CHAPTER ONE

RARE BOOKS AND REVOLUTIONARIES: THE FRENCH BIBLIOTHÈQUES MUNICIPALES

One of the greatest pleasures of ten years of work on sixteenth century French books has been the opportunity to explore the extraordinary riches of the French Bibliothèques Municipales. The Bibliothèques Municipales can be said without hint of exaggeration to be one of the great unknown treasures of the library world. If they were gathered together, instead of being scattered around metropolitan France, they would undoubtedly qualify for World Heritage status: collectively they comprise one of the greatest repositories of Renaissance and Enlightenment culture anywhere in the world. Yet this fabulous resource remains largely unknown outside the narrow range of specialists. Even in the French scholarly community the rare book collections of the Bibliothèques Municipales remain relatively under-used, the preserve very often of local specialists and regional societies. They receive far fewer visitors from outside the region than the more formally recognised Archives Départementales. Yet what they have to offer is often far more substantial, as members of the St Andrews book project team have had plentiful opportunities to experience.

The reason for this neglect lies partly in the utter singularity of the French experience of library formation. In every other part of the world where major collections of early printed books have been accumulated, it is universities, or the great national libraries, that hold the largest collections of rare books. This is true of Britain (reinforced by the local peculiarity of the Oxford and Cambridge College libraries), of Germany, the Netherlands, Spain and Italy. It is true also of the United States, where vast collections have been gathered through donation and systematic acquisition in the last one hundred and fifty years. Even here only a handful of private institutions and museums can rank alongside the great collections accumulated in university libraries. In almost all these countries the greatest, and certainly most diverse collection of early printed books is in the national library: the British Library in London, the Royal Library in The Hague, the Royal Library in Brussels, the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, the Austrian National
Library in Vienna. Thereafter, with few exceptions, it is the university libraries that make the greatest contribution to our understanding of Renaissance book culture.

That France remains a shining exception to this rule is scarcely known in the wider academic community. French universities do not, on the whole, possess particularly valuable collections of rare books: this despite the large number of distinguished universities established in France from the mediaeval period onwards.¹ In contrast there are over 450 Bibliothèques Municipales in France that have an ancien fonds.² Some are modest in size, others quite huge. The small town of Châtillon-sur-Seine possesses over 30,000 sixteenth century books. The ancien fonds in Lyon is approximately half a million items.³ In the course of its travels around France the St Andrews book project team recorded in these collections something over 30,000 different bibliographically distinct items published in the French vernacular in the sixteenth century: and these represent only a fraction of the total size of collections which are very substantially Latinate in character. These include many unique books, and many others not to be found in any Parisian collection—even in the formidable holdings of the Bibliothèque Nationale.

The search for the origins of the extraordinary riches of the Bibliothèques Municipales carries us back to one of the seminal events of French history: the French Revolution.⁴ This is not without a certain irony, because the bitter ideological conflicts of these years seemed at one point likely

¹ Hastings Rashdall, rev. by F. M. Powicke and A. B. Emden, The Universities of Europe in the Middle Ages (3 vols, Oxford, 1987), ii. 115–210. Of the 18 ‘French’ universities listed there, two (Dôle and Besançon) were in the Burgundian territories of the Franche-Comté and two were in the independent territories of Avignon and Orange. The university of Grenoble was apparently defunct by the mid 15th century leaving 13 other mediaeval foundations: at Paris, Aix-en Provence, Angers, Bordeaux, Bourges, Caen, Cahors, Montpellier, Nantes, Orléans, Poitiers, Toulouse and Valence.

² For more detailed statistics see http://www.culture.gouv.fr/documentation/bibrep/pres.htm.
