DAVID McKITTERICK

Histories of the book and histories of Antwerp

When in the 1560s Lodovico Guicciardini, writing his account of the Low Countries, came to the section on Antwerp, he explained that his first inclination had been to concentrate on the city and district. In doing so, he would be able to demonstrate the great affection in which he held the city, and to discourse on its beauty, size and magnificence, on its government, and on the power of its inhabitants. Then, instead, he decided that it would be more useful to set all this in a larger context. Rather like Guicciardini, I come to my subject with Antwerp foremost, but with comparisons constantly in mind.2

On the day when I was honoured to receive the invitation to speak to you on this occasion, I was in the middle of reading proofs of the history of a large British university press in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.3 This was the third and concluding volume in a series that had begun with the year 1534. In the course of traversing four and a half centuries, I had tried constantly to look beyond the little world of just one printer and publisher. I had tried also to look to other parts of Britain; to other countries and continents; and to parts of the market that were neither academic, nor theological nor educational. In other words, I had always sought for contexts – commercial, social and intellectual, in the means and materials of manufacture – as much as in what are generally, and rather loosely, referred to as the ‘contents’ of books.

In this third and final volume, covering the stormy century between the 1870s and the 1970s, I refer several times to the congress of the book or, as it was called, Conférence du livre held at Antwerp in 1890. On the other hand, in the first volume of my history I had referred to Antwerp’s part in the religious controversies of the sixteenth century, to Plantin (of course), to relationships between the British and Flemish markets for all manner of books.

In other words, when I was asked for a view of the book in Antwerp, I realised that I had not one, but several, views; that these were radically different in different centuries; and that they depended always on comparisons, and contexts.4

1 This paper was delivered at the opening of a conference Gheprint Antwerpen at Antwerp on 26 November. It was printed in Dutch in the proceedings, Gheprint Antwerpen; het boek in Antwerpen van de zeventiende tot de twintigste eeuw, ed. Jan Pauwels (Kapellen 2004), pp. 11-31.
4 ‘A myth creates order in the chaos of memories.’ The incomplete nature of historical

In phrasing our topic in that way, we address a commonplace for historians. How far is it possible to write a definitive history, and what do we mean by such a term? Are we not, rather, always left with several histories, dependent not just on the knowledge that we possess, or the way that we interpret it, or the way we organise it, or the choices that we make in assembling our evidence? If the writing of history has a purpose, then the choices and standpoints that are adopted in the course of pursuing that activity mean that it will have several purposes; and this is quite separate from the interpretations, intentions, knowledge, circumstances, background, race, class or expectations that each and every separate reader will bring. It has been often said, following in the steps of the New Zealand scholar Donald F. McKenzie, that new readers make new texts. In stating this, he was in turn doing little more than following literary critical theory; but he was also asking us to apply this commonplace not just to words, but to bibliographical artefacts. His appeal is now widely available in translation, in French, Italian and, most recently, in Dutch. What does it mean, for historians of the book? How far can it be used to support their activities?

I wish, on this occasion, to concentrate, first, not on readers, but on writers and artists, printers and booksellers. To some extent the two species of writer and reader are not just complementary, but are even inseparable, since the act of reading imposes its own contribution on a text’s making. In saying that we understand a book, or that we appreciate it (or not, as the case may be) we are applying our own knowledge and skills to interpreting the work of the author. This work has been in turn adapted by the person who set out his or her text in particular ways on the printed page; the people who chose the design, weight and size of the types used; the people who chose the weight, colour and quality of the paper on which it is printed; and the people who decided in what materials, of what colours and of what designs it should be bound. The processes of book production are of course much more complicated than such a brief summary suggests, but the point is made: that, in other words, each act of reading modifies what has so far been created, just as the processes of printing, binding, advertising, selling and dispersal likewise all contribute to a book’s

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