

Sailors and Shelves: Renewing the Library at the Maritime Museum of British Columbia

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Article abstract

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Brittany V. VIS

ABSTRACT

This article examines the library collection at the Maritime Museum of British Columbia. It provides portraits of its collections and outlines their importance for maritime, genealogical, scholarly, and general interest researchers. As a little-known collection in an underfunded cultural institution, this library has not received the financial support it deserves and is thus confronting the deterioration of its artifacts. The museum board members and the collections manager have launched an initiative to fully catalogue and preserve the entire library. This article outlines their approach, which serves as an example for similar institutions.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article est consacré aux collections de la bibliothèque du Musée maritime de la Colombie-Britannique. Il en fait la description et souligne l'intérêt qu'elles présentent pour la recherche, universitaire ou non, en histoire maritime et en généalogie, entre autres disciplines. Dépositaire de collections trop peu connues, au sein d'une institution culturelle sous-financée, la bibliothèque n'a pas reçu, au cours des dernières années, le soutien financier qu'elle méritait et qui aurait permis de freiner la détérioration des objets et documents qu'on y trouve. Les membres du conseil d'administration du Musée ainsi que la responsable des collections ont néanmoins entrepris de faire cataloguer tout le contenu de la bibliothèque et d'en assurer la pleine conservation. Cet article présente leur démarche, dont pourraient vouloir s'inspirer des institutions similaires.

The Maritime Museum of British Columbia (BC) houses unique items relating to the maritime history of Canada's Pacific Northwest. One of the museum's richest collections is its library, which contains a variety of rare books, periodicals, and photographs related to BC maritime history. The library's Special Collections room contains valuable books that date back to the 1700s, but these books have not been adequately stored. These materials have therefore suffered a steady deterioration over the past 50 years. This deterioration has not been caused by lack of care, but by a lack of available funding for these types of cultural institutions. Canada's meagre support for such collections makes book preservation extremely difficult for small libraries. However, with the help of generous donors and a partnership with the Greater Victoria Public Library, the Maritime Museum of BC will be able to restore its library and make it more accessible for its patrons. The partnership with the Greater Victoria Public Library is still being developed but ideally it will oversee the catalogue being made available online in an open-source, searchable format, and will involve promotion for the unique resources available in the library at the Maritime Museum of BC. In the meantime, this article will provide a portrait of the library's collections, outlining the museum's library preservation strategies for the benefit of similar institutions.

Maritime Culture as a Part of Canadian Identity

Maritime culture is deeply embedded in Canadian identity. Our country's colonial development depended on maritime trade and culture, and the country's waterways have been used as trade routes for thousands of years. Today, we uphold our strong maritime tradition with museums and heritage sites, and celebrate it with maritime festivals. Furthermore, our country's researchers have established maritime research collectives, such as the Canadian Nautical Research Society which publishes a peer-reviewed journal, to critically probe this identity-forming part of our history¹.

The multitude of maritime cultural institutions across Canada exemplifies the importance of maritime history for our national self-image. In addition to the Maritime Museum of BC, other examples of maritime-specific museums include the Vancouver Maritime Museum, the Marine Museum of the Great Lakes, the Musée de la Mer on the Magdalen Islands and the

Maritime Museum of the Atlantic. These geographically focused institutions contribute to the multi-faceted story of Canadian maritime history. Even institutions that are not solely focused on maritime history will include exhibits relating to Canada's nautical culture. For example, at the Royal BC Museum, visitors can "[e]xplore a replica of the stern section of Captain George Vancouver's ship HMS *Discovery*" and walk through a display of BC fishery industry development².

These museums are complemented by hundreds of heritage sites, including fur-trading forts, navy ports, and docked seasoned ships. At Fort Rodd Hill visitors can discover the xixth coast artillery fort built "to defend Victoria and the Esquimalt Naval Base"³. In Halifax, visitors of the HMCS *Sackville* can walk through a World War II navy corvette. Other examples of heritage sites and seasoned boats include the HMCS (Her Majesty's Canadian Ship) *Haida* National Historic Site in Hamilton, the Nancy Island Historic Site in Wasaga Beach, Ontario, the Cartier-Brébeuf National Historical Park in Quebec City, and the Halifax Citadel National Historic Site.

