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The Consortium of European Research Libraries and the Hand Press Book database (full text)

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[segretario del Consortium of European Research Libraries - CERL]

In November 2004, the Consortium of European Research Libraries (CERL) will celebrate the tenth anniversary of its creation in 1994. The original conception of the Consortium arose from the first International Conference on Retrospective Cataloguing in Europe which was held in Munich in November 1990. The Bayerische Staatsbibliothek and the British Library were two of the major sponsors of the initiative, which took place against the background of the sudden collapse of the post-war divisions of Europe and the hope for a new cultural dispensation in Europe in which new perspectives could arise. In the ten years since its creation, CERL has seen its membership expand to include major libraries from all over Europe. There are now member libraries in sixteen different countries, including Russia and the United States with a strong representation from Italy.

It was hoped that scholars within the field of the history of the book could once again hope to have access to historical printed materials from libraries in all countries of Europe, East and West. To this end, a database was planned which would offer records from many participating libraries for books printed in the period of the hand press. It was decided to call it the Hand Press Book database and to limit its scope to the period from the beginning of printing in the mid-fifteenth century with the year 1830 as an approximate terminal year, that is to say before the advent of widespread industrialisation in the mid-nineteenth century.

The Hand Press Book database (HPB) came alive in 1997. It is currently hosted by RLG (the Research Libraries Group) in California and is accessible via the internet to all members of CERL and to members of the public through the reading rooms of member libraries. Since 1997, the HPB has continued to grow as new files are added every year. By the end of 2004, when RLG has moved the database to its new computer system, the Hand Press Book database should have nearly two million records; the figure in June 2004 is already over 1,6 million. Files have been contributed by 19 libraries or projects from 13 different countries.

The technical requirements for a database of early-printed books are not the same as for a catalogue of modern monographs. As well as the expected searchable fields such as author, title and date, users of the Hand Press Book database require access to additional specialised indexes to make full use of the information contained in the database. For example, a printing historian might want to research books printed in a particular town or by a particular printer or within a particular range of dates (or a combination of all of these). This means that the HPB must provide a number of additional indexes which are not usually found in on-line databases. In addition to searching the whole imprint, the HPB also offers searches of "Imprint town" as well as "Imprint word" to facilitate this sort of research, together with a wide range of limits for date searching and searches by language.

Although the HPB offers additional indexing for the specialist information needed for searches on records for early printed books, there are also special sets of problems associated with retrieving records from a database whose contents have been contributed by libraries in different language communities. So far, the HPB has records from 12 different language communities: Croatian, Dutch, English, French, German, Hungarian, Italian, Polish, Russian, Slovenian, Spanish and Swedish. Of course this does not (or should not) affect the basic transcription of title-page and imprint information, which should record what is found in the book in question. However, the notes within a record will be written in the language of the originating library. For example, a record for a book in Italian from an English library will have notes in English. This inevitably poses problems when attempting to search the notes fields: if Italian search terms are used, a record with notes in English will not be retrieved.

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HPB record for an Italian book in an English library

A more fundamental problem arises when searching for personal names: the records in the HPB follow the national conventions of the originating libraries. The classical Latin historian known in English as "Livy" was "Titus Livius" in Latin, is entered as "Tite-Live" in French catalogues and "Livius", "Titus Livius" or "Livio" in other languages. There is a similar problem in searching for place names: if the imprint reads "Venetiis", the cataloguer may have included a normalised spelling as "Venice", "Venise", "Venezia", "Venedig", or some other national form. As the HPB database grew in size, CERL became more and more conscious of the need to find a means to help users to get the best results for their searches on data items of this sort. The obvious answer might have been to create a CERL authority file for names and places and to have all records converted to comply with its recommendations. This would have made the work of file preparation far too expensive and in any case it would have been impossible to elaborate a suitable set of standard forms which would have satisfied all competing national requirements: one only has to think about towns such as Trieste or Strasbourg, which were not in their present countries during the hand-press period, or to consider works written by citizens of the world such as Erasmus (Erasme, Erasmo, etc.) or Voltaire. In a browse list of names, this problem is often not serious, but for keyword searching it may prevent the user finding all the records relevant to the search.

