax—some kind of afterlife of their work as booksellers and publishers. P. J. M. Marks records both praise for the Edwardses’ work and some criticism of it in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth,⁴ while at the same time noting their extensive influence on the work of other first-class binderies in both London and Paris.

3. A small addition to the earliest history of the firm is the recently discovered transaction between William Edwards and the fledgling print business of John Boydell: Boydell’s account book shows a cash payment of £2.18.0 from “Edwards of Hallifax” on 17 March 1752, shortly after Boydell established his shop in Cheapside. See Alexander Gourlay and Robin Simon, “Not William Hogarth but John Boydell: Attributing and Elucidating Two Leaves from an Eighteenth-Century Account Book,” *British Art Journal* 15.1 (autumn 2014): 35-46.

4. Marks 211.