Canadians celebrate maritime culture during various festivals. The Classic Boat Festival in Victoria, BC runs every Labour Day weekend. Similarly Mahone Bay, Nova Scotia hosts a Classic Boat Festival every summer, while Quebec hosts la Fête des chants marins de Saint-Jean-Port-Joli. These festivals demonstrate the commitment of Canadians to commemorate their maritime heritage.

The Maritime Museum of BC is participating in this long tradition of maritime culture. Its stated purpose is to "promote and preserve [British Columbia's] maritime experience and heritage and to engage people with this ongoing story"⁴. It opened in 1955 as a naval museum in Esquimalt, BC, and subsequently became a non-profit society. In 1965 it moved to its current location in Bastion Square, downtown Victoria, in the former Supreme Court building erected in 1889. After the move, it expanded from its naval focus to include artifacts pertaining to all maritime work and leisure activities. The museum is currently run by six employees, seven board members, 15 trustees, and over 40 volunteers. It hosts gallery tours, educational programs for children and school groups, and various community events such as lecture series. The most recent of these discusses

the Canadian Coast Guard. This mix of programs and events attract all ages to the museum and helps keep maritime culture alive in Victoria.

Like most museums, the Maritime Museum of BC has been facing financial difficulties due to a lack of funding⁵. That the museum is located in a heritage building, however, makes renovations and technology upgrades especially difficult. Thematic focus can also be difficult to achieve. For example, in addition to the nautical materials, the museum building features the original provincial courtroom and the oldest operating birdcage elevator in North America. The building is also famous for being the most haunted place in Victoria. In a *Times Colonist* newspaper article from the 1990s, Patrick Murphy states that “the museum is crowded in its Bastion Square facilities and wants a waterfront site to allow more exhibits. Currently, just two per cent of the material is on display⁶”. The museum is still facing the same issues regarding space and function. Attempts have been made to move the museum to a new location but so far to no success.

The issues regarding space in particular have been detrimental to the library collection which continues to grow from incoming donations. Because of this, research has been limited and the library has not been able to reach its full potential as a strong research institution. The museum’s library is one of Canada’s largest collections of nautical archives. Though it is not currently in the best condition, the on-going initiative will soon have the library ready to lend itself to scholarly maritime studies.

Maritime History as a Scholarly Discipline

Maritime history is a broad, interdisciplinary, and relatively new field. Prior to the XXth century, the various aspects of maritime history appear to have been studied as sub-fields in other disciplines. It was not until post-World War II that maritime history started to be seen as an individual discipline; even more recently, “in 2008, the American Historical Association recognized maritime history among its taxonomy of specializations for the first time⁷”. The discipline has evolved from a narrow purpose to a broad range of topics that includes everything from naval warfare to ship architecture. In his article “Maritime History Today”, John B. Hattendorf, American naval historian, outlines the main streams of maritime studies:

The traditional themes for maritime history developed around three separate and isolated subjects: the history of maritime exploration, naval warfare, and economic affairs (shipbuilding, overseas trade, and commercial fishing). [...] Traditional maritime history had little to say about social and cultural matters, which appeared mainly in biographies of naval commanders. The narrow emphasis on national perspectives of naval warfare or isolated aspects of economic history contributed to the field's marginalization during the mid-twentieth century, as the broader discipline turned increasingly toward social and cultural history. Although the subject remained active at museums and in specialist education within the maritime profession, maritime history did not keep pace with developments elsewhere in academia⁸.

He then states that each subspecialty of maritime history has a “connection to an established discipline or distant field [which] helps to define it, while the traits it shares with other maritime matters interrelate and extend back to events on shore⁹”. This “new maritime history”, as he calls it, is interdisciplinary and “probes social and cultural life¹⁰”. The Maritime Museum of BC is largely interested in this new cultural approach of maritime studies and focuses on personal stories.

British historian Andrew D. Lambert has also discovered this shift in maritime historical studies. Lambert sees the current focus of maritime history to be cultural and praises this as encouraging “fresh approaches to [the] subject and emphasiz[ing] the past as contingent and fluid” which could ultimately loosen the tension that has existed in this field¹¹. Focusing on the navy, Lambert states that naval history “is first and foremost a study for navies, and only secondly a study of navies¹²”. This tension, he claims, still endures in modern studies¹³. The navy exists not only in our past but also in present day and will continue into the future; “history is at once a process and a record”, and it can be difficult to know where to draw the line between the two¹⁴.

