A New World of Books: Hernando Colón and the Biblioteca Colombina

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I came to the Biblioteca Colombina (like so many other aspects of Renaissance culture) through the peculiar medium of John Dee. In some ways, this is entirely appropriate: as one of Elizabethan England’s greatest book collectors, and one of its most active advisers on navigational and imperial affairs, Dee was perhaps uniquely well positioned to appreciate the universal library assembled by Christopher Columbus’s second son Hernando (or Ferdinand), in which the acquisition and annotation of books was closely bound up with the exploration and conquest of new worlds. Indeed, as my own research on Renaissance libraries began to shift from a narrow focus on Dee to a much more general survey of people, places, and practices, my rediscovery of Dee’s copy of Hernando’s infamous life of his famous father, the History…of the Life & Deeds of the Admiral Christopher Columbus, seemed almost providential. As I explained in my chapter on this volume in my study of Renaissance marginalia, Used Books: Marking Readers in Renaissance England, the annotations document Dee’s attempts to come to terms with both the imperial legacy of the father and the bibliographical legacy of the son.

And yet in other ways, this angle of approach was unfortunate: a training in the literature and culture of Renaissance England has left me ill equipped to map the wider world of the Renaissance library in general and the Spanish scene in particular. Most Anglophone book historians know next to nothing about Hernando and his remarkable collection; and it is rarely mentioned (much less studied) in our standard histories of libraries, collections, and information science. The scale of our collective amnesia becomes immediately apparent when we remember that Hernando’s library contained more than fifteen thousand books and more than three thousand prints by the time of his death in 1539—making it roughly four times as large as the collection created by Dee in the second half of the sixteenth century. And it’s not just the size of the Biblioteca Colombina that gives it such an important place in history: the methods by which it was acquired, organized, and mobilized give it a strong claim to being the birthplace of modern bibliography. In 2004–5, the British Museum published a CD-ROM and companion study of Hernando’s print collection, and their editor, Mark McDonald, claimed that “The classification systems that
Ferdinand devised to catalogue and access his collections are unique and pre-date any other systematic attempt to organise a collection..."1 And Hernando's will contains so much detail about the creation and perpetuation of his library that one scholar has gone so far as to call it the first modern treatise on library economy.2

Much of the library survives, more or less intact, in the Institución Colombina next door to the cathedral in Seville—just steps from the lavish tombs of Columbus and his son.3 Hernando himself drafted the design for the elaborate inscription on his own monument, and it is preserved in the original draft of his will dated 3 July 1539. The middle section suggests that Hernando wanted to be remembered, above all, for two things: first, for being the son of Columbus, whose coat of arms he featured proudly, with its bold motto “A CASTILLA Y A LEON MUNDO NUEVO DIO COLON” (To the Kingdom of Castile and Leon, Columbus gave a New World); and second, for giving his countrymen unparalleled access to the new world of print. The four open books he hung around the escutcheon represented not the individual volumes in the library but rather the set of astonishingly detailed catalogs he created to make them useful, providing the period's most comprehensive guide (as the labels indicate) to its “Authors,” “Subjects,” “Epitomes,” and “Materials.”

Hernando was born in Córdoba during the summer of 1488. Christopher Columbus lived with but never married Hernando’s mother, a shadowy figure named Beatriz Enriquez. Fortunately, the admiral later filed the necessary papers for Hernando’s legitimation (allowing him to inherit a great deal of money). In 1502, at the age of thirteen, Hernando joined his father for the last of his four voyages to the West Indies (where they spent more than two years exploring the Caribbean islands and the Central American coast). But

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3 In celebration of the Columbian quincentenary of 1992, the Institución Colombina embarked on a comprehensive catalog of the library: see T. Marín Martínez, J.M. Ruiz Asencio, and K. Wagner, *Catálogo concordado de la Biblioteca de Hernando Colón* (Seville: Institución Colombina, 1993–). But the untimely death of Wagner and the loss of funding meant that the project reached only the first few letters of the alphabet.