In 1879 Henry Bradshaw, Librarian of Cambridge University, took down from the shelves and placed before William Martin Conway, a young member of Trinity College, a copy of the *Dialogus creaturarum* printed by Gerard Leeu at Gouda in 1480. Bradshaw himself had given the book to the Library in 1870, where it had joined a handful of others from Leeu’s press bought at his instigation over the past few months. By 1879, thanks to his dedicated campaigning and an exceptional series of sales, Bradshaw had created at Cambridge the best collection in England of incunabula from the Low Countries.

What was it that so engaged Bradshaw, who was not an art historian, with questions concerning the use and re-use of woodcuts? In one sense they sat alongside type analysis of the kind pursued by Holtrop in his *Monuments typographiques des Pays-Bas au quinzième siècle* (1856-68), as aids in placing books and their printers. Their sharing and re-use was another matter, and more complicated in its implications. Whatever fired his imagination, we can see Bradshaw at work several years earlier in a copy of *Devotie ghetiden van*
den leven ende passie Jesu Christi, printed by the Collaciebroeders at Gouda in 1496 (ILC 1248). The book came from the Enschedé sale of December 1867, and had been bought for the University Library by Martinus Nijhoff. If Bradshaw, University Librarian only since March that year, found that sale in some respects disappointing, this book at least engaged his careful attention. With Holtrop’s new *Monuments typographiques* beside him, he puzzled over the use of Leeu’s type by the Collaciebroeders. Holtrop, quoting Heineken’s *Idée générale d’une collection complète d’estampes* (1771), also mentioned in a letter that Leeu had used the woodcuts. Never shy of writing on books, Bradshaw turned again to the volume, adding references as appropriate beside each cut to the series as used by Leeu at Gouda in the early 1480s. Perhaps he was inspired to do so partly by a previous reader, who had noted against the woodcut of Christ’s entry into Jerusalem that there were other versions of this cut to be found in presses elsewhere as well. But in this copy we can see Bradshaw at work.

Under Bradshaw’s guidance, Conway worked his way through the woodcuts of the *Dialogus* and of Leeu’s other Gouda-printed books, describing each in turn. The two men then worked through Campbell’s *Annales* (1874) and through Holtrop. After only a few weeks’ tuition, Conway set off on a tour of other libraries, to Dublin, the Netherlands, Germany, back to England via Brussels and then to Paris, more Belgium, The Hague again. On his return to Cambridge, between the beginning of April and the end of July 1880 he wrote up his researches. After a pause, he began to publish them, initially in *The Bibliographer* in 1882 and then in a volume published by Cambridge University Press in 1884, *The Woodcutters of the Netherlands*. It was an astonishing achievement, the more so in that it was the work of a tyro, a man with no previous bibliographical training. In its planning and in its execution it could not have been achieved without Bradshaw’s guiding enthusiasm and Conway’s energy. Indeed, Bradshaw financed some of Conway’s costs out of his own pocket. It is unlikely that any modern research funder would agree to so ambitious a proposal as a survey of all surviving Low Countries incunabula, and to write up the results in a coherent manner, the entire task to be accomplished in five years including several sets of proofs at the press. But Conway’s work has stood the test of time.

1 Wytze Hellinga, ‘The Enschedé sale was most disappointing…’, *Quaerendo*, 5 (1975), pp. 303–11.