



Cristina Dondi's speech after receiving the honour of "Cavaliere" of the Order of "Stella d'Italia" (OSI) by His Excellency The Ambassador of Italy Pasquale Terracciano on behalf of the President of Italy, during a ceremony at the Ambassador's residence in London on 4 Dec. 2017

I am really honoured and very happy to receive this sign of distinction from my country, which also happens to count the largest number of historic libraries in the world. On top of this, the country which produced and disseminated, first by means of trade, then less so, its book heritage throughout most of the globe.

I would like to spell out how the work done in these years is equally relevant for scholarship and for cultural heritage institutions.

First scholarship. The printing revolution has always attracted the imagination of scholars, historians and the public; rightly so, as until 30 year ago ideas and knowledge circulated via the medium of book. All this attention resulted in publications rich in opinions, but poor in data to support those opinions.

Is it because evidence was not there? If anything, the contrary is true, since half a million of 15th-century printed books survive scattered in 4,000 public libraries.

The word "scattered" is very important, it is the key to all we have done.

The books preserved in our libraries once moved very extensively. The printing revolution was a trade revolution, books began to be distributed and used anywhere in Europe. With almost no documents surviving to testify this new phenomenon but half a million of books which embody it, the solution was pretty obvious: we use the books as evidence.

Most of them still preserve marginal annotations and owners' names, but to be able to transform all this into meaningful historical evidence, it takes people with very special skills and knowledge, who can turn a scribble on a Venetian book into the valuable annotations of a German university student, or French lawyer, or Italian nun: it takes people trained in paleography, bibliography, Latin and Greek and modern languages, history of art. In short, scholars trained in Italy.

I developed a new way of following the books. One which, by simply associating spacial and temporal coordinates to every former owner of books is now allowing us to track their movements and that of the ideas they contain.

The implications of this straight-forward methodology for Italian cultural heritage institutions is huge: we are now reconstructing the content of collections which, for political and economic reasons, were dispersed over the course of centuries, and are today disseminated in thousands of European and American libraries and museums.

One of the crucial concepts that will inform the exhibition which we are organising in Venice at the Correr Museum next year is that “An invention is not a revolution”. A combination of factors determined the success of Gutenberg’s invention in Europe, first of all Venetian entrepreneurship, where printing joined an international trade network. Then a massive drop in prices, and of course existing and growing demand.

Similarly to Gutenberg’s invention, this new approach to the books would not have made a dent in historical research had I not been supported by an exceptional team (Alessandra, Birgit, Geri, Matilde, Sabrina, and now Laura); and by a network of great scholar-librarians, first of all at the National Library in Rome, the British Library, and of course the Bodleian Library, where my encounter with incunabula started 20 years ago. We have now over 350 contributing libraries, from Greece and Lithuania, to California, and over 100 editors, scholars and librarians, junior and senior, who have been contributing data of the highest standard, not because they had to, but because they wanted to.

The 15cBOOKTRADE Project coordinates the work of very many people, in different countries, over several years. No scholar alone could do this. Only international, ecumenical, collaboration can, and the synergy between science and humanities, research and cultural heritage institutions.

Of course it has been essential to capture the interest of visionary supporters: the British Academy, the Consortium of European Research Libraries, The European Research Council, Lincoln College, The Helen Hamlyn Trust, the Rothschild Foundation, and, really not least, our greatest fans, His excellency Pasquale Terracciano and Federico Bianchi.

On a personal note, all this work and commitment requires an almost obsessive drive which can only be sustained with the support and understanding of a special family, part an inspiration, part a tease to keep me grounded to the 21st century.

But what are the implications of our research? They extend way more widely than the History of the Book.

These days economic historians and global historians are paying more attention to the printing revolution to compare it with the present information revolution. Moreover, some economic historians are trying to quantify the relevance of the so-called human capital for the growth of Europe before the industrial revolution, and finally they are starting to pay attention to books as an essential component of human growth.

Unfortunately the data they use are not good, and what they build, they build on sand. But we, book historians, do want books to be taken into

consideration at last, therefore it is up to us to produce good quality, extensive, measurable, sets of data that economic historians can crunch in the way they are accustomed. Data that cannot, and should not, be ignored any longer.

To encapsulate the printing revolution in Gutenberg as the inventor and in Luther as the real disseminator of printing, as the current narrative goes, is plain wrong, terribly reductive and very dangerous: it associates the democratisation of knowledge with religious conflict. But already by 1500 Europe was awash with millions of books, not only for the elites, as the popular understanding claims, but for everybody, with a vast production in primary education completely overlooked.

With the Venice exhibition we want to foster a global change of mentality at a critical time in European history. We will show, evidence in hand, that a core constituent of being European, worth cherishing and teaching as an integral part of our heritage together with democratic values, lies in wide-spread literacy, the pursuit of knowledge, the value attached to our shared cultural heritage.

Detailed analytical work always sits at the foundation of sound assessments on a large scale. We can say it, because we have done our groundwork.

In the exhibition, we will show how books printed in Venice were distributed and used throughout Europe. My future project will trace and visualise the dispersal of the Italian book heritage in the world, explain the whys and hows, to offer our Italian libraries, large and small, the opportunity to collaborate with any European and American library, and build together powerful narratives on our shared heritage. Thank you for your trust.

