From Plantin to Manteau (1500-2000)

The Flemish Book Trade in an International Perspective
Contributions from Flanders to the SHARP Conference 2006

SHARP, the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing, organises its conferences in just about every part of the world. This time it was in the Netherlands – at the Koninklijke Bibliotheek in The Hague and at the University of Leiden – and the theme it highlighted was Trading Books – Trading Ideas. Because such mammoth conferences are really something of a 'mer à boire', where a large number of sessions sometimes come about somewhat artificially (due to the number of speakers), and not all the sessions could be attended by everyone, it seemed a good idea to me to assemble the papers given by some of the members of the Vlaamse Werkgroep Boekgeschiedenis [Flemish Working-group for Book History] and publish these. With two sessions and two papers in other sessions, the Flemish input at this international forum consisted of giving a bird's eye overview of five hundred years of book production and publishing in Flanders. The title of this article covers, chronologically, well-defined subjects that were discussed from the specific angle the conference organisers had set.

Flanders, the official name for the northern part of Belgium for some years now, is essentially a pars pro toto and is, in historical context, better – and more correctly – known as the Southern Netherlands (even if the ancient and present borders do not always coincide). With ups and downs, from the fifteenth century until the twentieth, this area played an important role in the printing and publishing of texts, and, as a logical consequence, in the dissemination of a body of thought. Being a small territory on the European map, the Southern Netherlands had to rely on commercial ties for sales to foreign markets, particularly in times of domestic economic recession. For this reason, the authors paid special attention to the interaction between the economic, political and religious factors on the one hand, and book production on the other. The articles collected in this issue reflect some of the themes and issues that were discussed during the conference.
Stijn van Rossem (University of Antwerp, UA), previously employed at the Short Title Catalogue of Flanders, applies himself to studying the Verdussens, a large printers' family that stood in Plantin's shadow and who, around 1585, or early in the Counter Reformation in the Southern Netherlands, applied themselves to the book industry.

Jan Roegiers (Catholic University of Louvain, KU Leuven) once again looks at the turbulent period after 1780 when freedom of the press and censorship followed in succession, leading printers to flee to other regions and authors to seek other publishers (in Liège, Maastricht, Breda, and then France).

Jan Pauwels (Royal Library of Belgium, KB Brussels) examines nineteenth-century bibliophiles and, in connection with this, the auction catalogues that were distributed all over Europe, something which sheds new light on the European book trade in that century.

Kevin Absillis (University of Antwerp, UA) discusses the lesser known aspects of the well-known literary publisher, Angèle Manteau. Between 1958 and 1962, after the Netherlands, as colonial power, had been made a scapegoat, she was able to cooperate with Dutch publisher Wilhelms van Hoeve and produce books for and about Indonesia.

In the session 'Private Libraries and Their Catalogues in Early Modern Europe', Chris Coppens (Catholic University of Louvain, KU Leuven) spoke about the auction of Charles de Croys Library in Brussels in 1614, a spicy story about a catalogus redevivus, a catalogue reborn. The unique copy was burned in 1914, and recently a unique copy turned up in a family archive!

Finally, in the session 'Early Modern Publishers', Hubert Meeus (University of Antwerp, UA), spoke of Zacharias Heyns, who was educated at the Plantin House and who, in Amsterdam, acted as publisher of humanists, becoming the first 'marchand-libraire' with an eye for both the local and international markets.

When, in the 1970s and 1980s, an explosion of young book scholars emerged in the Netherlands, Flanders found itself in rather the opposite situation. But the 'spring which followed this hibernation' is now bearing ample fruit, something which greatly delights an old veteran in the field. What's more, the young generation of book scholars who have presented themselves in Antwerp over the last few years, are able to count on the exemplary and stimulating roles played by Pierre Delsaerd, as teacher of Library and Information Science at the universities of Antwerp and Louvain and as chairman of the Vlaamse Werkgroep Boekgeschiedenis. It is no coincidence that the above-mentioned speakers are all members of this association.