

PROVENANCE: methods and findings

Saturday, 8 May 2010

Magdalen and Merton Colleges, Oxford

Symposium presented by the Centre for the Study of the Book, Bodleian Library, and Magdalen and Merton Colleges, Oxford

Conveners: Christine Ferdinand and Julia Walworth



Speakers:

David Pearson (Director, Libraries, Archives & Guildhall Art Gallery at City of London) *Present and future horizons in provenance work*

Nicholas Pickwood (Director of the Ligatus Research Centre, University of the Arts, London), *Provenance evidence in bindings*

William Poole (New College, Oxford), *Discovering Hans Sloane's Books in the Bodleian Collections*

Julie-Ann Vickers (University of Dundee), *The books and inscriptions of John Fitzwilliam: case study of a 17th-century library*

Cristina Dondi (University of Oxford), *Material Evidence in Incunabula: a New Database to collect and research provenance information on Venetian (and other) 15th-century books*

The day opened with a question from Anthony Grafton: 'What happens to texts when they take material form?'

Methods

Introductions: Anthony Grafton

"... the evolution of bibliography into history of the book"

David Pearson surveyed the numerous ways that copy-specific or, to use G. Thomas Tanselle's favoured phrase, post-production evidence, can alert us to histories of the making, reading, and understanding of books. Pearson found it fundamental to 'the evolution of *bibliography* into *history of the book*'. The notion of an association copy, a book that had a famous owner, was of consuming interest to earlier book collectors, but this has given way to an interest in lesser-known, or anonymous, owners whose marks might indicate how books were habitually used, a clue to the broader social impact of books. Provenance evidence for its own sake is valuable, and never more so than in an age of electronic reproduction of texts.

"... books are bound in a language"

Nicholas Pickwood drew us toward a close-up view of binding. The criss-crosses of stitching, the folding and trimming of parchment, the means of attaching ties to boards, all of which might have been invisible in the finished binding, were practiced in distinctive ways by craftsmen from different parts of Europe, he said. Wherever it might have been printed, a book was 'bound in a language', and provenance evidence could

begin with examination of the styles and techniques of binding.

Case studies

Introductions: Julia Walworth, Christine Ferdinand, Alexandra Franklin

“... a library behind a library behind a library”

William Poole's investigations of the books of Hans Sloane (1660-1753) that had come to the Bodleian Library led him to consider how new acquisitions were shelved in the 18th-century Bodleian. To begin examining books for distinctive marks of ownership, Poole had to identify likely locations and used the Library Records to trace accessions that might have been replaced on the shelves with the Sloane donations in the early years of the 18th century. The value of Library Records and the knowledge of library administration and, in particular, the physical layout of the library is demonstrated by Poole's success in locating many Sloane books no longer identified as such in the library catalogues.

“... the consolation of his books”

Julie-Anne Vickers's subject was John Fitzwilliam, chaplain to James II and canon of the Chapel Royal, a non-juror after the 1688 revolution who was forced into retirement. A friend of Pepys and Evelyn, he compiled a respectable collection of theological and learned books many of which are now in the library of Magdalen College, Oxford. Fitzwilliam's marks revealed in detail how a buyer of only moderate wealth accumulated books; prices (recorded in code) and the names of booksellers built a detailed picture of the man. Through his recorded purchases we saw him finding books in London, in communication with booksellers, as well as in Bath and other provincial towns on his travels. The expertise assembled at the symposium helped to identify some of Fitzwilliam's codes for recording prices, suggesting he used not only Greek but Hebrew letters.

“... a richness of primary sources”

Cristina Dondi called for a quantitative approach to the rich data contained within early books. Awareness of post-production evidence not only enriches our understanding of individual volumes but opens a whole new field of study, enabling the trade in books to be analysed as a subject of economic and social history. The database in preparation by Dondi and Prof. Nigel Palmer, [Material Evidence in Incunabula](#), strives to collate this information for only a portion of pre-1500 books, those printed in Venice. Linking this to the CERL databases, Dondi hopes to set a pattern for the systematic recording of provenance evidence of all early books.

Useful links

[The Sloane Printed Books Catalogue](#)

[Ligatus, historic bookbindings research at the University of the Arts, London](#)

[Material Evidence in Incunabula, from CERL](#)

[Reissued June 2012, Alexandra Franklin]