CERL's answer to this problem of the multi-lingualism of the HPB database was to create another database which would provide a key to all the competing national forms of names. This tool, called the "CERL Thesaurus" (www.cerl.org/Thesaurus/thesaurus.htm), is intended to facilitate searching for place names, authors' names, imprint names (i.e. names of printers and publishers) and provenance names (names of previous owners). The first element to be completed was place names, as this was a relatively limited problem. It is now possible to search the CERL Thesaurus and find a list of variant forms for any imprint place name. This is a useful finding aid in its own right. For example, if you have a book with the imprint "Bononiae", a search of the Thesaurus will tell you that this is the Latin name for Bologna and will also give a list of 20 additional forms of the place name. For some places, the Thesaurus will additionally offer lists of printers and publishers who are recorded as working there, though names for Italian printers have not yet been entered. For Rouen ("Rotomagus" in Latin), the Thesaurus shows 30 variant forms and a hyperlink "Include imprint names" which reveals the names of over 100 people who are recorded as producing books in Rouen, each name itself being a hyperlink giving bio-bibliographical information.

[printer name main entries]

Angier, Michel (14..-1566?)

Sources: <Frère> <Delisle, Livres imprimés à
Caen> <Lepreux, Normandie> <Rép. 16 s.>

[notes]

A souvent travaillé en association, notamment avec Richard Rogerie à Morlaix, Jean Macé à Caen et à Rennes, Richard Macé à Rouen, son neveu Girard Angier à Caen

Bonum est sperare in Domino

Devise(s) : Spes nostra in Domino

Libraire juré et relieur de l'université de Caen

[places]

Caen (1505?-1548?)

Près le pont Saint-Pierre

Près du couvent des Cordeliers (et des Grandes Écoles)

Morlaix (1501-1505)

Grand-rue

Rouen (1508-1515)

Près du pont

Saint-Brieuc (1505?)

Au portail de la Grande église

[variant forms]

Anger, Michel

Entry for Michel Angier, Rouen, in the CERL Thesaurus

It is now possible to use the CERL Thesaurus from within the Hand Press Book database to assist in searching for names with multi-lingual forms. Only place names are fully operational at present but work is going on to implement personal names of authors and printers. Assisted searching with the Thesaurus will eventually provide a solution to problems such as the "Tito Livio" case mentioned above. The Thesaurus already contains the following provisional entry, which would allow all the variant forms of name to be searched simultaneously, if desired.

[personal name main entries]

Livius, T. (59 v.Chr.-17 n.Chr.)

Sources: <De Roomsche historie oft gesten. / By Titus

Livius, 1585>

<Histoire romaine. / By Tite Live., 1740>

[variant forms]

Live, Tite-

Livio, Tito

Livius

Livius, Titus

Livy

Tite-Live

Entry in the CERL Thesaurus for "Tito Livio", showing national variant forms of name

CERL has plans to extend its focus from the hand press book to manuscripts, believing that there is a growing scholarly interest in researching the interplay between written and printed distribution of texts, not only at the time of the beginnings of printing but later, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The Consortium is currently developing an experimental web-based tool to provide distributed searching of on-line catalogues of manuscript materials, with an option to add a simultaneous search of the Hand Press Book database. The CERL Thesaurus will again play an important role in this new project.

Each year CERL has an annual general meeting at which the members of the Consortium take decisions about future policy and financial strategy and also an annual seminar on a chosen topic, usually relating to advances in catalogue work for early-printed books, with speakers both from within the Consortium and invited by the library which hosts that year's meeting. Recent topics have included "Books beyond Frontiers: the need for international collaboration in national retrospective bibliography" (The Hague, 2002), "European cultural heritage in the digital age: creation, access and preservation" (St. Petersburg, 2003). The papers are later published in print form.

The 2004 Annual Seminar will be on "Books and their owners: provenance information and the European cultural heritage" (12 November 2004, National Library of Scotland). The following day will be the occasion when CERL will celebrate its tenth anniversary during its Annual Meeting which will also take place at the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh.

Further information about CERL can be found on its web site or by contacting CERL's London office:

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