Transnational book history, or the journey of a teacher, researcher and “ambassador”

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One major aspect of Jean-Yves Mollier’s activity has been his contribution to the transnational history of the book, which he has promoted in several closely connected and complementary ways. He played an essential role in the direction and development of the Center for the Cultural History of Contemporary Societies (CHCSC) at the Université de Versailles-Saint-Quentin-en-Yvelines (UVSQ), making it a major hub which has earned international recognition in the field of book history. Leading specialists have regularly appeared at his seminar on “The History of Publishing, the Book, and Reading,” a privileged forum which also opened up a space for numerous students of different nationalities. The Center has exerted a centrifugal force as well as a centripetal attraction. A very broad international research network gradually formed around it, bringing together heritage institutions and university departments with an active interest in book history, and it has enjoyed constant expansion through collaborations and research partnerships. Jean-Yves Mollier has sustained this global network by means of regular visits over nearly thirty years to give lectures and attend conferences: these occasions have afforded an opportunity to broaden the conversation with colleagues, while at the same time consolidating the history of publishing and laying the foundation for first national and then comparative syntheses in various countries and on different scales.
Although I was fortunate enough to first meet Jean-Yves Mollier during my doctoral studies in the early 1990s, I may not be the best person to describe the shape or even recall the origins of the network he progressively put into place. That is why I invited some of the major players in this process to recall what Jean-Yves Mollier brought to book history research in their own countries, and his influence on changing approaches and methods over thirty years. I must therefore thank, in alphabetical order, Diana Cooper-Richet, Eliana de Freitas Dutra, Wallace Kirsop, Martyn Lyons, Jacques Michon, Gustavo Sora, and Ian Willison for their collaboration and for the information they provided, while I fully apologize to all those whom I did not have a chance to contact. Creating a variety of echoing experiences and viewpoints is the best way to prevent this account from becoming too hagiographic – hagiography being a genre which Jean-Yves Mollier has never favored either in his own scholarly work or in relation to himself. This method enables me to stress the fundamentally collective character of his initiatives, first of all in institutionalizing the discipline, and subsequently in opening it up in both geographical and disciplinary terms.

I return first of all to the role of the Center, and especially to the seminar on the History of Publishing, the Book, and Reading, which Mollier has led since 1992. In a document dated that year,¹ the Center’s originality was summed up by a few features: it was the first to devote itself exclusively to cultural history as an exclusive specialization; it brings together both modern and contemporary historians in the same project; it establishes a forum for dialog between the humanities and the social sciences; it operates in conjunction with local communities and European organizations.

From the outset, five specialist seminars were launched, including one entitled “History of the Book and of Reading.” The first academic year (1992–93) was devoted to “Reading and the People.” It brought together mainly French scholars, veterans like Robert Muchembled or doctoral students like Sophie Grandjean and Georges-André Vuaroqueaux. But very soon the seminar began addressing themes which were not exclusively French, as in the following year’s series entitled “Reading and the People in Europe.” The German-speaking territories were discussed by Anne-Marie Thiesse and Helga Jeanblanc, Jean-François Botrel gave an assessment of research in Spain, while Britain was covered by Bernard Cottret, Ian Willison, and Michel Rapoport. Several international scholars got into the habit of attending the seminar either as speakers or as visitors. Among them, considering only the period 1994–98, were Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink (University of Saarbrücken), Martyn Lyons (University of New South Wales), Wallace Kirsop (Monash University), Jacques Hellemans (Université libre de Bruxelles), James Raven (Magdalene College, Cambridge), Bo Peterson (Stockholm University), Natacha Chmatko (Moscow Academy of Sciences), Denis Saint-Jacques (Laval University, Quebec), Julia Bettinotti (University of Quebec at Montreal), and Giancarlo Menichelli (Oriental Institute, Naples University).

The seminar went on to forge strong links with certain individuals and institutions. In addition, it became a laboratory for new approaches and new research areas across an ever-widening geographical spectrum. Researchers, scholarship-holders, and foreign doctoral students received their training, and a large number of masters and doctoral theses were produced on
problems associated with a wide range of nations and continents: Europe, Canada, South America, the Middle East, China, and so on.  

A second notable aspect is the interest shown overseas in Jean-Yves Mollier’s research work. This has been expressed, for example, in numerous invitations to speak in Belgium, Switzerland, Italy, Germany, Spain, North Africa, the Middle East, Canada, Australia, China, and, above all, South America. These visits generated a number of international partnership agreements, facilitated by Diana Cooper-Richtet in her role as vice-president for international relations at UVSQ from 2005 to 2012. Jean-Yves Mollier’s activity both as a guest speaker and an ambassador for the history of the book and of publishing has been extended by translations of his most important work, especially into Spanish and (Brazilian) Portuguese.

