

Geneva printing

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

Printing was the great industry of Calvinist Geneva. Before the Reformation, the city had a few workshops. The arrival of refugee printers, from the 1540s and above all the 1550s, transformed the sector. Masters such as Robert Estienne, Jean Crespin and Conrad Badius set up their presses in the city.¹ In the 1550s and 1560s, Geneva became one of the principal centres of Protestant publishing in the French language.²

Geneva's output included Bibles, New Testaments, psalters, catechisms, the works of Calvin and other reformers, works of controversy, scholarly books and legal texts. The Geneva Psalter, which set to music the psalms translated by Clément Marot and Théodore de Bèze, achieved a considerable circulation.³ A large part of this output was destined for the French market, where it often circulated clandestinely.

Printing is a capital-intensive industry. It requires presses, type, paper, ink and a skilled workforce. Paper accounted for a significant share of costs. Printers had to advance these expenses well before selling their books, which presupposed credit, partners and distribution networks. Large editions were often financed by partnerships bringing together printers, booksellers and financial backers. Printing was thus, in Geneva, one of the first proving grounds of modern merchant capitalism.

The book trade was subject to the control of the Council, which authorised printings and supervised their content. This censorship was intended to preserve orthodoxy and to avoid diplomatic incidents. It also created a regulatory framework that printers had to build into their strategies.

For the financial centre, printing left several legacies. It trained generations of entrepreneurs accustomed to credit, to exporting and to risk. It strengthened Geneva's links with the European markets. It made the city a centre of written culture in the French language, which prepared the role of language that Part J will analyse. Finally, it contributed to Geneva's

intellectual reputation, which would attract scholars, students and wealthy families.

1 Notes

1. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Estienne, Robert”: printer to the king, took refuge in Geneva in 1550, bourgeois in 1556, died 7 September 1559; Wikipedia (en), “Jean Crespin”: settled in Geneva in 1548 with a printing works, bourgeois in 1555, Livre des martyrs (Geneva, 1554). ↩
2. Réformés.ch, “L’imprimerie, une économie majeure pour Genève” (August 2017), and Regards protestants, “À Genève, le boom de l’imprimerie” (Michel Grandjean): fewer than five books a year before 1540, 20 titles in 1544, 75 in 1561; more than 200 printers, around 1 per cent of a population of 20,000, and 34 presses, printing ranking among the three leading industries of the city; two thirds of output in French; reference bibliography by Jean-François Gilmont. Dictionnaire historique de la Suisse (DHS), art. “Imprimerie” (Tschudin): Jean Girard printed Calvin; the refugees Jean Crespin, Conrad Badius and Robert Estienne secured Geneva’s international renown. ↩
3. Wikipédia (fr), art. “Psautier de Genève”: 150 psalms, of which 49 translated by Clément Marot and 101 by Théodore de Bèze (completed in 1561), 152 pieces set to 125 melodies (Loys Bourgeois, then “Maistre Pierre”, probably Pierre Davantès); ten-year royal privilege granted to the Lyon merchant-publisher Antoine Vincent; 27,400 copies already printed in Geneva in 1562 according to the archives, total production estimated “between 50 and 80,000 copies”, 32 editions dated 1562 recorded in Caen, Geneva, Lyon, Paris and Rouen. ↩

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