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Forty Years of the Collected Works of Erasmus

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Article abstract

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Forty Years of the *Collected Works of Erasmus*¹

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This article discusses the origins and development of the Collected Works of Erasmus series, a project to translate the vast majority of the Dutch humanist Erasmus of Rotterdam's Greek and Latin writings into English. A unique partnership between the University of Toronto Press and a team of Canadian and international scholars, the series is roughly 70 percent complete. Sixty of the projected eighty-six volumes have been published. Conceived by the late Ron Schoeffel, a long-serving editor at the Press, the series is expected to be complete by 2030.

Cet article examine les origines et le développement de la collection Collected Works of Erasmus, consistant en la traduction anglaise de la plupart des écrits en grec et latin de l'humaniste néerlandais Érasme de Rotterdam. Grâce à un partenariat unique entre les Presses de l'Université de Toronto et une équipe internationale de chercheurs canadiens et étrangers, la collection est maintenant terminée à 70 pourcent. Ce sont soixante des quatre-vingt-six volumes projetés qui ont été publiés. La collection, conçue par Ron Schoeffel, éditeur de longue date aux Presses de l'Université de Toronto, devrait être complétée d'ici 2030.

This year, 2014, marks the fortieth anniversary of the publication of the first volume in the *Collected Works of Erasmus* (CWE) series. Over the past four decades, nearly sixty more volumes have appeared. The current best guess at a completion date for the series, which will include a total of eighty-six volumes, stands somewhere around 2030. The story of the CWE is one of the perseverance—some might even say against the odds—of a dream that mirrors, in part, the ambition and enthusiasm for editorial work of the sixteenth-century Dutch humanist who inspired it. That dream is “to provide accurate, readable, suitably annotated English texts of his correspondence and the other main works for those unskilled in Latin and unfamiliar with the classical disciplines.”² The project has brought together some of the leading lights of two succeeding

1. The author wishes to thank James K. McConica, chair of the editorial board of CWE, and Suzanne Rancourt of the University of Toronto Press for agreeing to be interviewed to provide background for this article.

2. See James K. McConica and Ron M. Schoeffel, “The Collected Works of Erasmus,” *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* 11 (1979): 314.

generations of scholars from Canada and around the world, and continues to draw on the talent of a younger generation to see it through to completion. The result of a unique partnership between a university press and a scholarly community, *CWE* has consistently drawn the highest accolades from reviewers around the English-speaking world and beyond. The scholars and editors, both Canadian and foreign, who have played some role in the series number in the hundreds, with a central core of about fifty people. Through changes in the academic publishing industry, shifts in government policy, and the rise and fall of academic fashions, the series has stayed true to its original goal. Not only does the publication of each volume bring that dream closer to reality; when complete, the series will provide a model of scholarly rigour, cooperation, and exchange worthy of emulation by generations to come.

To fully appreciate the aspirations of the *CWE* project it is necessary to understand the broader climate that produced them. One might say that a variety of circumstances and good fortune came together at the right time in the late 1960s to make it possible. Broadly speaking, after the Second World War the Canadian government was looking to support large editorial projects that promised to add some positive knowledge to the humanities. In Toronto specifically, as many of the contributions in this celebratory issue attest, the 1960s was a bustling time for all things Renaissance and Reformation. The founding of the Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies (CRRS), the founding of the Toronto Renaissance and Reformation Colloquium, and, indeed, the founding of this journal all worked together to promote that spirit.³ After all, the nucleus of the rare-book collection that became the CRRS is a world-class collection of Erasmiana, collected by Victoria College classics and comparative philology professor Andrew James Bell (1856–1932).⁴ Furthermore, in the period after Vatican II (1962–65) there was a growing sense among scholars that a real understanding of the religious turmoil of the first half of the sixteenth century required looking beyond the confessional lens of history, and

3. For more on the initiatives relating to the Renaissance and Reformation at the University of Toronto, see James M. Estes, *The First Forty Years: A Brief History of the Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies 1964–2004* (Toronto: CRRS Publications, 2004), 11–22.