The Institut Mémoire de l’Édition Contemporaine (IMEC), established in 1988, was an important element in the construction of an international network in research on the history of the book and of print culture. At the same time, the newsletter *In-octavo* also played an essential role in bringing into contact researchers and institutions with an interest in the field as well as

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3 A *Leitura e Seu Publico no Mundo Contemporâneo. Ensaios sobre Historia Cultural* (Belo Horizonte: Autêntica, 2008); Ô Camelo. *Figura emblematica de Comunicaçao* (São Paulo: Edusp, 2009); *La Lectura en Francia durante el siglo XIX (1789-1914)* (Mexico: Cuadernos Secuencia, 2009); Ô Dinheiro e as Letras. *Historia do Capitalismo...
proposing comparative approaches. Jean-Yves Mollier made a substantial contribution by proposing comparative approaches. Jean-Yves Mollier made a substantial contribution by proposing comparative approaches. Jean-Yves Mollier made a substantial contribution by proposing comparative approaches. Jean-Yves Mollier made a substantial contribution by proposing comparative approaches. Jean-Yves Mollier made a substantial contribution by proposing comparative approaches. Jean-Yves Mollier made a substantial contribution by promoting at the start a whole series of scholarly meetings, which were to help to put some flesh on these exchanges. I will confine myself to mentioning a few conferences, but a full list would be impressive, to say the least.

One of the first landmarks was the conference on “French Bookselling in the Nineteenth Century,” organized at Saint-Quentin in November 1996, with proceedings later published in the IMEC series. The research questions it addressed had a Franco-centric focus, but the conference played a foundational role in at least two senses. Firstly, several contributions dealt with foreign bookselling, a theme which assumed greater importance during the 2000s thanks notably to François Botrel and Diana Cooper-Richter. Secondly, the first contact was made with researchers from Quebec, especially the Research Group for the Study of the Book in Quebec (GRELQ), set up by Jacques Michon and Richard Giguère in 1982. In 1996, Jacques Michon had just brought out the proceedings of “Publishing and Power,” a conference which sought to interrogate the consequences of the new political and economic situation brought about by the collapse of communist regimes and the rise of neo-liberalism. At the same time, it examined the impact of technological change on the book throughout the world. As far as Mollier was concerned, GRELQ appeared an ideal partner, ready-made to assist in the planning of “the first comparative history of print culture from its rise in Europe, in Germany, Britain and France, up to its

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expansion in other continents.” This conference, held at Sherbrooke in 2000, featured over fifty papers from researchers with extremely diverse perspectives. The proceedings, published in 2001, had an extraordinary impact. They were reprinted several times, with three reprints in 2001 and 2002 alone, a rare achievement in scholarly publishing. It received many reviews and citations, reaching beyond its specialized audience to attract the attention of many scholars interested in new global approaches to historical phenomena. The Sherbrooke conference also set in motion a series of subsequent meetings, each addressing a different theme but pursuing a comparative and transnational perspective on the global history of print. Following Prato in 2001, London in 2004, and Sydney in 2005, discussions shifted to the International Congress for Historical Sciences (ICHS) held in Amsterdam in 2010 and Jinan in 2015. Here they took place under the auspices of SHARP, recognized as a key international umbrella institution for historians of the book.

French historiography, and in particular the *Histoire de l’Édition française* (History of French Publishing), emerged in the course of these meetings as a decisive influence on several national projects launched in its wake. The whole achievement, as Jean-Yves Mollier insisted, was the work of a three-way collaboration between Roger Chartier, Henri-Jean Martin, and Jean-

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Pierre Vivet. A series of subsequent conferences showed that problems and solutions were appearing simultaneously in different places, which, as in any historiographical process, was due to convergence rather than mere imitation. One example was the great project on German bookselling undertaken from the 1980s onwards under the auspices of the *Börsenverein des deutschen Buchhandels.* This project was the continuation of the four volumes on the history of the book in Germany published between 1886 and 1913 by Kapp and Goldfriedrich, a major undertaking but one often overlooked, for better or worse, by subsequent historiography. Michael Winship has recalled the decisive boost to the history of the book in the United States given by the 1980 conference sponsored by the Rare Books and Manuscripts Section of the Association of College and Research Libraries in Boston. Kenneth Carpenter organized this interdisciplinary conference, whose proceedings appeared in 1983 entitled *Books and Society in History,* and it underlined the importance of book history for the history of modern and contemporary societies. A second conference sponsored by the American Antiquarian Society was entitled “Needs and Opportunities in the History of the Book in American Culture,” and this set out the blueprint for what became the great project on the history of the book in America, directed by David Hall.

