CHAPTER FIVE

GENEVAN PRINT AND THE COMING OF THE WARS OF RELIGION

During his career in Geneva, John Calvin often found himself in disagreement with the city’s governing powers.\(^1\) Expelled once, when his view of the prerogatives of the ministerial office proved more than the town could stomach, even after his return he frequently tries the patience of his employers with his determined efforts to direct and shape the lives of the citizenry.\(^2\) But the city and the reformer were in perfect agreement in welcoming Calvin’s prolific output as a writer. Here the interests of city and minister coalesced. For Calvin, writing and publishing was an essential part of his vocation as a teacher. And from the time that he first published his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* to offer the basics of the faith to those ‘who hungered and thirsted for Christ’ this was a vocation that he pursued with remarkable assiduity: through all the vagaries of Genevan politics, despite a hectic schedule as a preaching minister, through sickness and in health.\(^3\)

Calvin was a writer both of extraordinary skill, and of prodigious range. The work of Francis Higman had shown how Calvin’s contribution to French style helped to re-shape the language.\(^4\) His contribution to theological and polemical debate was also strikingly original in its contrast to the prolixity of many of his contemporaries.\(^5\) But these polemical works were only a small part of a published output that

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\(^1\) The first version of this paper was given at a conference in St Andrews to mark the 50th anniversary of the publication of Robert Kingdon’s seminal work, *Geneva and the Coming of the Wars of Religion*. My thanks to colleagues in the St Andrews Reformation Studies Institute, and especially to Robert Kingdon, whose account of how he came to write the work was one of the highlights of the occasion.


ranged across systematic theology, and three different types of exegesis: sermons, lectures, and his great series of Biblical commentaries.\(^6\)

For modern scholars it is Calvin’s theological clarity and total command of scripture that has most attracted attention in this astonishing scholarly output. For the members of the Genevan printing industry who brought Calvin’s works to the reading public of far greater concern was the sheer quantity and popularity of his writings. These two considerations turned what had, until this point, been a publishing backwater, into one of the most influential, or notorious, centres of print culture in Europe. When, in 1551, the French authorities attempted to stem the worrying growth of evangelical activity within the kingdom, it was Geneva that they identified as the source of the poison, and books as the principal instrument of its dissemination. The Edict of Châteaubriand, intended to put an end to evangelical activity in France, concentrated much of its fire on Geneva.\(^7\) French citizens were forbidden any contact with the town, on the severest of penalties. The possession of books published in the city would be taken as prima facie evidence of heretical beliefs.\(^8\)

Fifty years ago, when he published his *Geneva and the Coming of the Wars of Religion*, Robert Kingdon identified the importance of books from Geneva as one of the principal aspects of the Genevan campaign of evangelization.\(^9\) In this, if perhaps not much else, Robert Kingdon and King Henry II of France were in agreement—both regarded books as the perfect instruments of evangelization. But if the Edict of 1551 was intended to stifle the movement of books into the kingdom, it failed completely. The evidence presented by Robert Kingdon shows a steady increase in production, rising to a peak between 1560 and 1562, the years leading up to the French Wars of Religion.\(^10\) This increase in activity was accompanied by a steady improvement in the

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\(^6\) Jean-François Gilmont, *Jean Calvin et le livre imprimé* (Geneva, 1997); in English (trans. Karin Maag) as *John Calvin and the Printed Book* (Kirksville, MS, 2005).


