

## CHAPTER TEN

### SELLING, PURCHASING, AND BORROWING: TOWARDS AN UNDERSTANDING OF READERSHIP

Analysing the interests of readers in early modern Europe can be tricky. Gondomar and Ramírez were only two of what must have been thousands of people who read one or more volumes of the collection and marvelled at the copper engravings. Yet most of the questions one would like to see answered, such as how and why people read these travel accounts, or even more straightforward concerns, such as how many copies of the volumes were printed, are extremely difficult to answer. The necessary sources—copies with handwritten commentary, letters discussing the collection's contents, or a business archive of the De Bry publishing house—are simply not available. The owners mentioned here are therefore no more than faces in the crowd.<sup>1</sup> This chapter will nevertheless make an effort to indicate how the De Bry volumes fared between coming off the presses in Frankfurt and adorning the bookshelves across late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Europe.

#### 10.1. FROM THE PRESSES TO THE BOOKSTORES: PRICING THE VOLUMES

The first issue the De Brys had to address in order to reach a wide audience was selling copies at the fairs in Frankfurt to their colleagues in other parts of Europe.<sup>2</sup> Although they also sold the collection to individual customers in their own bookshop, as the existence of a placard listing their publications indicates, the Latin volumes were mostly aimed at readers abroad. Hence the Antwerp bookseller Jan I

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<sup>1</sup> For an approach similar to this chapter, with similar difficulties: P. Burke, *The fortunes of the Courtier: the European reception of Castiglione's Cortegiano* (Cambridge 1995b) 139–57 and his appendix 2. Burke also includes dedicatees, translators, and censors in his inventory of readers of *Il Cortegiano*.

<sup>2</sup> Selling books by subscription, as Greve (2004, 68) suggests, was not common practice in Germany until the 1620s, and I haven't found any indications to the contrary in the case of the De Bry collection.

Moretus († 1610) and his son Balthasar were among the De Brys' most important contacts.<sup>3</sup> The reputation of their Plantin-Moretus firm, one of the largest in Europe, ensured the interest not only of many learned men native to the city and to the Southern Netherlands. Knowledgeable customers from as far away as Spain and Italy ordered some of their reading matter at the *Officina Plantiniana* as well.

The Moretuses twice annually visited the Frankfurt fairs, went to see what the De Bry family had published since their last rendezvous, and almost always bought copies of several of their works. New publications enjoyed their particular attention, but the collection of voyages, including its older volumes, had an enduring appeal. After initial wariness on the part of Jan Moretus, perhaps a result of the combination of a high price and initial uncertainty over the collection's appeal, he bought six copies of each of the first three *America*-volumes in September 1592, and then another eight copies of each at the Easter fair the following year.<sup>4</sup> From then on, a steady trickle of De Bry volumes made its way from Frankfurt to the *Golden Compasses* in Antwerp. The Moretuses increasingly bought complete *America*- and *India Orientalis*-series, from Volume I to what was the most recent volume at that point.

The large format and the sheer number of volumes accounted for the collection's hefty price, which added prestige, but also implied that the voyages remained out of reach for many people curious about overseas expansion. Volume prices are listed in the account books of the *Officina Plantiniana*: the Moretuses purchased *India Orientalis* I, with fourteen illustrations, from the De Brys for one Brabantine guilder and four *stuivers*.<sup>5</sup> Volume II, with twice as many pages, and almost three times as many engravings, cost two guilders and six and a half *stuivers*, while Volume III, with more pages still, and no fewer than fifty-eight engravings, was sold for three guilders and six and a half *stuivers*. *India Orientalis* IV, with a size similar to Volume II, but only twenty-one engravings compared to Volume II's thirty-eight, was a full guilder cheaper at one guilder and six and a half *stuivers*. More than anything else, the number of engravings determined the price of the books.

<sup>3</sup> On the Moretuses and their officina: Voet (1969–72) I 191–215.

<sup>4</sup> Arch. MPM 973 (S92), f28r; 974 (Q93), f12r.

<sup>5</sup> Since the Moretuses wrote down the prices, these are referred to in the Antwerp currency. One guilder equals twenty *stuivers*. The prices are based on the 'Cahiers de Francfort' and the 'Journals' for the period between 1590 and 1620, resp. Arch. MPM 969–1029 & 67–75, 171–80, 216–27.