The Sydney conference (2005) made it clear that a range of national projects had been advancing at a faster pace since the 1990s. They had appropriated the French model for their own

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original purposes, revisiting its chronological limits and the themes it treated. The British project, which owed a debt to Donald McKenzie’s approach, was distinguished by its sustained examination of manuscript culture, while it favored a global perspective linking its analysis of production to that of distribution. The Australian history placed a strong emphasis on popular writing genres, and also on the history of reading, together with everything that governed the writing process at one end of the spectrum, and transmission to readers at the other end. The Canadian project, on the other hand, had three special characteristics: its inclusive territorial coverage which embraced not only urban centers but all the provinces and territories of contemporary Canada; the integration of multiple languages spoken by the inhabitants, quite apart from the country’s bilingualism; the attention paid to the issue of cultural identity in the context of the book trade, marked by a permanent tension between nationalism and colonialism.

Within this network, two regions deserve special mention. The first is China, which Jean-Yves Mollier has visited several times. The Franco-Chinese conference on “China-Europe: Book Histories,” held in Beijing in October 2005, initiated a dialog between Western and Chinese book specialists. The conversation was far from easy – Michela Bussotti and Jean-Pierre Drège preferred to call it a negotiation. Chinese scholars systematically defended the primacy of wood-block printing and its alleged influence even on Europe. On the other side, Western researchers

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16 A selection of papers was published in *Histoire et civilisation du livre: Chine-Europe: histoires de livres* 3 (2007).
had difficulty comprehending the achievements of a very precocious print civilization in all its
diversity, given the challenges in obtaining access to relevant materials and collections.

The second major geographical region is the South American continent. In 1999,
following a Franco-German project on the *Messager Boîteux* almanacs in France, Germany, and
Switzerland, the CHCSC organized a conference at Saint-Quentin on works of mass circulation
in Europe and the Americas from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century,\(^{17}\) with the
participation of several Brazilian colleagues. This first contact set off a series of repercussions:
the invitation extended to Eliana Freitas Dutra of the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG) by the CHCSC at Saint-Quentin, and the development of joint research projects
between the two institutions. In the 2000s, exchanges between France and Brazil intensified. For
example, a conference on “Politics, the Nation and Publishing: The place of print in the
construction of political life,” was held in 2003 at UFMG in Belo Horizonte.\(^{18}\) This led to the
formation of a much wider Brazilian network, which harnessed the increasing amount of work
being undertaken by historians of the book in Brazil, and the synergy generated by the first and
second congresses on the history of reading and the book, organized by Marcia Abreu in 1998
and 2003. Recently, international collaboration has developed more broadly around the theme of
the “Transatlantic Circulation of Print and Cultural Globalization in the Nineteenth Century.”
This project, co-ordinated by Jean-Yves Mollier and Marcia Abreu, involves some forty
researchers from Brazil, Portugal, France, and Britain. Their work centers around three principal
themes: textual and print production and its dissemination across the Atlantic, the circulation and

\(^{17}\) The conference was entitled “Les almanachs populaires en Europe et dans les Amériques (XVII-XIXe siècle)”; the
proceedings were published as *Les lectures du peuple en Europe et dans les Amériques (XVIIe-XXe siècles)*, Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink, York-Gothart Mix, Jean-Yves Mollier, and Patricia Sorel, eds. (Brussels: Complexe, 2003).
reception of literature and theater, and lastly the mechanisms and networks of the diffusion of the periodical press.

Jean-Yves Mollier’s role has been crucial in promoting dialog among South American scholars. Gustavo Sora notably recalled a working lunch in Paris in 2006, with Laura Suarez de la Torre from the Mora Institute in Mexico, Eliana de Freitas Dutra, and himself which illustrated Mollier’s role as an intermediary. In addition, Jean-Yves Mollier lent strong support to the SHARP Congress in Rio de Janeiro in 2013, which was both an important stage in the internationalization of the discipline, and also a prelude to new connections and synergies among researchers in Latin America. Mollier played a major role in developing book history in Argentina, and was one of the first speakers invited to the first Argentinian conference on books and publishing in 2012, an event which led to a second conference in Cordoba in September 2016.

The last section of this brief article turns to transnational perspectives on book history, which Jean-Yves Mollier, following Henri-Jean Martin and Ian Willison, has always pursued. There were several stages in this process. The first stage, completed at Sherbrooke in 2000, was comparative, but it then led to approaching book history in terms of cultural transfers, before incorporating more recent thinking on global or entangled histories.

