

The Royal Society of Edinburgh

The Luther Quincentenary: Print and the Reformation. A Drama in Three Acts

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Report by Jeremy Watson

It could be unwise to draw parallels between Martin Luther, the “father” of the Protestant Reformation, and Donald Trump, the current incumbent of the Oval Office. However, Professor Andrew Pettegree did not shy away from exploring their similar methods of communicating with mass audiences. It worked for Luther in the 16th Century, when he decided his works should be printed in German, rather than the Latin in which most European texts had previously been published. The *New York Times* may have tried to prove that President Trump’s tweets were untrue, but that missed the point: Trump was reaching his intended audience quickly and effectively. On the quincentenary of Luther posting his “95 Theses” on the door of the castle chapel in Wittenberg, it is clear to see that although few doubted Luther’s veracity, he was using the same techniques to get his message across.

The welcome side effect was that the publishing industry in Europe (which had, at the time, lost its way, Professor Pettegree said) was given a second chance to succeed. Much of that was down to the German priest and the drama of what happened after his entrance onto the scene, played out in three acts: the arrival of “Brand Luther” and the rise of Wittenberg, a small German town, into a printing powerhouse; the dangerous problems caused in some countries to his converts by the high visibility of his “heretical” tracts; and the way his ideas eventually became mainstream in countries such as the Netherlands, liberated from Spanish rule. Vital to all of this, and to the survival of the medieval printing industry, were changes to the design of books, which made them more accessible to a much bigger market.

Before Luther emerged as a force to be reckoned with, printers had mastered the technical aspects of their trade, but their output was very conservative, with often poorly-designed front covers and monoblock, un-illustrated text. The Catholic Church had kept many in business, but by the end of the 15th Century the trade was in the doldrums. Copies, mainly in Latin, were piling up, unbought and unread, and something needed to change if the industry was to survive. Gutenberg, producers of the famous Bible, had gone bankrupt and much of the industry had disappeared. Luther provided salvation, with his shorter, simpler books that were, crucially, printed in German rather than in Latin, the language of the intellectual classes, Professor Pettegree explained. The mass market was opening up; printers could look forward to a more sustainable future.

Nowhere was this seen better than in Wittenberg. In 1502, small printing houses were producing around nine books a year. Thanks to the “Brand Luther” effect, between 1517 and 1546 that rose to 90 books a year and many millions of copies. “This vast blossoming was entirely due to Martin Luther,” Professor Pettegree insisted. And the effect was enduring, even after his death. Wittenberg became a wealthy town, with some of the stone mansions still evident today that were owned by 16th-Century print barons.

Why did this happen, Professor Pettegree asked? One reason was that Luther’s powerful and prolific writing was exactly what publishers wanted. He produced 65 original works, many no longer than eight pages and written in German, a format that spread quickly beyond Wittenberg to Germany’s other main publishing cities. This was the new model of publishing. Previously, books had to be printed in one place and then laboriously and expensively distributed around Europe. Luther’s pamphlets could be easily reproduced in multiple locations in a couple of days and sold out within a week. He became the most published author in history, eclipsing Cicero and Erasmus, and a significant public figure. However, he could not have done it alone.

Publishers who were prepared to be innovative – and sniffed the potential profits – were prepared to collaborate with him, with new front cover designs and multiple typefaces that made the German texts easier to read and absorb. The cheap versions were even bought by some citizens so that they could be read to them. The woodcut designs of Lucas Cranach, the Leipzig court painter, revolutionised the design of Luther’s now distinctive front covers. “Brand Luther”, with its instantly recognisable products, was now in full swing. At the time of his death in 1546, his home town of Wittenberg, and the publishing industry, had been transformed by his efforts.

His legacy, however, was also spreading rapidly in other countries that were still dominated by Catholicism, such as England, France and the Netherlands. Luther’s quarrel with monarchs such as Henry VIII meant there were clear dangers to those who wanted to follow his Protestant teachings, as his works, because of the innovative design work that helped make them popular, were recognisable. That put both printers and publishers in those countries in peril, if they wanted to sell “Brand Luther”, and the solution was to disguise his handiwork. Flying against tradition, the books were printed with no decorative features, so the copies could not be traced back to the print works. The deception worked and Luther’s work continued to sell, even in places where it was banned.

The Netherlands of the late 16th Century had places of refuge – such as Emden – where Protestantism, in the form of Calvinism, was taking root and gradually usurping the Spanish-inspired Catholicism. Here, the deception used by publishers was not as pronounced, as the choice of typefaces used was instantly recognisable to those who sought the books out. The authorities of the day, for their part, with religious freedoms growing, largely turned a blind eye. From 1563 onwards, with Spanish influence waning, the Netherlands was on its way to becoming a great State, with the publishing industry – through the printing and publishing of Calvinist works – playing a significant part in this transformation.

The Dutch readers of the 16th and 17th Centuries favoured religious literature of “quiet devotion.” Many of the books of the time, however, have not survived, Professor Pettegree said, and one project he is working on is how to rediscover them. Work at the University of St Andrews is now

focusing on tracking down what books existed, through careful study of book auctions of the age, newspaper advertisements and publishers' stock catalogues. What has become clear is that although there was a "mass" of literature, it has survived poorly. One example is the works of Gellius de Bouma (1490–1564), a Protestant Minister from Emden, whose books enjoyed considerable popularity. Initially, records of de Bouma's literary career were scant. However, careful study of historic data has yielded that far from being a peripheral figure, de Bouma was a publishing sensation, whose works were published in ten cities in multiple formats. Why have so few survived? The answer, Professor Pettegree argued, is that de Bouma's books were cheap and for everyday use in the home. They became tatty and were thrown away – and not passed down through the generations as were the more expensive, but perhaps less well read, books that have survived the passage of time. It is a paradox of the great age of print, Professor Pettegree asserted, that it is the books that have not been read that have survived in our great libraries.

He concluded that the publishing industry survived and flourished after 1470 because of its energy and its ability to adapt to new phenomena, such as Martin Luther and the Reformation. But the relationship was mutually beneficial. Print encouraged the Reformation, but it also gave the industry a sustainable future.

Q&A

Q: In terms of compiling lists of lost books, would this be very difficult without the internet?

A: Yes. It would be extremely difficult without digital resources. In my research, I have had physically to visit hundreds of libraries. Now we have digital access. One problem is private collections, but if we appeal for help through the internet, then perhaps private copies will come to light.

Q: Did printing in the vernacular in Luther's time help to increase the publishing base?

A: Yes. Previously, two thirds of publications were printed in Latin. Martin Luther's success shows the importance of using the vernacular, which allowed him to speak to a much wider German audience. But his style of brevity also played a big part. He understood the power of brevity. His sermons could be read aloud in ten minutes. His ability to effectively reach his audience quickly played a big part in the Reformation.

Q: Did increasing levels of literacy also play a part?

A: A century previously, there had been a big step forward in literacy. It was originally the province of the religious and learned classes, but as the trading classes grew, there was a need for more people to be able to read and write. The brevity of Luther's works helped but, because they were so short and inexpensive, even those who were not literate bought them so that someone else could read the pamphlets to them.

Q: You mentioned England, France and the Low Countries in the 16th Century. What was happening in Scotland at the time?

A: Scotland was late to the feast, as at that time it was more a subsidiary of England. Only 300 books were published here in the 16th Century. But things improved through trading links with the Dutch Republic and it eventually became a Calvinist country.

The Vote of Thanks was offered by Professor Jocelyn Bell Burnell, President of the RSE.

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