4. For an overview of Bell and his collection of Erasmiana, see Jacqueline Glomski and Erika Rummel, *Early Editions of Erasmus at the Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, Toronto* (Toronto, CRRS Publications, 1994), 7–16.

furthermore that the writings of Erasmus might offer up seeds from which a new, post-confessional understanding of the religious reformations could grow.

Long neglected (or rejected) by scholars of all confessional stripes, and painted as a fence-sitter on the decisive religious questions of the Reformation era, Erasmus's posthumous fortune began to change in the post-WWII world as scholars began to ask new questions that they found could only be answered by returning to the sources—*ad fontes* as Erasmus would have termed it. These new questions were prompted by a desire to re-assess Erasmus's contribution to theology in general, to textual criticism of the New Testament, and to the transmission of classical and Early Christian learning. This new interest, by scholars who had lived through the Second World War, led to the question of how to get at those sources. In Europe, that question was answered by a number of proposals to make up a new critical edition of Erasmus's works, a task that had not been undertaken since the eighteenth century.⁵ The project that won out was the edition (known as *ASD*) based in Amsterdam and sponsored by the Royal Netherlands Academy for Arts and Science, which in 1963 started the task of publishing critical editions of all of Erasmus's works (except the correspondence).⁶ To date, it is just over halfway complete.

One of the problems evident in the 1960s, especially to scholars in North America, was that few people were equipped to read the original sources, as Latin and Greek were experiencing a precipitous fall from prominence in the school curriculum. With great foresight, it seems, many of them recognized that the only way for Erasmus's legacy to get its due would be to translate all of his works into English. The one person solicited to work with the *CWE* series to give the project a lukewarm reception was the famous Yale historian Roland

5. The first *Opera Omnia*, following for the most part Erasmus's instructions, appeared shortly after Erasmus's death between 1538 and 1540 in Basel from the press of Hieronymus Froben. It is often conjectured, but has never been proven, that this edition was edited by Erasmus's friend Beatus Rhenanus. A second *Opera Omnia* was published between 1703 and 1706 from the press of Petrus Vander Aa in Leyden, edited by Jean Leclerc. It is commonly referred to as *LB*, short for the Latin name for Leyden, *Lugdunum Batavorum*.

6. On the origins of the *ASD*, see the "General Introduction" to the first edition of *Opera Omnia Desiderii Erasmi, Recognita et adnotatione critica instructa notisque illustrate* 1.1 (Amsterdam: North Holland Publishing Company, 1969), vii–xxi.

Bainton (1894–1984), who is reported to have advised: “Let them learn Latin!”⁷ Even by the late 1960s, however, most scholars had realized that this was simply not a viable option.

Genesis

One of the unique things about the *CWE* series is that it originated not with a group of scholars, but with a modern languages editor with the University of Toronto Press (UTP), the late Ron Schoeffel, in the summer of 1968.⁸ The idea came to him after an unsuccessful search for an edition of Erasmus’s correspondence in English, his choice for some summer reading. Puzzled by this lack of reliable translations for a figure he vaguely felt had been of major importance to the Renaissance and Reformation world, he made some more inquiries, quickly getting the sense that this glaring absence could be turned into an opportunity. He laid out the idea, which at this point was limited to a reliable translation of Erasmus’s correspondence, in a memo to Frances G. Halpenny, UTP’s managing editor, opening with the line “In case you haven’t had your share of hare-brained schemes today [...]”⁹ The idea was received with great enthusiasm within the press, and in short order two scholars, James K. McConica and Richard J. Schoeck (1920–2008), both at the University of Toronto, were invited to get on board. By the following year, an editorial board to lay down editorial policy, an executive committee to run the day-to-day operations, and an international advisory board were established. At this critical juncture the project was able to recruit two important figures to get it off the ground. The first was Wallace K. Ferguson (1902–83), no doubt Canada’s most distinguished historian of the Renaissance period, who had recently retired from the University

7. See James M. Estes, “The Englishing of Erasmus: The Genesis and Progress of the Correspondence Volumes of the *Collected Works of Erasmus*,” in *Neo-Latin and the Humanities: Essays in Honour of Charles E. Fantazzi*, ed. Luc Dietz, Timothy Kircher, and Jonathan Reid (Toronto: CRRS Publications, 2014), 145.

