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Cultural Diffusion: Encounters and Legacies
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8. Booksellers and the Diffusion of European Culture in New Spain During the Sixteenth Century

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Introduction
As a bookseller of Latin Americana, the development of the book trade in the Americas was an intriguing choice for this paper. The trade was an integral part of an enormous effort to give the subjugated inhabitants of the newly conquered lands European institutions, culture, religion, and language to ultimately transform them into citizens of the Spanish Crown. Such efforts in the first decades after the conquest to Christianize the aborigines, to teach them Latin and Castilian and the arts and crafts of European civilization, required books—many of which stimulated the Iberian/Indies book trade during the sixteenth century. This trade was instrumental to the transfer of European culture to the New World, and the evidence of a successful transfer is still clear today, four centuries later.

In the early 1500s, booksellers on both sides of the Atlantic, although few at first, prospered by supplying “romances of chivalry” as well as evangelical materials in surprising quantities to the conquest generation. As the century progressed, the demand increased, as did the changes in the book titles requested. By 1600, the book trade was well established. During the preceding years, a large increase in the bureaucracy, clergy, university, and literate classes engendered an ever-increasing need for books even as the popularity of “romance” books waned. Unfortunately, there are scanty records for the books exported from Spain. Things such as fire, insects, and humidity insured that, until 1583, few surviving inventories recorded the nature and quantity of the books shipped.

This paper concentrates on sixteenth-century New Spain, it being the primary arena of the conquest, the birthing of the European/American book trade, and the location of the first printing press in the Americas. In addition to the booksellers as merchants, some attention will be given to the booksellers as bibliographers, although a product of a later period.
The Early Decades of the Sixteenth Century

The discovery, conquest, and occupation of the Americas by European soldiers of fortune included individuals who anticipated economic opportunities in the commerce between the new colonies and the European motherlands. The book trade offered one of those opportunities. The development of printing technology in the fifteenth century meant that the costly, scarce, and inconstant manuscripts—then the only writings extant—were mostly superseded by a more accessible and textually consistent format. Through the book, the transmission of ideas, knowledge, and culture was greatly facilitated, as were the means of administrative control. Fortunately for the Spanish Crown, the new invention practically coincided with the discoveries and conquests in the Americas, which it also influenced and memorialized. The transfer of Hispanic culture proceeded.

Early in the Conquest period, romances of chivalry (or libros de caballerías) accompanied the invaders and, for some time, were in great demand as they were stimulating, entertaining, and written in the vernacular. So, too, were works that aided the evangelization of the natives by the religious orders: grammars, dictionaries, basic readers, missals, bibles, and breviaries, among others. Also common were the prolix documents, which regulated the administration of church and crown in the conquered lands. Religious precepts and laws were generally written in Latin up until the mid-1700s as an alternative to Protestant writings in various national languages. Also, Latin provided a unifying language for the Catholic Church.

The early book importations were subject to restrictive measures to ensure preservation of Church doctrine and obedience to the Crown’s will. Regulatory laws were promulgated by various authorities to prohibit the importation of “profane” books which could corrupt morals. The advent of the Inquisition in 1570 in the Indies aimed to further prohibit “profane” or fantasy fiction books being exported from Europe, subjecting them to an index of prohibited titles. But the resultant restrictions were largely ineffective as the Inquisition was primarily interested in prohibiting only those listed titles that threatened church doctrines. Curiously, the Spanish Crown remained largely indifferent to vigorous enforcement of the existing laws against most “profane” works. Their enormous popularity may have contributed to that policy. In addition, booksellers both in Europe and in the Indies found ways to evade most restrictions.

At first, the demand for books was too small to allow the first generation of booksellers in New Spain to devote themselves exclusively to the trade. They required additional means of support. Consequently, some were employed in the slave trade, the bureaucracy, agriculture, or as merchants.

The earliest record of books shipped to the Americas from Europe dates from 1501 when a number of religious titles were sent to a Franciscan friar. Several more shipments of the same nature arrived over the next few years. The quantity of the books imported to New Spain during the first decades is
unknown as the registration of titles and authors was not mandatory until 1550. One calculation has some 2,805 shipments, including books sent from Seville and Medina del Campo between 1504 and 1555. As stated previously, because of fire and other circumstances, registrations of ships’ cargos are rare before 1583; it is estimated that the number of such shipments could have reached four thousand in the same period.²

The selection of books imported in the early 1500s was influenced not only by popular demand but also by legal restrictions, safe transportation, inadequate capitalization, and delayed payment. Almost no documentation exists as to the size of the population who could read and/or had the means to purchase at that time. Nevertheless, the Conquistadores and their progeny were strongly affected by the almost mystical exaltation of adventure and romance set forth by the numerous imaginative novels or “romances of chivalry” that flowed from Spanish presses. Their appeal spread not only to New Spain but throughout Europe as well. They fired the imaginations of their readers and inspired a highly idealized concept of life in which strength, virtue, and passion overruled the most basic scientific facts, accepting avidly and uncritically the wildest extravagances. The Four Books of Amadis de Gaula, cited by Bernal Díaz de Castillo in his 1632 memoirs, was reprinted seventeen times during the sixteenth century; La Celestina and La vida de Lazarillo de Tormes were other titles that remained throughout the same century as the favorites of numerous readers.³