Rather than endeavour into this debate, Lewis R. Fischer outlines the history of Canadian maritime academia in his article “The Enterprising Canadians”. While providing his readers with a thorough list of Canadian

scholarship on all aspects of maritime history from the last quarter of the xxth century, Fischer states which ones have received the most attention and which ones are lacking. Amongst those he sees as receiving fair attention are fishing, seafaring labour, maritime exploration, and the navy. Those he believes require more development are merchant shipping, business history of shipping, shipbuilding, naval architecture, and technological history. He also acknowledges the prolific work of Canadian maritime scholars such as Barry Gough and Eric W. Sager, both of whom now reside in Victoria, BC. Fischer concludes that “the state of Canadian maritime scholarship is healthy¹⁵”. He does not attribute this gradual success to funding, however. Instead, Fischer claims, “the impetus behind the advance of the discipline has come from individuals and groups within the system¹⁶”. One of these groups is the Maritime Museum of BC, which, despite budget cuts, has been making a valiant effort to tell the on-going story of maritime history through its exhibits and its rare library resources.

Collection Portrait

The library at the Maritime Museum of BC provides space for the public to learn more about Canadian maritime culture. Because it is a research library, its books cannot be signed out for home use; visitors therefore use the open desk in the main library room. The library is split between two rooms: the main stacks collection and the Special Collections room, both of which use Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC).

The main stacks contain the bulk of our collection. They are home to approximately 6,700 books; a surplus of uncatalogued periodicals and journals, 40,000 photographs; and four vertical filing cabinets on topical subjects, including biographies and historical ships¹⁷. The general section stores books on all aspects of marine life, including religion on ships, international sea laws, Canadian Naval Forces, warships, the Canadian Coast Guard, inland waterway transportation, various types of ships, mathematics, electrical engineering, boat construction, seamanship, navigational guides, lighthouses, fishing and whaling, sailing and yachting, ocean travel and seafaring life, shipwrecks, geography, biographies, and, finally, history. Such a long list of subject areas testifies to the scope of this small yet exhaustive

collection. It also vividly demonstrates the interdisciplinary nature of maritime studies.

The two opposing outer walls in the main library room shelve the substantial assortment of periodicals. These items do not follow DDC, however, and are arranged alphabetically by title. This system is not topically ideal, but it is practical since most of the library's researchers know the title of the periodical for which they are searching. Some notable periodicals in the collection include a complete run (with indices) of the *Mariner's Mirror* from 1911 to 2009, a nearly complete run of *Pacific Marine Review* from 1917 to 1948, and miscellaneous copies of *Rudder* from 1901 to 1969. The library also houses several boxes of the Vancouver publication *Harbour and Shipping*, which focuses on west coast commercial shipping. Large filing cabinets, also arranged alphabetically, align the adjacent walls. These contain biography files, photographs of ships that came to this region, documents containing information on specific ships, and vertical files containing information on various topical subjects. Since these files are not currently in the database (the museum uses PastPerfect Software), there is still much to be discovered in this section of the library, making it an exciting place to explore.

The library also holds five journal collections. These are the *International Journal of Maritime History* (32 volumes from 1989 to 2004), *Research in Maritime History* (numbers one through 30), *Marine Engineer* (eight volumes ranging from 1949 to 1959), *Marine Engineering* (17 volumes from 1903 to 1955), and *Transactions of the Institution of Naval Architects* (24 volumes from 1895 to 1941). These journals, particularly the *International Journal of Maritime History* and *Research in Maritime History*, are the paramounts of our critical collection.

The final wall in the main library room shelves the reference section. Besides the typical reference materials such as dictionaries and thesauruses (some general language, others specifically on marine terminology), this section also contains books pertaining to museum and library studies. Museum libraries are unique in that they serve more than the public; their initial purpose is to serve the museum staff in all of their duties ranging from research, exhibition, education, and publication¹⁸. In order to meet these needs, the Maritime Museum of BC's library contains books

specifically on databases, museum cataloguing, conservation, and exhibits. Furthermore, these museum books are tailored to small institutions and are thus best suited for the library's parent organization, the museum itself.

