Preface

by Daniel Roche

For many years Raymond Birn has pursued and directed research on the production and diffusion of the book in eighteenth-century France and Europe. He has collaborated on the *Revue française d'histoire du livre* and the *Histoire de l'édition française* and has taught at the École des hautes études en Sciences sociales and the Collège de France. He belongs to that group of Americans whose thinking and disposition have ensured the quality of long-term cultural relations between France and the United States—relations that we should do our best to encourage and maintain.

Two books and many articles are landmarks in Raymond Birn's intellectual itinerary. His initial monograph, the impeccably researched *Pierre Rousseau and the Philosophes of Bouillon* (1964), pioneered study of the cultural role of the French Enlightenment's transnational publishers and booksellers, who lived just across the borders of the kingdom and served as intermediaries in the diffusion and refraction of ideas. Before Neuchâtel's *Société typographique* existed and before Geneva's was founded, journalists and publishers in the semi-independent duchy of Bouillon, located in the Ardennes, held an advantageous position in the production and dissemination of French-language editions.

Birn's more recent book, *Forging Rousseau: Print, Commerce and Cultural Manipulation in the Late Enlightenment* (2001), situates itself just as the system of state censorship control was shifting, between the death of Jean-Jacques in 1778 and the outbreak of the Revolution eleven years later. The marketplace of subversive ideas had become extraordinarily competitive, and literary canonization contributed to constructing the modern idea of "collected works" by well-known authors. In Birn's book we can make out the tension between the capacity of businesses to act with moral and ideological purpose, struggling to publicize the new ideas, and the use of economic reasoning, marked by the need

to publish for profit. There, too, editions produced in states on the periphery of France had their place. As a matter of fact, the entire European book trade became involved in the dissemination of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's complete works, published by the *Société typographique* of Geneva in 1781. The *Collection complète* represented the ultimate triumph of print over the censoring and condemnations of Rousseau, begun in the 1760s with *La nouvelle Héloïse*, *Émile*, and the *Social Contract* in original and pirated versions.

Condemnations contributed to Rousseau's fame. Curiously, censorship, which defined and repressed the illicit, also guaranteed the rights of the author, since official approval protected book privileges, acknowledged tacit permissions, and defended against piracies that were ruinous for legitimate bookseller-publishers and authors alike. There is where the following essays by Raymond Birn enter the picture. They cover systems, practices, discourse, and the effects of an authoritarian state upon both censorship and the policing of the book.

Royal censorship in Enlightenment France has in its background the cultural policies of Henry IV, Louis XIII, and Louis XIV to create a New Rome. From this idea arose the royal protection of letters, arts, and sciences, and the creation of institutions that channeled and employed academic élites. There also arose the need to regulate intellectual production through the mechanism of royal privileges; the surveillance of French printers, publishers and booksellers; and the control of commerce at frontier stations. The royal administration's preventive censorship defined illicit books; repressive censorship by the Church and sovereign courts pursued books once they had surmounted publication obstacles and circulated among readers. From top to bottom, the machinery of preventive censorship was put in place under Chancellor Louis II Phélypeaux, count de Pontchartrain (1643–1727) and his nephew Abbé Jean-Paul Bignon (1662–1743), the latter remaining informal minister of culture until 1741. At the same time the Church jealously maintained its hold on repressive censorship by way of episcopal summonses and declarations of its general assemblies; and the parlements sought to expand authority by virtue of high-profile juridical condemnations. However, the initial filtration and control of ideas remained the responsibility of the royal officials of the book trade, its director, its censors, and the Parisian or local police.

Postpublication repression and the great scandals deriving from it have captured the attention of historians to the detriment of the prepublication negotiations that aimed at safeguarding the economic activity of the book trade while preserving unity of thought, faith, politics, and morals. As Birn shows us, however, preventive censorship under

Bignon and, during the 1750s, under *Directeur de la librairie* Chrétien-Guillaume de Lamoignon de Malesherbes (1721–1794) tried to define barriers not to be crossed and more or less successfully divided up the works proposed for verification among categories that awaited production (*privilèges*, *permissions tacites*, verbal authorizations). Censorship decisions took into consideration the state of cultural evolution—for, as Malesherbes remarked: "Causes sometimes take centuries to be pleaded. The public alone can judge, and in the long run will always have judged correctly when sufficiently instructed."[1]

Despite the spectacular postpublication censorship scandals where the Church, parlements, and Royal Council confronted authors, publishers, sellers, and each other, despite the grand affairs and books burnt at the bottom of the outer staircase of the Parlement's chambers, the matter of prepublication censorship lies at the heart of any study of the *lumières*. It certainly represents a means of surveying intellectual production at the same time as it is a place covering negotiation over formal quality and correct expression, all of which resulted in a largely prudent tolerance distributed among intellectual fields: for example, Birn finds that between 1699 and 1715, there were 6,017 requests for publication in all fields, with an average rejection rate of 11.5 percent, a bit higher (13 percent) for religious literature, largely due to the extraordinary controversies of the time. In short, for all fields of knowledge, censors were not the enemies of innovation; rather, they defined tolerable norms and acceptable range.

In following the censors at work from 1750 to 1787, Birn clearly reveals how the preventive control apparatus functioned and what its consequences were. He describes the evolution of the bureaucratic principles that aimed at protecting censors from the pressures of authors and booksellers alike, and he investigates the range of censorial leeway in the face of ministerial or religious involvement. He also shows how registered tacit permissions or unconfirmed oral authorizations blurred the frontier between the forbidden and the permitted. The homogeneity of the censors' culture lent itself to moderate opinions. Censors operated in a world of privilege and merit—clerics who held official posts, intellectually inclined aristocrats, intellectuals, lettered professionals, physicians, lawyers, civil servants, scholars, and savants—all linked to royal academies, official cultural institutions, universities, colleges, and journals. Their examinations according to field—Theology, Sciences and Medicine, Law, Belles-lettres, and History—reveal more of a willingness to negotiate than to participate in severe repression. For example, concerning religion, rather than simply defend orthodoxy, they preferred to avoid violent controversies and admit to realism—to the point

of recognizing a Protestant presence in mid-eighteenth-century France. Concerning medical and scientific topics, censors aimed at encouraging debate while trying to reduce pseudo-science to silence. For other subjects, they judged according to their conception of norms of good taste, correct style, exact reasoning, and respect for the law, morals, and the integrity of individuals. In the long run, however, facing violent episcopal and juridical reactions to the *Encyclopédie*, *On the Mind* (*De l'esprit*), *Émile*, and other works, censors were inconsistent in their judgments during the 1770s and early 1780s.

In the end, preventive royal censorship policy during the Enlightenment, as described by Raymond Birn, was based on pragmatic case-by-case examples rather than on grand theoretical principles of morality, theological principle, politics, or level of personal affront. While the French monarchy centralized administratively, censors grew willing to accept experimentation with ideas that extended beyond the Pontchartrain-Bignon parameters of the early eighteenth century. This resulted in examination inconsistencies and what seemed to authors to be irresponsibility. Today, of course, any form of bureaucratically formulated censorship is unacceptable. We tolerate the self-censorship of authors and constraints of an appellate process for libel and slander before regulated tribunals. What Raymond Birn accomplishes in the essays that follow is to describe the transitional phase of acceptable censorship between the last decade of Louis XIV's rule and the rupture of 1789, when the rusting bolts of idea control broke apart before the pressures of supply and demand.