The immense popularity of the “romances” led to the laws of 1531, which prohibited their shipment as well as the shipment of other supposed profane titles. They were thought to be capable of wrongly influencing the Indian population (although the existence of numerous literate Indians is highly questionable, literates reading aloud to illiterates was not uncommon). The arrival in 1605–1606 of almost the entire first edition of Cervantes’ great Don Quijote that so humorously satirized the romances, plus the large importation of libros del picaro (picaresque fiction) finally diminished their popularity.

The New Generations of Booksellers

The first printing press in the Americas, that of Johan Cromberger, arrived in 1539 with a ten-year monopoly, allowing his firm to print and to sell books at a hundred percent profit. The new policy indicated the Crown’s awareness that there was a greater need for books in New Spain. It was not long before other printers and their presses arrived to fill the demand.⁴

As the century progressed and literacy expanded, the interest in “light literature”—secular nonfiction and belles-lettres—easily matched theological works. That the latter is still so numerous on convent and monastery library shelves probably reflects their lack of usage. Medicine was predominant among the science titles, but natural history, history, geography, and philosophy were also imported. Classic literary titles of antiquity in Latin and Greek as well as
masterpieces in verse such as *La Araucana* and the *Lusíadas* were ordered as well as works from printers throughout Europe, indicating the widening appeal of European publications in the Indies.  

Required licenses complicated the bookseller’s life. A list of titles to be shipped had to pass a censor of the Inquisition and gain approval for a license to make the voyage. Upon receiving the proper approval, the list then passed to the Casa de la Contratación, or House of Trade in Seville, for review. Lastly, a register was made of the cargo, and a copy given to the ship captain. The Inquisition inspected the cargo; such searches were called *visitas* and were carried on again by the Crown’s representatives at the port of destination, usually Veracruz in the case of Mexico. In addition to the red tape, there was the great expense in insuring the cargos, which were so necessary given the frequent loss of ships. That the Iberian booksellers persisted can only attest to profitability of the book trade.

The end of the Cromberger monopoly in the 1550s nurtured a new generation of printers and booksellers who mainly sold from shops near the Plaza Mayor or Zócalo in Mexico City. A good example of this is Alonso Losa.  

Losa was involved in the sale in 1576 of 121 titles totaling 341 volumes. He also sold another 1,190 volumes in the same year. The lists of titles included price and type of binding. It should be noted that few of the New Spain booksellers trafficked exclusively in books until the 1560s when Pedro Balli (Valli) and Juan Trevino arrived from Spain. Balli, like Cromberger, sold his own printings as well as those he imported. He was continuing the custom in Spain at that time, where it was the norm for printers to also sell books, and it was common for Spanish printers to marry into booksellers’ families or vice versa. The new generation of booksellers in New Spain was often unable to enjoy the prior generation’s access to capital, thus leaving the trade open to those from Spain with more capital who could devote themselves exclusively to the selling of books. This is evident in the number of newcomers to the trade who arrived in the last third of the sixteenth century.

As the number of New Spain booksellers and bookstores increased, so did the numbers of those in Spain and Europe who provided the books. Printers worked hard to fulfill the demands. Middlemen purchased larger quantities of books for exportation. Itinerant peddlers traveled back and forth, as did some Spanish booksellers who accompanied their books to the Americas, possibly to sell in the provinces before returning home. Due to the restrictive laws, most Spanish dealers worked out of Seville; however, the laws seemed to be more often broken than obeyed. Shipments of books varied from a few boxes to enough to carry more than a thousand volumes. One shipment in 1601 totaled some ten thousand volumes. Because of the great costs and risks associated with the book trade, it is logical to believe that only the large publishing and distributing concerns were involved in the larger consignments to merchants in
the Americas. In addition, books printed in New Spain were shipped in growing quantities to Europe. The book trade had grown up.

Of note is the failure of the Inquisition and House of Trade to enforce royal decrees banning “profane” literature not specifically listed on the Index of Prohibited Books. In fact, there seems to have been very little official opposition in the Casa de Contratación, to the dissemination of books to overseas possessions. The Crown issued various prohibitory regulations—probably to appease the Vatican—but looked the other way as to enforcement. The evidence puts a lie to the anti-Spanish propaganda that accused the Crown of erecting barriers against the Indies’ access to European ideas and culture.

In summation, “Spain established in an incredibly brief time, considering the transportation and communication facilities of the age, an extraordinary unity among the widely dispersed regions it occupied, a unity of customs, culture, and language which remains virtually intact to the present day. The printed books that poured into these areas in increasing quantities from the Conquest on contributed in no small measure to this unification of the Spanish American mind and spirit.”

