Bibliopolis, developing the one-stop shop for the history of the book in the Netherlands

Book history is a flourishing discipline, the Internet is a hype. So it seems to be a good idea to connect these two exciting enterprises. That is exactly what is being done in the project which is the subject of this article: Bibliopolis. The aim of Bibliopolis is to provide the most important information on the book in the Netherlands to book historians and others by integrating existing electronic services, by developing new ones, and by offering worldwide access through the World Wide Web (www). It will still be necessary to visit libraries and archives while doing research on this topic, but once Bibliopolis is on the air, a visit to this site will provide answers to Frequently Asked Questions on the history of the book in the Netherlands.

NATIONAL HISTORIES OF THE BOOK

Since World War II the study of the book in the Netherlands has evolved into a fully fledged academic study. The influence of various foreign schools has resulted in a clear approach focused on production, distribution and consumption of printed information. This new focus has led to a flood of publications on major and minor issues of the history of the book in the Netherlands, but a general overview has not yet been written. This is widely deplored, especially since bibliography is highly interdisciplinary by nature, with strong ties to the history of literature, economics, art, and - more generally - cultural history. For these disciplines such overviews have been available for many years and often in several forms. Moreover, it looks as if every self-respecting country is currently planning a 'national history of the book'. It started in France in 1983 with the publishing of the first part of the Histoire de l'édition française. This four-volume work was completed in 1986. It gives an integrated overview of the history of the book in France, following the lines L. Febvre and H.J. Martin designated in their L'apparition du livre (1958). The book was not only considered to be an object, as in analytical bibliography, but also as a social agent.


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Febvre and Martin emphasized the relationship of the book with the social-economic and cultural developments. Another new element in the French project was the fact that the work had been written in collaboration by a group of notable French book historians. The outstanding result has inspired many—mostly English-speaking—countries to a similar approach: a group of collaborating authors writing a multi-volume national history of the book.

Projects are under way in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, United States, Britain, Wales, Scotland and Ireland. In Germany and Italy plans are being made for a similar undertaking. The book on Wales has been published, the first volume on Britain came out in October 1999. These are all projects on a national level, but there are also many international exchanges of ideas and experiences. Many delegates meet at the annual SHARP conference, each year preceded by a pre-conference on ‘national histories of the book and related cooperative projects’. In 2000 the conference will be held in Gutenberg’s city, Mainz.

And now the Netherlands can be added to the list of countries where a national history of the book is under construction. Almost ten years ago the first plans were being developed. A ‘Werkgroep Geschiedenis van het gedrukte boek in de Lage Landen’ [= Working Group on the Printed Book in the Low Countries] envisaged a six-volume work, which was later limited to three volumes. Editors were asked, an inventory of gaps in the knowledge of the history of the book in the Netherlands and Belgium was made and financing was sought. But the latter appeared to be a problem. Even for the smaller project of three volumes no funding could be found and the plan was abandoned.

THE KONINKLIJKE BIBLIOTHEEK

After it had become clear that a printed history of the book in the Netherlands could not be realised, the Koninklijke Bibliotheek (KB), the National Library of the Netherlands in the Hague, presented a new approach for a national history of the book. The objective was not to produce a multi-volume printed work but to create an online tool for research on the history of the book. This tool would be designed as an interactive academic information system, based on World Wide Web technology. The system, which will be called Bibliopolis, will give a state-of-the-art survey of knowledge on the history of the book in the Netherlands and will be limited to the printed book. The project started on 1 March 1998 and will continue for four years. The KB will manage and realise...

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