

**William A. Kelly and Giulia Trentacosti (eds): *The Book in the Low Countries* Merchiston Publishing, Edinburgh, UK, 2015, 182 pp, Paperback, £5.00, ISBN: 978-0-9566136-2-2**

The seven essays published together in *The Book in the Low Countries* focus on what is better known today as the Netherlands and the Flanders region of Belgium, both constituting a single language area with a robust, common cultural history that predates the creation of their respective nation-states in the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. These essays derive from a wide-ranging seminar, held at the National Library of Scotland, on the topic of the history of the book in the Low Countries from the manuscript period to the present. The seminar, in turn, reflects the strong and long relationship between Scotland and the Low Countries in the fields of printing and publishing. Yet this is not an insular approach for the volume as it considers the impact of the book industries of the Low Countries on other countries in Europe as well as their present and future prospects.

The essays are arranged in chronological order: examining the early development of the publishing industry in the Low Countries, moving through a number of periods of social, technical and political change, and concluding with its contemporary situation in a digital and globalised media environment. The first five contributions explore a diverse range of historic topics from an account by Christiaan Coppens of the book trade of the Low Countries with the British Isles from the fifteenth century onwards to a very detailed analysis by Goran Proot of the typography of theatre programmes of Flemish Jesuits in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The latter essay highlights the overall evolution of design and layout in the context of changing cultural and aesthetic views. The importance of the continuing relationship with Great Britain comes to the fore again when Kuniko Forrer explores the production and varying typographical characteristics of Dutch academic theses. The

analysis by Stijn van Rossem of the pursuit by one Dutch family of dominance of the almanac production in the seventeenth century, and its connection to a government drive to establish censorship in order to achieve greater control of its citizens, raises now contemporary questions of monopolies, fixed book-prices, and the role of the government in the information sector. It promotes discussion of issues of market regulation and protectionism, stressing the dialectic between economic interests and political concerns, in a manner that elevates it beyond the historical case-study. This is true, too, of Lisa Kuitert's contribution on the interest of Dutch publishers in the Anglo-Boer Wars in South Africa and the relationship between propaganda and reporting.

The collection concludes with a shift of focus from the purely historical perspective towards the present and future with essays on the market for e-books and their reception by readers, by Adriaan van der Weel, and on small-nation publishing in a global marketplace, by Alistair McCleery. At first sight, these last two essays do not seem to fit the historical perspective of the others. However, that historical perspective provoked consideration of general issues applicable today while underpinning the perhaps banal point that contemporary publishing finds its roots in the way books were created, traded and consumed in the past.

The very diversity of these contributions demonstrates that this volume is a collection, rather than a general survey of the historical development of the book in the Low Countries. This book points towards the need for such a survey in English, rather than satisfying it itself. Indeed, some of the earlier contributions may seem designed for a specialized audience—although, as noted above, they do stimulate wider issues. It is unfortunate, moreover, that not enough page space was given to the figures, a factor that minimises the usefulness of these tables and illustrations. In addition, the contributions vary greatly in length. Perhaps, it would have been preferable to abbreviate the

longer contributions to create space where further essays would have given collectively the general overview of the subject or where a more reader friendly layout would have let the figures breathe.

These carpings apart, *The Book in the Low Countries* is an important contribution to book and publishing studies, particularly in its demonstration that, in order to understand the state of publishing in Europe and where it might be heading, one needs to understand its history also. In this volume, the editors provide a base for further general accounts of publishing in this small but significant region of Europe and its links to the rest of the world.