CHAPTER ONE

COMMERCE, BOOKS, AND DECREES

Writing from Louvain in late February 1520 northern Europe’s foremost man of letters, Desiderius Erasmus, complained at length about a recently published critique of his New Testament translation. He addressed his letter to Wolfgang Capito in Basel, several hundred kilometres away. The offending tome was authored by an Englishman, Edward Lee, and printed at the press of Gilles de Gourmont in Paris. Erasmus had anticipated its publication for some time. His brief *Apologia*, which announced a forthcoming response, likely was ready even before he had seen Lee’s book. Antwerp printer Michiel Hillen van Hoochstraten issued it and the second rejoinder as well. Capito penned a supportive reply to Erasmus in mid-March. In it he identified Lee’s publisher as Konrad Resch, who had commissioned the printing at his own expense and then brought some copies to Basel. Resch was a bookseller and principal Paris agent for the Basel press of Johann Froben. And Froben often printed for Erasmus. At Erasmus’s request he proceeded to pair Lee’s text with the responses and some related correspondence. The result was a twenty-eight-piece compilation, in print by mid-summer.¹

Among intellectuals and theologians the feud between Erasmus and Lee attracted interest for awhile. Lee’s criticisms were read in Louvain, Cologne, Basel, Wittenberg, Nürnberg, and of course in England within a few weeks of their publication. In the long run, the controversy proved little more than tangential to the fierce polemical debates of the subsequent decade. Nevertheless, the sequence of events introduces important facets of communication and the dissemination of ideas in print. A Catholic humanist and a later supporter of Luther informed each other through written correspondence.

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¹ *The Correspondence of Erasmus*, vol. 7, trans. R.A.B. Mynors (Toronto, 1984), 215–19, 229–32, 267, 280; *The Correspondence of Wolfgang Capito*, vol. 1, ed. and trans. E. Rummel with the assistance of M. Kooistra (Toronto, 2005), 71–77, 92; *VD E3613; NK 765, 782, 864*. Erasmus’s responses were also reprinted in Cologne and Mainz. *VD L921, E2031*. 
A contentious publication precipitated a ‘debate’ that ultimately involved printing houses in three major typographic centres: Paris, Antwerp, and Basel. The man who initiated it was an upstart without a reputation, and yet an entrepreneur within the book trade was willing to pay for the printing. And in a short time viewpoints were exchanged and imprints disbursed over a substantial geographical area. Much of this was possible because of mercantile commerce and its transportation and communications systems, which enabled a high level of integration. Not every territory or town of commercial importance had a printing house, however interregional trade provided vital connections with those that did.

**Communications and the Merchants’ Domain**

Although the passable roads that criss-crossed Europe’s northern expanses in the early sixteenth century were relatively few in number, a web of well-travelled primary arteries sufficed to link the major urban centres. Over many decades Italian merchants in particular had organised and developed transcontinental routes, especially for cloth shipments. Maintaining agents at selected staging points, specialised firms now managed some of the commercial transport. Considerably more of it, though, was left to independent carriers. Horse-drawn wagons, many guided by drivers from Hesse and Frammersbach, trundled year round along roads connecting Antwerp and Cologne with manufacturing towns and transit hubs in upper Germany. From Basel and Augsburg they pushed onward to Lombardy and Venice by way of alpine passes. Roadways in France stretched from Paris to Bordeaux in the south, east to the borders of the Empire, and north to the industrial and commercial towns of the Low Countries. The main overland route from Antwerp to Spain passed through Paris to Orleans and thence to Poitiers, Bordeaux, and Bayonne. Commercial waterways were also vital, not least the

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