

SHARP DeLong Book History Book Prize— Citation text

(to be Delivered at SHARP 2019 Annual General Meeting by Claire Squires, SHARP Director of Publications and Awards, and Michael Hancher, Judge)

This year, the judges for the award—Kristina Lundblad, Dot Porter, Martyn Lyons and I—read an impressive total of 76 books submitted by publishers for the SHARP DeLong Book History Book Prize, all copyrighted 2018. We were ably assisted by Vincent Trott, SHARP’s Executive Assistant.

The total number of submissions was the highest to date in the history of the prize, just beating last year’s tally by one! These works addressed a rich variety of periods, geographical regions, and intellectual challenges—ranging from participatory reading in late Mediaeval England, to Enlightenment bestsellerdom in France, to the reception of Australian books and authors in America, and to comics, materiality, and the book of the future. The variety of topics and approaches impressed the judges, making their reading experience a rewarding one. As in prior years the robust range of subjects and the manifold approaches taken confirm the diversity and wide reach of that constantly evolving field termed “the history of the book.”

And now to the announcement of the prize winner and commendatons.

This year, we have one winner and two commendations. We will announce the commended titles first.

Our first commendation goes to a past winner, **David McKitterick**, for **The Invention of Rare Books: Private Interest and Public Memory, 1600–1840** (published by Cambridge University Press) The title of the book itself reveals his ability to think beyond received categories in search for a deeper understanding of the relation between us and our documents. McKitterick invites us to a thought-provoking journey amongst the contingencies of taste and selection, and the mutable rationales of collecting and preservation, rarity and perceived worth, over the course of two and a half centuries, from the foundation of the Bodleian Library in Shakespeare’s day to the consolidation of public research libraries in the nineteenth century. McKitterick also presents a timely caution in the present day as research libraries, hard-pressed for money and space, discard copies of common, digitally ‘preserved’ books as not rare or worth caring for.

Our second commendation goes to **Adam Smyth** for his magnificent study of English sixteenth- and seventeenth-century book culture **Material Texts in Early Modern England** (also published by Cambridge University Press). It is an extraordinarily well-written book, which makes an important contribution to the field by demonstrating how physical aspects of books and texts are in constant interplay with the abstract work proposed by the author. This interrelatedness is at the core of book history, and Smyth’s work reveals a profound understanding of its complexity. His elegant analysis of printer’s errors opens new perspectives on the dynamics of authorship and reading, and revitalizes the question of how the production of books constructs literature and its meaning.

Now, the winner! This year, the SHARP DeLong Book History Book Award goes to **Brent Nongbri** for **God’s Library: The Archaeology of the Earliest Christian Manuscripts** (published by Yale University Press). This path-breaking contribution to the field of book history urges us to reconsider beliefs and concepts that have been fundamental in the formation of religious and cultural history while captivating the reader with its exciting, Indiana Jones-esque research story. Nongbri gives a fascinating, nuanced, and revisionist interpretation of a rich array of ancient manuscripts. In so doing he throws light on the origins of the Christian codex, and warns of the dangers of reading into the past an anachronistic view of the Biblical canon. Exerting his expertise in palaeography and codicology, including attention to stitching and binding techniques, Nongbri highlights the lack of

certainty about the provenance, authorship, date, and place of origin of many influential papyrus and parchment manuscripts. The judges praise Nongbri's amalgam of thorough knowledge about techniques and materiality, his exhaustive archival research, and the analytical sharpness that he brings to bear on this important history. This is a story that involves untrustworthy antiquities dealers, private collectors spreading false information to put their rivals off the scent of discoveries, cave raiders, and the accidental discovery of papyri. *God's Library* is a must-read for anyone interested in the history of beliefs, which is, of course, also a history of books.

I'm afraid neither commended authors nor the winning author is able to be with us today to collect their award, but all have expressed their delight at their success, and they thank SHARP and the judges. Brent Nongbri sent us some words:

Thanks very much to the DeLong family and to all of you in SHARP for this wonderful award. Preparations for an international move prevented me from coming to the meeting, so I apologize for not being here to thank you for it in person. I'm grateful to the panel of judges for taking the time to read my book, and to the editorial and production team at Yale University Press for putting together what, in my opinion anyway, is a very sleek looking volume! Thanks also to the Australian Research Council for funding much of the research and covering the costs of most of the images in the book and associated permissions fees.

It's humbling to be considered in the company of the previous winners of this award, and I'm thrilled to see that historians of the book are also interested in this early Christian evidence. Scholars of ancient Christianity have long tended to focus on the texts carried within these books without giving due consideration to the manuscripts themselves as physical, three-dimensional artifacts with their own individual stories to tell. I'm very happy to be a part of the movement that is bringing early Christian studies into dialogue with materialist histories and media studies.

So once again, my sincere thanks to you.