

How the secularization of religious houses transformed the libraries of Europe

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DESCRIPTION:

The closure of religious houses, in varying circumstances, affected all of Europe at some point between the sixteenth and nineteenth century. At different times and in different countries the consequences were widely varied, in some cases preserving medieval and early modern collections intact, in others abandoning books to their fate, or transferring them piecemeal into new ownership to serve different cultural purposes. Integral preservation or dispersal may each be viewed in positive or negative terms. For religious and political history there are many, and bigger, factors involved, and the effects of secularization worked on many things beside libraries and books. None the less, by focusing on books and libraries through these changes a particular narrative emerges of great cultural importance. It is the most important book-historical story for the survival and accessibility of Europe's heritage of the written word, one that interacts with major historical themes and still connects with future issues for the continuing role of books and libraries in the European heritage.

A conference held in Oxford in 2012 brought together thirty experts in different aspects of this process or with knowledge of its impact in different countries and at different periods. The result was to bring together and share for the first time the similar and different experiences of different European countries, from Portugal and Spain in the west to Poland and Ukraine in the east, from Finland and Sweden in the north to Naples in the south, with ramifications stretching to North and South America.

ISBN:

9782503593920 (hb)

PRICE:

\$124.00 (hb)

PUBLICATION DATE:

05 July 2022 (hb)

BINDING:

Hardback

PAGES:

670

ILLUSTRATIONS:

11 col illus.

PUBLISHER:

Brepols Publishers

IMPRINT:

Brepols Publishers

SERIES:

Bibliologia

READER INTERESTS:

Book History
Conservation, Museum
and Library Studies