8. Ron Schoeffel died unexpectedly of a heart attack on 4 July 2013. For an obituary that summarizes the achievements of his half-century association with UTP, see Jack Kirchhoff, “‘Superman Editor’ Ron Schoeffel lived for Scholarship,” *Globe and Mail*, 1 August 2013. See also Robert Fulford, “Erasmus of Toronto,” *Journal of Scholarly Publishing* 30.3 (1999): 124–30.

9. McConica and Schoeffel, 315.

of Western Ontario.¹⁰ The second was R. A. B. Mynors (1903–89), arguably the world’s leading classicist at the time.¹¹ After securing funding from the Killam Fund of the Canada Council (the forerunner of SSHRC), and with the full support of UTP, the project was underway.

One factor that has sustained the series is the consistency of the personnel who have guided it. Schoeffel acted as chair of the executive committee from the project’s inception until his death in 2013—over forty years. James McConica, who has been involved since the beginning, has sat officially as the chair of the editorial committee since 1976. Without such consistency in personnel at the helm over such a long period, supported institutionally both by University of Toronto and UTP, it is hard to imagine that this project would have endured to this point. Such support made it possible, fairly early on in the project, to expand its ambitions beyond translating the correspondence to translating almost all of the Dutch humanist’s writings. Furthermore, again very early on in the project, close contacts were established with the *Conseil international pour l’édition des oeuvres complètes d’Erasmus*, the overseers of the ASD edition, and over the decades there have been fruitful collaborations and sharing of materials between the two linked, but very different, projects.¹²

Correspondence of Erasmus

The letters of Erasmus are a treasure trove for nearly all aspects of life in the sixteenth century. They read like the sixteenth-century equivalent of today’s

10. For an appreciation of Ferguson’s contribution to Renaissance studies, see J. G. Rowe and H. W. Stockdale, “Wallace K. Ferguson,” in *Florilegium Historiale: Essays Presented to Wallace K. Ferguson*, ed. J. G. Rowe and H. W. Stockdale (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), v–vii.

11. For an appreciation of Mynors’s contribution to a vast variety of scholarship, see Harold C. Gotoff, “Sir Roger Aubrey Baskerville Mynors (July 28, 1903–October 17, 1989),” *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 135.2 (1991): 308–11.

12. *ASD* is a critical edition of all of Erasmus’s writings. Following the principles of classical philology, it begins with the earliest witness of the text and tracks its development in subsequent redactions. *CWE*, on the contrary, begins with the text in its final witness, noting where changes have been made in individual redactions. Furthermore, there is a different emphasis in the annotations; while there is significant overlap in identification of sources, the emphasis of the annotations in *ASD* is on philology, while the annotations in *CWE* emphasize history. For more on the connections between the two projects, see James K. McConica, “Erasmus in Amsterdam and Toronto,” in *Editing Texts from the Age of Erasmus*, ed. Erika Rummel (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 81–100.

“social network.” They contain confidential remarks to and from Erasmus’s closest friends, advice to kings and prelates, bitter exchanges with his most ardent critics, mixed with quotidian remarks about his health, general disposition, and lifestyle. The correspondence includes over three thousand letters, just over half of them written by Erasmus, and slightly less than half addressed to him.