The Bookseller as Bibliographer

In addition to the book trade, booksellers contributed greatly to the development of Latin American bibliography. Their catalogues and monographs were, and still are, excellent reference sources for bibliographical, historical, and biographical data. As one Spanish author explained, “bookseller catalogues are powerful bibliographic instruments, and the older the better, since they preserve for us the record of books no longer in existence, they illustrate the typography and give us useful information about the development of commerce.”

The vast majority of catalogues devoted to Spanish Americana and produced prior to the nineteenth century tended to be simple title lists. The relatively small size of the book market, and the lack of bibliographic expertise, precluded significant bookseller cataloguing. However, indices and the periodically required inventories of religious orders’ libraries contained valuable bibliographic information for scholars. Spanish scholars produced the earliest bibliographic works. The first that applied to the Americas as well as to Spain was that of Nicolás Antonio y Bernal. Published in 1672 and written in Latin, his Biblioteca hispana referred to many American authors and, in addition to the titles, provided the place and date of imprint as well as the physical dimensions.

The Epitomé de la biblioteca oriental i occidental náutica i geográfica by Antonio de León Pinelo is considered the first bibliography consisting solely of Americana. First published in Madrid in 1629 by Juan González, it was later augmented by Andrés González de Barcia Carballido y Zúñiga in 1737–1738.
Outstanding Spanish booksellers’ catalogues began to appear in the latter half of the nineteenth century. A good example is that of Pedro Salvá y Mallén, who published in Valencia, Spain in 1872 a superb two-volume catalogue of 4,040 titles: *Catálogo de la biblioteca de Salvá, escrito por...y enriquecido con la descripción de otras muchas obras, de sus ediciones, etc.*

The reference bible for the Latin Americanist, also the work of a bookseller, is the *Manual del librero hispano-americano* by Antonio Palau y Dulcet. The second edition, published in 1977, consists of twenty-seven volumes containing 381,897 titles. To date, several supplemental volumes have been published. The “Palau,” as it is popularly known, provides basic bibliographic information, occasional historical data, and values when available.

Juan José Eguiaraya Eguren was the first Mexican to write a bibliography of Mexican books. Only Volume One of his *Prólogos a la biblioteca mexicana*, Letters A–C, was published in 1755. The rest of the Latin manuscript is now at the University of Texas at Austin.

Of great importance to the Mexicanist is the *Biblioteca hispano americano septentrional* by José Mariano Beristáin de Souza, published in Mexico in 1819, as well as the works of Joaquín García Icazbalceta, especially *Bibliografía mexicana del siglo XVI*, 1886. Perhaps the greatest individual bibliographer of Latin Americana was José Toribio Medina who was at times a bookseller. His numerous erudite bibliographies, along with the many volumes of Palau, are essential reference tools. It is not unusual to find catalogue entries marked “not in Medina” or “not in Palau.”

There are many other booksellers who have contributed much to Iberian-American bibliographic knowledge through their catalogues and bibliographies. There are the Frenchmen: Eugene Boban, Alphonse Luis Pinart, Ch. Leclercq and Charles Etienne Brasseur. There are also the Vindel family and the Porrúa family, two Spanish families. Also contributing are the Englishmen: Henry Stevens and the firms of Bernard Quaritch and Maggs Bros. Additionally, there are Americans worth noting: Henry Harrise, Joseph Sabin, William Reese, David Szewczyk, Dorothy Sloan, H.P. Kraus, and Eberstadt & Sons.

The great number of bibliographies and catalogues by scholars and booksellers reflects the enormous production of books in the Americas and in Iberian Europe. It also signifies the importance of the bookseller in the diffusion of European culture. Their roles cannot be overstated nor can their contributions to our knowledge of the books integral to that diffusion be understated. It is an ongoing process and appears to be without end.

NOTES

1. Perhaps the most readable and extensive discussion of the sixteenth-century book trade can be found in Irving A. Leonard, *Books of the Brave* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1949). An excellent, more recent study is Carlos Alberto González Sánchez, *Los mundos del libro, medios de difusión de la cultura occidental en las Indias de los siglos*
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XVI y XVII (Seville: Universidad de Sevilla, 1999). See also Francisco Fernández del Castillo, Libros y libreros en el siglo XVI (México: Archivo General de la Nación, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1982); José Torre Revello, El libro, la imprenta y el periodismo en América durante la dominación española (New York: Burt Franklin reprint, 1973); and María del Pilar Gutiérrez Lorenzo, Coordinadora, Impresos y libros en la historia económica de México (Siglos XVI–XIX) (Guadalajara: Universidad de Guadalajara, 2007). For the first academic library in New Spain, see Miguel Mathes, Santa Cruz de Tlatelolco; la primera biblioteca académica de las Americas (Mexico: Sec. Relaciones Exteriores, 1982).

2. Torre Revello, El libro, la imprenta y el periodismo, 209.


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