

PROSPECTUSES IN THE BOOK TRADE

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When monies raised from the sale of an engineering invention to reduce sound distortion in electronic amplifiers enabled the Monash University Library to acquire, late in 1985, a significant number of French booksellers' catalogues and prospectuses from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, not only did this purchase add to the Library's already significant holdings in this area (thereby putting it "almost certainly in the top 10 libraries in the world for this material"),¹ but it brought to Australian shores a rich store of some of the most underestimated, most exciting and most fascinating material available for scholars and researchers of all persuasions and interests.

Booksellers' catalogues and prospectuses form part of that elusive, ephemeral archival source material that is so often of incalculable value in providing for an old issue or question a hitherto unknown clue, a new insight or a missing link. If attention is focused on prospectuses alone, (for that is the purpose of this issue of *Explorations*), their value lies principally in their scarcity — far too often there are no known surviving copies of prospectuses that were certainly published, or, if we are lucky, a sole copy turns up in some unexpected corner. It is only recently that conscious efforts have been made to collect and record those that have been saved.

But scarcity is not their only interest. The chance survival of prospectuses does not mean a chance intent. Prospectuses were prepared for a specific purpose and the content of each separate piece of publicity has its own inherent interest, although the nature and purpose of such material in turn determine that readers from a later period should treat some aspects of what they read with a certain degree of caution and even, at times, cynicism.

Generally a book prospectus was "a publisher's device, being a descriptive leaflet outlining the plan of a work to be published. It usually contains a specimen page and illustration, and often a table of contents."² — but more of this later. Thus prospectuses were, after all, designed to get the best sales possible for the goods they were promoting. The old adage "plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose" holds just as well for the world of book promotion as for any other development in society. The fact remains — the writers of book prospectuses (often the authors of the books themselves) generally spared no effort to sell their wares, although, as will be seen shortly, there were limits to the sales techniques which could be used. Nevertheless, it is a tantalising challenge to sift through what are sales superlatives and what is strictly factual.

Publicity to encourage the sale of books printed with movable type is almost as old as the books themselves. Glaister states that "the first prospectus of a book was issued by Johann Mentelin (John Mentel) in Strasbourg in 1469"³

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whereas Steinberg in his *Five Hundred Years of Printing* claims that the first true prospectus, i.e. publicity "looking forward to books to come... made its first appearance in 1474 when the astronomer and mathematician Regiomontanus sent forth a list of Greek mathematical texts and other scientific books from his own press in Nürnberg [in which he detailed] exactly which books of his list were available, which [were] in the press and which were in some state or other of preparation."⁴

When did the first book prospectuses appear in France? Book catalogues existed in Paris no later than 1552, but what of book *prospectuses*? The Bibliothèque Nationale has a prospectus bound in with its copy of the second edition of Baluze's *Capitularum regum francorum...* of 1675, but this is not necessarily the first to have been produced. In fact, although the French trade was in many respects slow to follow publishing practices in other countries, it seems hard to believe that it would take two centuries for it to adopt a proven effective means of sales promotion.

However, what is clear, is that by the time of the first publication enterprise by subscription in France, the phenomenon of the prospectus as a form of publicity was firmly entrenched. It has been confidently established that France's first subscription book was Montfaucon's *Antiquité* of 1716, and the copy held by the Bibliothèque Nationale has a prospectus bound in.

In less than ten years, an *arrêt* of 10 April 1725 made it mandatory for any registered bookseller / publisher / printer planning a subscription sale to prepare a prospectus that set out clearly the conditions of the subscription, including payment procedures, number of volumes, price per volume, paper quality, proposed date (or dates, if volumes were to be released separately) and typographical features. The prospectus itself was to be a specimen of the quality of production or was to be accompanied by a specimen page of the book.

Whilst it was obligatory for a prospectus to be prepared for a subscription book, the converse was not so, for many prospectuses appeared for books for over-the-counter sales, no doubt because of their general acceptance as a good means of making a book known and attractive to a potential purchaser.

It was required by law under the Ancien Régime that any material published be granted, first of all, an approval and permission for publication and, secondly, that at least one copy be lodged in the *dépôt légal*. Although many, if not most, of the copies appear not to have survived, it is possible, through registers and trade publications such as the *Journal de la Librairie*, to gain some idea of the extent of prospectus publication.

A considerable number have survived, in spite of the flimsiness of many of the prospectuses that were usually freely available as handouts and that were probably discarded once their immediate purpose had been achieved. A quick scanning through the catalogue of the Bibliothèque Nationale reveals that some

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have been accessioned in their own right and others have been bound in with the books they promote; a random set discovered in the Bibliothèque Nationale within the past few years has been sorted and catalogued; there are holdings in other libraries; some private collectors are adding to their own supply as others come onto the market... Their discovery is, however, at best, a game of luck and chance.

The circumstances of the acquisition of the recent additions to the Monash collection exemplify the ephemeral nature of the prospectuses themselves and the hazards of the whole business, for it was "almost by chance" that Monash heard of the collection of ten bound volumes then held by Jonathan Hill, an antiquarian bookseller in New York City. It appears that they have come also from several different now unknown sources.⁵

It is not without its own irony that the realisation that the two prospectuses reproduced in this issue were in that collection⁶ came about by a chance comment during a general discussion on the survival of prospectuses, nor that these same two items are of unique bibliographical interest.

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Notes

1. See *Monash Review*, February, 1986, p. 1.
2. G.A. Glaister, *Glossary of the Book*, London. Allen and Unwin Ltd, 1960, p. 331.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 138.
4. S.A. Steinberg, *Five Hundred Years of Printing*, Penguin Books, 3rd edition, 1974, p. 133.
5. *Monash Review*, February, 1986, p. 1.
6. Now stored in the Rare Book Room of Monash University Library.