



Australasian Rare Book School

The Origins of Rare Books

University of Otago, Dunedin, NZ

30 January–3 February 2017

This summer, thanks to SHARP's excellent scholarship program, I was fortunate enough to attend the Australasian Rare Book Summer School at the University of Otago. I participated in The Origins of Rare Books course, studying under the instruction of Professor David McKitterick, Fellow Librarian and Vice-Master of Trinity College, Cambridge. Over five days, we examined changing ideas of rarity as they relate to books, framed by a formalised study of European rare book collecting and book history from the seventeenth century to the present day.

Practical handling and examination of rare books held by University of Otago Library's Special Collections supplemented our discussions. In addition to our lectures, we also visited Dunedin Public Library's Alfred and Isabel Reed Special Collections, and the Otakou Press Room at University of Otago, where we received a demonstration of the hand-operated printing press techniques of the pre-industrial era.

While the advance reading list provided a robust panorama of European rare book history, the ability to handle and study early printed material in the context of the course elevated the scholarship to an extraordinary level of significance and understanding. As a new rare book library professional, the opportunity to visually explore how early printed material was created through our excursions and our handling of rare books helped to solidify much of the theory around this area. After reading about it in the weeks prior, being able to physically examine the Harleian Library auction catalogue – with all its idiosyncrasies – truly brought the theory to life, and was one of the major highlights of the course.

Another important element of the week was our coursework, considering the future of rare books and the historical trends that continue today by undertaking a small project. Each student in Professor McKitterick's course identified an area of printed material not commonly considered rare, but that we believed should be kept for posterity. We then presented a case for its preservation that tied back to the history and traditions of rare book collecting. Not only did this compel us to truly consider the concepts of rarity and value, but it led to a fascinating discussion about how to future-proof first edition e-books.

As an early-career librarian, the opportunity to participate in such a course was invaluable to



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me, and would not have been possible without the generosity of SHARP. Studying alongside rare book professionals with a range of experiences, forming new professional relationships, and receiving formal instruction in the provenance of rare books and their history from an expert instructor has given me new insights into the importance of my profession and a strong foundation of rare books knowledge that I will harness in both my current position and future career.

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