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Cultural transfer, an idea developed most notably by Michel Espagne and Michael Werner, presents three levels of analysis: the first privileges the agents of print circulation – from authors to booksellers, via translators, literary agents and other critics; the second level concerns particular institutions such as libraries and reading rooms (cabinets de lecture); a third perspective focuses on material supports and the nature of texts in circulation. Jean-Yves Mollier and Marie-Françoise Cachin have demonstrated the internationalization of different publishing genres from the nineteenth century onwards. The importance of the novel has been well recognized since the work of Franco Moretti, but other genres, too, emerge as equally important on the global market, such as travel guides, practical handbooks, encyclopedias and, last but not least, religious publications.

More recently, works on global history have finely delineated the influences radiating outwards from the main European publishing systems, and their specific adaptations in different parts of the globe, the transformations initiated by large international publishing and multi-media corporations, and the impact of new technologies on the chain of book production and on the economic or symbolic hierarchy of its various links.

The International Congresses of Historical Sciences in Amsterdam (2010) and Jinan (2015) enabled us to draw a preliminary sketch of a transnational history of the book worldwide. In their introduction to their panel in 2010, Martyn Lyons and Jean-Yves Mollier defined this approach as one which throws light on “the connections between societies, cultural transfers, the movement of peoples and individuals pulled in various directions, and the multiple identities

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which follow from this, sometimes at the expense of national solidarity.” They point forward in a programmatic way to three research agendas now considered essential: the intensification of work on translations and also on translators as important cultural brokers; a re-assessment of traditional relationships between center and periphery which does not neglect either the creative and productive role of peripheries or the links which develop between peripheries themselves on the margins of great cultural metropolises; and thirdly, the question of international law, particularly the law on intellectual property, as well as international institutions, both professional ones like the International Publishers’ Association and more specialized ones like UNESCO or the Agence intergouvernementale de la francophonie (Inter-governmental Agency for the French-speaking world).

The papers from Amsterdam and Jinan revealed similarities and differences between national environments. In the case of the Americas, Eliana de Freitas Dutra showed the impact of the proscription of all typographical activity in Brazil throughout the colonial period up to the early years of the nineteenth century, as well as indicating the diversity of agents involved in the transatlantic book trade.25

Considered in global terms, both meetings broke with the dominant Eurocentric view of the history of the book,26 by first of all stressing the importance of print in other continents well before European contact, and then by focusing on the bilateral nature of exchanges, and the

24 Reprinted in Histoire et civilisation du livre 8 (2012): 10, special issue on “Pour une histoire transnationale du livre,” which includes selected papers presented in Amsterdam, together with some new contributions on the theme.
26 Note also in this context the SHARP conference in Montreal in 2015, entitled “Générations et régénérations du livre / The Generation and Regeneration of Books.” Selected papers were published in a special issue of Mémoires
scientific and intellectual impact of discourses and representations of non-European societies on Western thought and ways of life.

This expansion of the history of the book and of publishing is only in its infancy. In taking it further, we must bear in mind the obstacles and limits to this kind of approach. Widening our research horizons challenges both the stamina and competence – especially linguistic competence – of individual researchers. Henceforth we have to operate in teams, in collective investigations into common corpora using shared databases. At the same time, the transnational approach does not signify simply a change of scale but it demands an investigation of the relationships of interdependence linking the local, the national, and the international. All of Jean-Yves Mollier’s work is distinguished by this dialog and this constant enrichment, underpinned by both rigorous archival research and the mastery of the broadest bibliography possible, borrowing from different regions and several disciplines.

Jean-Yves Mollier does not propose a monolithic or unilateral reading agenda, but he rather invites all specialists in the field to explore new territory, while creating the conditions for communicating their hypotheses and conclusions. His contribution to the discipline cannot simply be measured in bibliometric terms; this would obscure his role as an intermediary, which, as this paper has tried to show, has been fundamental in many parts of the world. We can also call him an observer, since his historical vision is nourished by a precise analysis of contemporary transformations in the publishing world both national and international. This problem is what lay behind his creation a few years ago of OMEC, the World Observatory of Contemporary Publishing, aiming to stimulate inquiry in different countries, and also to draw up an inventory of

the book trade, its future directions, its re-formation, and its cultural practices in the digital era. This fine idea needs reviving with a firm institutional base: what better expression of gratitude could Jean-Yves Mollier receive from his friends and colleagues?

Translated by Martyn Lyons