The labour of translating the correspondence has been much lightened by the existence of a modern edition published by the Oxford scholar P. S. Allen (1869–1933).¹³ He spent decades combing European libraries in search of extant letters, discovering some 232 that had never before appeared in print. A testament to his thoroughness is that since the early part of the twentieth century only a handful of new letters has since been brought to light. Furthermore, Allen is also credited with purging several errors that had crept into the text in print and creating a reliable system of dating and ordering all of the letters.¹⁴ Because the texts were so thorough, the *Conseil* of the ASD deemed it unnecessary to undertake a new critical edition of the correspondence. For all of Allen’s hard work, however, there has been plenty for both translators and annotators to do. As James Estes (annotator for volumes 9, 10, and 14 through 21) put it, “he did a thorough job, if not an absolutely perfect one.”¹⁵ Where those imperfections show up most glaringly, and put responsibility on the annotator, is in the historical annotations, biblical references, references to Erasmus’s own work, and classical annotations. The number of annotators has been kept quite small in order to ensure consistency. They include Wallace K. Ferguson (vols. 1–2), James K. McConica (vols. 3–4), Peter G. Bietenholz (vols. 5–8), James M. Estes (vols. 8–10, 14–21), Charles G. Nauert (1928–2013) (vols. 11–12) and James K. Farge (vol. 13).

It is in the translation of the letters that the voice of Erasmus in English was primarily forged by the late R. A. B. Mynors, who translated the first ten volumes of the correspondence (the first six of them with University of Toronto

13. The first volume appeared in 1906, and six more volumes appeared in Allen’s lifetime. The final five volumes were completed by Allen’s widow, Helen Mary Allen, and H. W. Garrod. The last volume appeared in 1947. For more on Allen, see James M. Estes, “The Achievement of P. S. Allen and the Role of CWE,” *Renaissance and Reformation/Renaissance et Réforme* 25.3 (1989): 289–98 and James K. McConica, “The Englishing of P. S. Allen,” in *Erasmus and the Renaissance Republic of Letters*, ed. Stephen Ryle (Tournhout: Brepols, 2014), 51–60.

14. James M. Estes, “Achievement,” 293.

15. Estes, “Achievement,” 295.

classics professor D. F. S. Thompson [1919–2009]). Since Mynor's death there have been only two others directly charged with Englishing the correspondence: Alexander Dalzell, emeritus professor in classics at University of Toronto, and Charles Fantazzi, emeritus professor of classics at East Carolina University, retired from the University of Windsor. The small number of translators of the correspondence has allowed for a remarkable consistency in Erasmus's voice in English over a period that spans close to fifty years.

Another significant project that was inspired by the work on the correspondence was the creation of a biographical register of people addressed and mentioned in the letters. For most of the twentieth century it was Allen's edition of the correspondence that was seen as the definitive guide to Erasmus's contemporaries. It was used as the basis for *Contemporaries of Erasmus: A Biographical Register of the Renaissance and Reformation*, a three-volume set published by UTP between 1985 and 1987, edited by Peter G. Bietenholz and Thomas Deutscher, both of the University of Saskatchewan. The volumes, which contain entries on nearly two thousand persons mentioned in the correspondence, have become an indispensable tool for scholars of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

The correspondence makes up volumes 1 through 21, and volume 22 will be devoted to an index for the correspondence. To date, volumes 1 to 15 have been published, volume 16 is in press, and volumes 17 and 18 are in preparation.

Structure and progress

Erasmus gave very specific instructions for the structuring of his *Opera Omnia*. He called for nine sections (or *ordines* as he called them) that divided his works by their purpose or subject matter. Since it is not a critical edition, and will not include all of the works (like translations from Greek into Latin, and the text of the Greek New Testament) that Erasmus produced, the order of *CWE* diverges slightly from Erasmus's wishes.¹⁶ For example, to highlight the central place of the correspondence in this series, those volumes are placed first. The

16. The divisions as ordered by Erasmus and followed by the *ASD* are as follows: 1: Writings on Philology and Education; 2: Proverbs and Sayings (*Adages*); 3: Correspondence (not included in *ASD*); 4: Writings on Moral Questions; 5: Writings Related to Religious Instruction; 6: Latin Translation of the NT, the Edition of the Greek Text, and Annotations; 7: Paraphrases on the NT; 8: Writings Related to the Church Fathers; and 9: Controversies.