The reference section also holds the collection of book series. One of the most notable titles among these is the international *Lloyd's Register of Ships* (volumes from 1897 to 1999). Originally, these lists were bound in single-volume books but eventually became three volumes plus an appendix. *Lloyd's Registers* are a vital part of any maritime collection because of the extensive information they hold on all international ships. The Maritime Museum of BC also contains volumes from 1898 to 1991 of *Jane's Fighting Ships*. These annuals follow a similar mandate to *Lloyd's* in that they catalogue ships, but instead focus on the world's navy and coast guard vessels. The library reference section also holds unpublished lists of *British Columbia Heritage Vessels*. These were a project undertaken by a previous museum director, John M. MacFarlane, who finished the project in 1991. These lists are in alphabetically organized binders and contain the names of all BC heritage vessels. When possible, the lists include the boats' dimensions, building materials, engine types, name changes, and owners. These lists are useful for volunteers and community users researching family heritage, shipyard history, and the history of individual vessels. Since they are currently unpublished, they are unique to the Maritime Museum of BC.

Another rare series in the library's reference section is the *History of Yarrows*, which tells the story of the Yarrows Shipyard, located near Victoria in Esquimalt harbour. Described as "one of Canada's major shipbuilders and repairers¹⁹", the shipyard was owned and operated by the Yarrows family and had been established as an offshoot of their large shipyard in Scotland. These *Histories* are rare volumes that are particularly unique and valuable to the museum's library collection both because they are extremely relevant to the museum's purpose and because only a limited number of these volumes were published. As the museum holds the business records from Yarrows, these unique privately published books complement the archival records. The library also holds a similar company-published history of Burrard Drydock Company, the major Vancouver shipyard during the Yarrows era. These documents provide the library with an authentic localized quality.

One of the final resources available in the reference section is the vast amount of pilotage books. The library holds Canadian, British, and American publications. Within each publication series, the books are separated geographically and provide sailors with waterway directional information. The main section of the library holds volumes from 1873 to the 1970s, but the Special Collections room holds the older pilotage books that are in poor condition. One notable one was published in Britain in 1864 and provides information on the waters along the west side of Vancouver Island. It is one of the first pilotage books printed and is another local treasure. The University of Victoria Libraries also holds a copy in their Special Collections.

The Special Collections at the Maritime Museum of BC are housed in the museum's Board Room, a separate room from the main library where they are held in glass cases containing prized books such as the British and Canadian Navy Lists. The library holds *Navy List* volumes dating from 1801 to the 1950s. The Navy Lists were published annually and later quarterly. They are hierarchical lists organized alphabetically which account for all commissioned naval officers serving at the time, stating their current position, in other words the ship, staff or shore base where they were posted. They are a clear example of the existing tension in historical studies mentioned above: they were initially published for the Navy's use but have since been re-appropriated for personal and cultural research. These lists are extremely valuable for tracing a person's deployment history in the navy. The Canadian lists started relatively early in 1914, only four years after the Royal Canadian Navy was founded, but stopped being published in October 1965, around the time when the Canadian Forces were consolidated. The Royal Canadian lists are valuable and rare, but are not unique in Canada to the Maritime Museum of BC. The Department of National Defense is currently digitizing these lists in Ottawa and is the only initiative doing so. The British *Navy Lists* in the museum, however, are not held at any other location in Canada, and therefore make this part of the library particularly enthralling for showcasing the transfer of maritime knowledge and culture from European countries to Canada. The *Navy Lists* in our cases are arranged in chronological order and shift at the start of the XXth from the British lists to the Canadian lists, showing not only the move from British publication, but also the transfer of the Canadian navy from British

ownership to Canadians. Our cases thus display not only the books themselves but also an important passage in our country's autonomy.

There are many other rare and fiscally valuable volumes in the Special Collections room. These include 32 volumes of *Bancroft's Works*, which are written by XIXth American historian Hubert Howe Bancroft, who published works on the western states and provinces. The Special Collections room also holds six of the eight-volume set of *Lives of the British Admirals*, published in London in 1814. *Venturesome Voyages of Captain Voss* is another remarkable find on our shelves. This memoir tells the captain's tale of the Tilikum, an Aboriginal dugout canoe converted into a sailboat that began a worldwide journey in Victoria in 1901. The boat is now on display in the museum. The library has four different copies of this title, which were published from 1913 to 1934 in London, Tokyo, and Boston. The oldest known item in the collection is *Mariner's Compass* by Andrew Wakeley, which was published in 1761.

