

‘Print Networks’ Conference, Cambridge 2009

## *Collectors, Librarians and the Book Trade*

Reports by Conference Fellows, Freyja Cox-Jensen & Daniel Starza Smith

FROM STAID SCHOLARLY STUDIES in the sixteenth century to books of the more bawdy of Burns’ verses, the 2009 ‘Print Networks’ conference covered the full spectrum of British bibliophilia. A catholic audience of aspiring academics, established researchers and keen enthusiasts enjoyed three days of stimulating discussion on all aspects of book collection, from the early modern period to the present day.

Individual seventeenth century collections were discussed by Renae Satterly in her investigation into the books bequeathed to Middle Temple Library by Robert Ashley, and by Daniel Starza-Smith and Daniel Cook, in two papers which led to fruitful discussion about the authority of writers over the afterlife of their texts, and the relationship between collection and publication in establishing an authorial canon. Eighteenth and nineteenth century librarians and collectors were especially well-represented in the programme. The movement of books into and out of collections, and the changing nature of book sales were explored by William Noblett in his work on James West, and Susan Bain in her work on William Hayley, while Iain Bevan and Brian Hillyard addressed the wide-ranging careers of Thomas Ruddiman and James Fraser. Lindsay Levy and Stephen Brown continued this detailed insight into print networks north of the Scottish border, with their papers on the library of Walter Scott and the clandestine circulation of Burns’ *Merry Muses of Caledonia* respectively. An Irish perspective was provided by Sarah Arndt in her examination of Belfast’s Linen Hall Library and its trade links with London, and Diana Dixon added diversity in her consideration of English local newspapers, a form of printed material so often overlooked by scholars in their pursuit of more ‘serious’ tomes.

The guest speaker was Whitbread-award winning biographer Ann Thwaite, who entertained an eager audience with the story of Edmund Gosse’s life in books. Long-time librarian of the House of Lords, Gosse’s relationship with books and textual authority was the subject of this wide-ranging paper. Twentieth century popular culture was represented by Helen Smith in her analysis of the US Armed Services Editions produced in the Second World War, which opened up a rich field of discussion about the desirability of books as material artefacts and the role of reading in making soldiers on active service feel that they were still in some way connected to civilised society.

Held in the picturesque surroundings of Trinity Hall, Cambridge, the conference allowed time for a guided tour of Trinity College's magnificent Wren library, as well as providing the opportunity for delegates to investigate the city's other rich collections in their own time. A highly enjoyable three days, the event provided a welcoming forum for profitable discussion and for friendly conversation, highlighting the importance of books even in this technological age. If this year's success is anything to go by, the conference scheduled for 2010 will be an event that any self-respecting bibliophile cannot afford to miss!

Freyja Cox-Jensen

**S**IR HUGH WALPOLE was careful to warn his readers about the potential pitfalls of book-collecting, defining a bibliomaniac as 'one to whom books are like bottles of whiskey to the inebriate, to whom anything that is between covers has an intoxicating savour.' Like liquor, books can give pleasure, but in the hands of an addict they can become health hazards: T. F. Dibdin's *Bibliomania, or Book-madness* offered 'some account of the history, symptoms, and cure' of 'this fatal disease'. From Lindsay Levy's fascinating account of Sir Walter Scott's collections, the first paper to use the term, it soon became clear that 'bibliomania' was the unofficial theme of the 27th Print Networks conference, 'Collectors, Libraries and the Book Trade'.

Four papers focused in detail on fascinating eighteenth-century collections. William Noblett surveyed the library of the antiquarian James West, with a particular concentration on the sale of his collection. Susan Bain championed the 1772 catalogue of William Hayley's library, analysing the implications of its discovery for the study of the book trade. Sarah Arndt explained the differences between a library and a 'Society for Promoting Knowledge' in her meticulous study of the Belfast Linen Hall Library. Iain Beavan elucidated the under-explored life and work of the royal librarian James Fraser, who stood at the cross roads of the Scottish and English book trades.

Brian Hillyard connected Thomas Ruddiman's activities as a publisher and printer with his activities as both a librarian and private collector, making a strong case for the enduring legacy of Ruddiman's *Rudiments*, the hugely popular Latin primer. Freyja Cox Jensen continued the Latin lessons, studying patterns of demand for classical texts in seventeenth-century England in order to show the dual needs to translate and to import original-language texts.

Helen Smith investigated (some of) the 123 million books circulated for free during World War II, partly to enact ideals of democracy and the uninhibited dissemination of ideas. Diana Dixon explored another bastion of democracy, the press. Her paper on English local newspaper archives highlighted the challenges of working in this field but called for greater use of these rich resources.

Conferences are of course also places to meet fellow scholars working in the same fields. Daniel Cook's work on Swift, like mine on Donne, involves an examination of an author's family, and their use or mis-use of a famous relative's life work. Stephen Brown's analysis of Robert Burns's work 'The Merry Muses of Caledonia' assured me that the creation and circulation of 'impolite' verse was one of the most rewarding areas in which to be working. Renae Satterley's paper on the library of Robert Ashley (b.1565) emerged from a heroic project to digitise the catalogue of the Middle Temple library, and was a fine example of the benefits that technology can bring to the humanities.

Conversely, perhaps the most absorbing paper given at the conference was produced with a resolutely untechnological methodology. Ann Thwaite deliberately never learned to type, because her female contemporaries who did invariably became secretaries. Ann, of course, was destined for higher things. When Ann's allotted time-slot was over, all too soon, we were all happy to forego some of our lunch break to hear her continue.

The conference organisers deserve special mention for ensuring a never-ending supply of delicious refreshments, and an inspired series of extra-curricular activities. Punting in the torrential rain was thankfully decided unwise, but a visit to the Wren Library proved highly enjoyable. Trinity Hall itself was an inspired choice of venue, peaceful and friendly, and – when I found a spare half-hour in the busy programme – just a short walk to the John Donne manuscripts of the main university library.

Daniel Starza Smith