divisions give a clear indication of the vast spectrum of Erasmus's writings: 1: Correspondence (vols. 1–22); 2: Literary and Educational Writings (vols. 23–29); 3: Adages (vols. 30–36); 4: Apophthegmata (vols. 37–38); 5: Colloquies (vols. 39–40); 5: New Testament Scholarship, subdivided into Paraphrases (vols. 42–50) and Annotations (vols. 51–60); 7: Patristics (vols. 61–62); 8: Exposition of the Psalms (vols. 63–65); 9: Spiritualia and Pastoralia (vols. 66–70); 10: Controversies (vols. 71–84); and 10: Poetry (vols. 85–86). In a number of cases, all of the volumes in the division have been published or are in press. Among them are the literary and educational writings, works like “The Education of the Christian Prince” and “On Education for Children,” which cemented Erasmus's reputation as the foremost advocate for humanist learning. Also complete are six volumes of Adages (an introductory volume with indices is in preparation). These volumes are an invaluable tool for any student of classical or neo-Latin literature, as they explain and trace the sources for literally thousands of expressions encountered there. Another noteworthy completed series includes the Colloquies in two volumes in a masterful translation and notes by Craig R. Thomson. To that list may be added the Paraphrases of the New Testament, the Exposition on the Psalms, and the Apophthegmata. Other divisions, like the Controversies, are nearly done but will require a few more years to be completed. To date, however, a number of noteworthy works in that division have been published. These include his controversies with Martin Luther, which appear in two volumes translated by Clarence Miller and annotated by one of the most distinguished Renaissance scholars of the twentieth century, Charles Trinkaus.

The most challenging division, due to its subject matter and its style of presentation, is the sub-set of volumes dealing with Erasmus's annotations on the New Testament. Because of the inherent difficulties, these are likely to be the last volumes published in the series. From very early in the project it was clear that Erasmus's New Testament scholarship would pose particular challenges not faced in the other volumes. For that reason, a sub-committee devoted especially to that work was struck, and Robert D. Sider of Dickinson College (and later the University of Saskatchewan) was appointed as general editor of the New Testament scholarship volumes.¹⁷ The immediate challenge that Sider

17. For a more complete discussion of the unique challenges of the New Testament scholarship to the series, see Robert D. Sider, “Erasmus's Biblical Scholarship in the Toronto Project,” in *The Unfolding of Words: Commentary in the Age of Erasmus*, ed. Judith Rice Henderson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 86–98.

and his committee faced was which works should and should not be translated. For example, Erasmus's Greek text of the New Testament, despite being a great work of scholarship, did not lend itself to translation into English. The issue also of whether the Paraphrases and Annotations should be published together or separately, as had been proposed in a manuscript offered to the press, also needed resolution, and it was finally decided that they should be published separately. The work on the Paraphrases is fast approaching completion, while the Annotations, with their multiple references to a broad corpus of patristic authors and complicated theological concepts, will take over a decade to reach that same stage. It is these volumes that will benefit most from the scholarship of a younger generation, with scholars like Mark Vessey of the University of British Columbia and Reimer Faber of the University of Waterloo who bring their particular expertise to the series.

And so, the scheme laid out by Schoeffel in the summer of 1968 continues to develop with the assistance of many, firmly associating Erasmus's name with Toronto in the English-speaking world, only second perhaps to his native city of Rotterdam. UTP remains as committed as ever to seeing the project through to completion—considering it as one of the jewels in its crown. In fact, the press took a big leap of faith with the series in the early 1990s as a policy change at SSHRC saw funding for the series dry up. Thus, for the last two decades it has assumed all of the costs of keeping the project going. The press also established the Erasmus Studies series to publish monographs dealing with Erasmus and his milieu. It has published a number of important volumes, including an English translation of Dutch scholar Cornelis Augstijn's authoritative *Erasmus: His Life, Works, and Influence*. Despite the sea change in academic publishing over the last twenty years, and the growing shift to electronic publishing, readers will be able to rely on the distinctive material volumes of *CWE*.