The most valuable set in the library is the three-volume leather-bound set of George Vancouver's *A Voyage of Discovery to the North Pacific Ocean and Round the World*, published in 1798. This set was presented to the Maritime Museum of BC by the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, England in 1952. It is not exceedingly rare, but is nonetheless very costly. This donation exemplifies the extreme generosity and attention to relevancy among cultural institutions.

The Special Collections also holds the first edition volumes from Captain James Cook, another famous maritime explorer who came from England to Canada's Pacific coast in the late 1700s. This three-volume set titled *A Voyage to the Pacific Ocean* and authored by James Cook and James King, was first published in 1784. Similar to Vancouver's volumes, this set is not particularly exceptional but is still valuable. After years of deterioration, these volumes are currently being conserved so they can be used by the public. In the meantime, patrons can view the museum's four-volume set of the *Journals of Captain Cook* published in London in 1974.

There is a wide variety of items in the Special Collections room that are not as fiscally valuable as those previously mentioned. These include other sea

memoirs such as a two-volume set of *The Autobiography of a Seaman: Earl of Dundonald*, published in London in 1861. The Special Collections also holds a wide range of XIXth and XXth journals and sets, including a minimum of 46 volumes of the *Journal of the Geographical Society* (London, 1832 to the mid-twentieth century) and seven volumes of Clowes's *The Royal Navy : A History* (London, 1897). While not particularly unique, the library also holds four copies of Lewis and Dryden's *Marine History of the Pacific Northwest* (Portland, Oregon, 1895) and four copies of the H.W. McCurdy *Marine History of the Pacific Northwest* (Seattle, Washington, 1966), both of which are frequently used. Though these titles are not as fiscally valuable as others in the collection, together they all complete the history of Canada's Pacific Northwest and thus complete the library's purpose of presenting the regional maritime past to the visitors²⁰.

Threats and Struggles

Unfortunately, due to a lack of funding, the museum's library has not received the financial attention it requires to be fully functional. Its rarest and oldest items are neither catalogued, nor housed in a climate-controlled vault. These rare items have decayed over the past few years alone.

As Juanita M. Toupin writes, libraries “must be provided with the financial and physical means to meet the requirements of collection development and maintenance, effective facilities and equipment, qualified staff, and promotion of library use and services²¹”. Because it lacks the necessary “financial and physical means,” the library at the Maritime Museum of BC has been unable to fulfill these requirements, despite the efforts of its dedicated staff.

First, the requirements for collection development and maintenance have not been met. Until recently, the library had been accepting all donations of books on a wide range of marine topics without strict regard as to whether these new items would benefit the library collection or not. As a result, the library is now overflowing with books, newspaper articles, photographic journals, and a multitude of unrelated periodicals. These excess materials are currently in boxes lined along the stacks, some of them covering relevant materials making them inaccessible and adding to the accumulation of dust

and dirt that gradually destroys books. To worsen this growing threat, the entire library collections, both main and special, have not previously been catalogued correctly, creating issues for insurance purposes (for example, if anything were to happen to our collection, we would not be aware of the extent of the damage) as well as for the development and maintenance of the library. Without a proper catalogue it is nearly impossible to know what a collection has and what new resources it needs to maintain its function. It is exciting to enter the library and potentially find a valuable item hidden away in a box or corner, but it is not practical or helpful to researchers visiting the library with a specific goal in mind.

The second vital aspect of properly maintaining a collection outlined by Toupin is having effective facilities and equipment. The shelves in the main section are largely inadequate. Most of the shelves are open at the top, allowing dust to accumulate, while some are warped due to the weight of the large books they were not designed to hold. Other sections of the shelving are not properly bolted together and are thus unstable. The Special Collection items are held in a separate room, which is generally considered best practice. However, these special items are stored in plain glass cases rather than in climate controlled vaults (20 degrees Celsius and a 50 per cent humidity rate is recommended²²). This lack of climate regulation has resulted in the books deteriorating aggressively even in the last few years. Without proper care and attention, these rare books will eventually become unusable. The museum staff and board members are concerned about what will happen to the collection if a new situation cannot be achieved. However, the current building blocks the way. The equipment that is required to regulate the temperature and humidity cannot be installed in the museum because it is located in a heritage building that does not allow such renovations. Therefore, the best preservation method for the library collection would be to move it to a more accommodating location.

