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A CASE STUDY

Opening New Worlds to Researchers with Early Modern Historical Materials

Professor Andrew Pettegree is a renowned British historian and a leading expert on Europe during the Reformation. He holds a professorship at St Andrews University, the oldest of four ancient universities in Scotland, where he is the director of the Universal Short Title Catalog (USTC). The USTC is a collective database of all titles published in Europe between the invention of printing and the end of the 16th century.

ProQuest and the USTC are collaborating to improve access and discoverability of materials essential to scholarship of the early modern era. Prof. Pettegree discussed this relationship, challenges in the study of early print books, and the future of scholarship in this area.

Print ignited a new era in European history

The advent of printing, according to Prof Pettegree, is one of the “foundational technical developments” to distinguish the medieval period from the early modern era. Before the invention of printing, books had to be hand-copied, one by one.

“A time-consuming retail process,” Prof. Pettegree pointed out.

Printing enabled the quick production of multiple copies, not just of books, but of pamphlets and ephemera. As a result, people gained access to a proliferation of information, inspiring an interest in a broader scope of affairs, and inviting a broader exchange of ideas. The study of early European print materials lends critical insight into a tremendous cultural shift that rippled around the globe.

“This is the period when Europe began looking outward to the world,” Prof. Pettegree said. “Political engagement became commonplace. This is when society started to involve a far greater number of people in political decision making.”



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Making Early Modern historical materials available to a world of researchers

For serious scholars of Early Modern books, research into the pivotal development of print and its impact is often a sensory experience.

"You can't understand these books unless you also go and see them," Prof. Pettegree explained. "You have to go Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris where you can read a bunch of original pamphlets from 1590. You'll notice they are printed on a terrible paper. And it's a terrible paper because at the time, Paris was under siege and they couldn't bring in new supplies of paper.

"So you're getting a bit of social history right there, just by touching it."

That's why, Prof. Pettegree insisted, that digitized reproductions will never completely replace the important "physical experience of handling the books."

But, with this in mind, Prof. Pettegree added that he and his colleagues have always recognized that for "a researcher in, for instance, Oregon, to find that a single copy of rare, sought-after book exists in Vienna, is exciting. It's also a very expensive discovery."

Digitization of early modern books and ephemera revolutionized scholarship by enabling around-the-clock access to rare material that was once limited to those with the time and budget to visit far-flung places. And digital versions of these materials are in high demand, Prof. Pettegree attested. The USTC has approximately 300 unique users a day, and the majority of them come seeking digital editions of early print materials.

According to the professor, "the most important benefit of ProQuest's Early European Books (EEB) is giving users in libraries access to books which otherwise they'd have to travel to see."

Surprisingly, digital access to books doesn't deter users from wanting to work with original materials. It has the opposite effect, sparking scholars' desire to go and see them, Prof. Pettegree explained.

"You'd think that researchers would use the digital image as a surrogate but they don't. People want, after they've used the digital edition, to also go and experience the book as a physical object."

The advantages of digitization for in-depth scholarship

An essential component in the creation of the USTC, Prof. Pettegree explained, has been to include, wherever possible, digital copies of the titles in their collection. "This is a major facility that we offer our users. We are a one stop shop, not only for bibliographical information but for attached digital copies.

So obviously we've always been on the lookout for publishers or libraries who have been digitizing their books."

Prof. Pettegree said, in comparing ProQuest Early European Books with other subscription services, "[ProQuest] offers a much, much higher quality of filming, which gives the user a real sense of the original book, the quality of the paper and the printing. The manuscript notations are also very much more legible."

ProQuest's digitization of these materials is enriched with special features such as maps, charts and marginalia, delivered in harmony with USTC's metadata. "Book historians and bibliographers are amongst some of the most meticulous scholars and it matters to them that a book is accurately and fully described. So the better the description, the more satisfactory the results. So these features are critical from that point of view."



Additionally, Prof. Pettegree points out, “The more data you have, the more search tools you can build.”

For example, a historian researching a book by Machiavelli will want to know who printed it, but also what other materials were printed by the same printer that year. “Unless you have full metadata, you cannot build those sorts of searches,” he said.

“The other unique thing we do is allow our researchers to search by format. They could search for folios, for quartos, for octoavos, for a broadsheet. Broadsheets are an absolutely fascinating part of the print world, but they have been very difficult to study because even the original library catalogs don’t give you this search facility.”

This combination of innovative features, along with a mutual commitment to expanding access to early print materials, set the foundation for a continuing and evolving partnership between USTC and ProQuest.

“[ProQuest Early European Books] is a developing resource,” Prof. Pettegree noted, “which is going to ultimately to have a sensational impact on our understanding of the economic, social, political, religious and literary culture of the early modern period.”

– Prof. Andrew Pettegree

Ongoing work in the documentation of early print materials

The USTC aims to offer a complete bibliographic survey of all books published in the first stage of print – defined as everything published up to and including the year 1600. The project has already documented 365,000 editions from 1.3 million surviving copies worldwide.

Recently, they’ve begun to extend their efforts into the 17th century.

This endeavor will bring the potential number of titles encompassed by the USTC database to 700,000 editions published before 1651 from 4 million surviving copies, scattered across more than 600 libraries worldwide.

“Our intention is that, with ProQuest’s help, we extend our collection to include materials through the end of the 17th century,” said Prof. Pettegree. “In the course of doing so, we will begin to document the enormous number of books which are known to have been printed, but are without a single known surviving copy in existence today.”

Incorporating lost books into a collection, he explained, “is the ‘Holy Grail’ of bibliography.”

Prof. Pettegree and his colleagues have been conducting a survey of publications from the 17th century Dutch Republic. The established bibliography, the Short-Title Catalogue of The Netherlands, listed a total of 70,000 editions published during the 17th century.

“We now estimate that we can authoritatively document 380,000 editions,” Prof. Pettegree said. “The incorporation of these lost editions is truly going to revolutionize what we know about the early modern print world.”

Because the USTC’s “universal grasp” of what books are out there, the organization is able to direct ProQuest to unique surviving copies of books and to libraries that hold large but often scarcely known holdings, so that these can be added to the Early European Books collection.



ProQuest is a proud partner of the Universal Short Title Catalogue (USTC) of the University of St. Andrews, Scotland. Together, our two organizations will select future collections for Early European Books; in addition, USTC will provide enhanced metadata to improve access and discoverability within and across the collections.

The value of metadata vs. open-access material

- A single place to search the most comprehensive collection of Early Modern Books.
- EEB and its enhanced metadata is in synch with the prestigious USTC roadmap that lists all European books from the Early Modern Period.
- The USTC subject classification feature facilitates a search according to themes in English across multiple language texts.
- Our editors have captured searchable special features such as marginalia, coat of arms, maps, charts and illustrations.
- The page images can be viewed in greater detail using Zoomify technology.
- Soon, an exact author search will identify the millions of contributors to creative works, including writers, artists, researchers, producers, publishers and more. Plus, scattermap technology will further enhance research.



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