‘True and Historical Descriptions’? European Festivals and the Printed Record

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European festivals, whether staged by cities, courts, nobles, or the church, are often primarily known to posterity through the official printed accounts that have come down to us. Such printed festival books begin to appear already in the late fifteenth century, but the festival book really becomes a recognisable genre around 1520 during the reign of the emperor Charles V. He published official accounts of his coronation in Aachen in 1519 as Roman King, the peace celebrations in Madrid in 1526 after the Treaty with Francis I, King of France, his entry into Seville in the same year after his wedding to Isabella of Portugal, his entry into Bologna in 1529 and double coronation there in 1530 as King of Lombardy and Holy Roman Emperor, his entries into Messina and Naples in 1535, into Florence, Lucca, Rome, and Siena in 1536, into Nice in 1538, into Mallorca and Utrecht in 1540, as well as his progress through France in 1539. Indeed, he published multiple accounts, each in a different language, of the same event. The coronation in 1519 was the subject of at least five festival books in German and Latin, the entry into Rome in 1536 was published in Italian, German, and French, and the progress through France in 1539 appeared in Italian, French, and Spanish. The double coronation was so important that it was the subject of festival books in German, Latin, and Italian.

Though festival books do not become numerous until around 1550, from then on for the next 200 years they are an essential element of most princely, civic and religious festivals and are preserved today in their thousands in such libraries as the Herzog August Bibliothek, the British Library, the New York Public Library, and the Library of the Getty Research Institute.¹ One of the

first questions the historian asks is whether festival books give, as they claim, a faithful and accurate account of the festivals they purport to describe.

Most festival books consist of plain unadorned text which narrates the events of the festival in sequence and, by means of such typical titles as ‘Recit veritable de tout de qui s’est fait et passé’; ‘Warhaffte und historische Beschreibung’, ‘Diario esatto e veridico’ or ‘Klare und eigentliche Beschreibung’ lay claim to complete and truthful narration. Many festival books in all European languages appear to make good this claim to historical accuracy, for they are chronicles that, in an often simple and brief narrative, give the precise date, list the principal participants with their names and titles, describe their costumes, and narrate the events of the festival and the manner in which they took place, all without much comment. This holds good whether the accounts are in prose—the commonest type—or in rhymed doggerel couplets according to the older German tradition.

It is very important that the reader should be convinced of the factual accuracy of what he is reading. In the account of a ceremony as significant as a coronation, for instance, the festival book should confirm for the reader that the coronation was carried out according to the pre-ordained ceremonial, for this is what makes the coronation valid and gives it its binding power. Equally important in a festival book is to describe who stood and who sat, who walked towards whom, who was bare-headed in whose presence. Such matters were vital indicators of rank and power and therefore essential pieces of political information which needed to be recorded. This need for particular details explains the pages of lists to be found in many festival books: of who followed whom in a procession, of how many there were in each group, of what they were wearing, and of what floats accompanied them. In accounts of tournaments we are often told who scored what and who won the prizes. It is therefore easy for the modern reader to imagine that festival books intend, like modern war or sports reporting, to tell us exactly what happened blow by blow.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Early modern courtly historiography is meant to be biased, and so are festival books. Just as official histories were commissioned by a dynasty to demonstrate how the great deeds of that

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books can be gained from Helen Watanabe-O’Kelly and Anne Simon, Festivals and Ceremonies. A Bibliography of Printed Works relating to Court, Civic and Religious Festivals in Europe 1500–1800 (London, 2000), which describes 3000 works in twelve languages. A corrected and augmented version of this bibliography is now available online as a searchable database: festivals.mml.ox.ac.uk.

2 See, for instance, Birgit Studt, Fürstenhof und Geschichte. Legitimation durch Überlieferung (Cologne, Weimar, Vienna, 1992), and Horst Wenzel, Höfische Geschichte. Literarische