The third of Toupin's requirements for libraries is qualified staff. Here too the museum's library is behind. The museum cannot afford to hire a full-time qualified librarian and instead relies on the help of volunteer librarians who dedicate several hours a week of their time to the museum's library. Despite their hard work, the library still requires the support of a full-time

librarian to manage the acquisition of materials, the preservation of the collection, and to write and maintain library policies.

A full-time librarian is also vital to the promotion of library use and services, the fourth and final point that Toupin emphasizes. A standard way to promote any modern library is to have the catalogue available online. The library's catalogue is currently inaccessible to anyone but its staff. It is important for a library to "take every opportunity to let the general public and the museum staff know what resources are to be found in the library, and how and by whom they can be used²³". Without making this information readily available, the library's resources will not be used by staff or researchers simply due to a lack of awareness. It is also important to note that, in general, museum libraries play a "significant role in establishing the museum's reputation as a research institution", thus making the library an important feature for the museum to promote and showcase to the public²⁴.

The lack of funding available in Canada for cultural institutions is the major cause of these issues. Due to recent economic downfalls, the cultural sector has received a lot of cutbacks making it difficult for small libraries to thrive. Without government support, our cultural institutions, and in turn our culture itself, becomes muted and eventually we will lose valuable resources like those held at the Maritime Museum of BC, which are vital to understanding our past, present, and future as a maritime culture.

What Can be Done to Overcome these Problems?

Despite these challenges, the Maritime Museum has done a fine job of maintaining its collection. The recent efforts especially reflect the care that its employees have for the library. The museum has mobilized a dedicated team of volunteers (a mix of retired librarians and ex-mariners) and temporary staff to catalogue, cull, and preserve the collection.

The first and foremost priority is to catalogue the entire collection. Once all items have been catalogued, the next stage is culling. This process will weed out all unnecessary materials from the library to create space for the items most relevant to the museum's purpose. Discarded materials will first be offered to institutions that are more closely related to their content. If items

that are removed from this collection are available online, a staff member will create a list of their digital sources. This list will then be available to any library patron for further reference. The culling process requires the collaborative efforts of cataloguers, volunteers, maritime academics, and museum board members. Once this stage is complete, the catalogue will be made available online with assistance from the Greater Victoria Public Library.

The collection will then be ready for preservation. Because of its high cost, this process is the most difficult stage. The Special Collections room will receive the most attention as these valuable materials are the most in need. Since moving to a different location is not currently possible, the library hopes to acquire acid-free book coverings. These covers will allow some books to be kept in their current location without decaying further. Some items, however, are much more deteriorated and will require a book conservator. As for the preservation of the main collection, the library will acquire Brodart covers for the dust jackets. The library also hopes to replace the shelving in the stacks, and has already invested in cloth tape to repair broken spines and covers. Once the current holdings have been preserved, the library will need only regular preservation maintenance.

This maintenance will require regular workers to deal with acquisitions and promptly catalogue incoming donations. For example, the library now has an acquisitions policy to govern incoming donations, and will only accept those materials that are most relevant to the museum's purpose. Once the museum has been revitalized, these regular maintenance duties will keep the integrity of the collection intact.

As this article has outlined, the library at the Maritime Museum of BC preserves and contributes to Canada's maritime culture. While the library has been confronted with many challenges –inadequate shelving, a surplus of items unrelated to maritime history, and a less than ideal building – I have shown that these difficulties can be overcome with the dedication of a committed staff. Though it could be argued that the Canadian government should make cultural institutions a higher financial priority, small libraries with limited resources can take steps to preserve their most valuable items.

Brittany V. Vis is an early modern English drama scholar who studied at the University of Victoria and the University of Western Ontario. Her interests include book history, textual scholarship, and library studies. She has been part of the team revitalizing the library at the Maritime Museum of British Columbia for almost a year. Her current projects include creating a modern scholarly critical edition of *The Comedy of the Most Virtuous and Godly Susanna* (1578), a rare early modern English play text that has yet to be edited for a modern audience.

Notes

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