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Confiscations at Customs: Banned Books and the French Booktrade during the Last Years of the Ancien Régime [Book Review]

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Confiscations at Customs: Banned Books and the French Booktrade during the Last Years of the Ancien régime. By Robert L. Dawson. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2006. xv, 315 pp. € 100 (paper). ISBN 0-7294-0881-7.

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Robert L. Dawson's stated goal for *Confiscations at Customs: Banned Books and the French Booktrade during the Last Years of the Ancien régime* is "to concentrate the main thrust of the research on two related manuscripts…. Those two ledgers cover what initially happened in Paris to importations and confiscations from 1778 to 1789." (p. 2) He of course includes much more than these limited objectives since "[m]any other original sources will also pass in review." (p. 2) He also gives a brief history of censorship before this period as well as documentary evidence on the end of customs review in the early years of the French Revolution.

Dawson describes the customs review in all its complexity. Customs officers were required to identify all book shipments before they entered Paris and then send them to the Chambre syndicale for inspection. The inspectors had several choices. The most objectionable books were destroyed, most often shredded at the Bastille though some copies were requested by nobles or high ranking officials for their private collections. The inspectors returned others to their senders. They allowed book dealers to pick up those that permanently or temporarily passed inspection. In some cases, they gave tacit permission with the understanding that the books could later be fully approved or condemned after a more thorough review. There was yet another intermediate category where the books could be discretely sold but not displayed, advertised, or listed in catalogs. The decisions were not permanent and could change over time, most often towards less censorship as the liberal forces gained greater power on the eve of the Revolution.

Content was not the only reason for confiscations. The local book trade held a quasi-monopoly on publishing and sales in Paris though Dawson notes that Parisian publishers were not able to meet reader demand. The inspectors often seized books where a local book dealer had exclusive rights and either sent them back to original publishers or gave them to the Parisian publisher who held the rights. Dawson discusses in some depth publishing centers outside of Paris where labor costs were lower and that had their own system of confiscations. Since Parisian customs officers treated foreign publications somewhat more liberally, the provincial publishers often used fictitious imprints and mimicked the typography of foreign publishers.

Dawson believes that the customs officials were a hard working lot but that the system broke down under the weight of its complexity and the increasing number of publications to be reviewed by the end of the period. Even with the centralized system of royal government, customs and the French book trade had to deal with contradictory decisions that could be changed by pressure from various sources including the conservative Catholic hierarchy. Dawson is at times surprised at what got through and what got confiscated and believes that these inconsistent decisions helped undermine royal authority.

This volume can also serve as a case study in using primary source materials in archival collections. Dawson takes great care to give his methodology in examining the two principal registers and in coordinating information from additional multiple sources. He recounts the difficulties in reading handwritten documents and in interpreting what he found such as suspected errors in the register entries. He makes no claims that his is the definitive work on the subject and expects that much additional information could be found in unexamined documents. He is also blunt about how the archival repositories have sometimes hindered his research. He is particularly unhappy with the Bibliothèque nationale de France for limiting the number of daily requests for primary sources and for not allowing him to consult original documents when a microform copy is available since the microform version is often not clear enough to indicate erasures, changes of hand, and other important textual details.

At 150 pages, the main narrative is less than 50% of the volume's 315 pages. There are eleven appendices whose importance is nonetheless understated since five are available online where "[t]hey are retrievable in search engines using the identifier 'Confiscations123xyz.'" (p. v.) This search leads to a PDF file of 274 pages and a recommendation from the author that libraries print out a copy to shelve with the book. I would feel more comfortable with this option if the WorldCat record indicated this supplementary material and included holdings information for a paper copy in safe hands. (Consulted May 28, 2007) Other supplementary materials include: "List of secondary sources" (pp. 277-285), "Index of works" (pp. 287-299), and "Index of names, places and themes" (pp. 301-315).

Dawson has written a work for the serious scholar as it appearance as a volume of *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth* Century (*SVEC* 2006·07) would indicate. He presumes a reading knowledge of French since he does not translate the often extensive quotes. I also found myself consulting my favorite volume of French history to understand better some of the allusions to historical events that had an effect upon the book trade. I doubt that none but the most serious scholars of 18th century French literature would recognize, much less have read, many of the works

cited in the text. To his credit, Dawson almost always explains why the more obscure works were objectionable enough to be confiscated. He also has a section where he explicitly has chosen to give the fate of works by more popular authors such as Voltaire and Rousseau as they passed through customs inspection. Finally, the volume will be of interest to Beaumarchais scholars for Dawson's discussion of his role in editing the Kehl edition of Voltaire's works.

While the following comment may be unjustified given the goals of the author, I would have appreciated a bit more context on censorship in other European countries during the same period. Was censorship and control of the book trade particularly onerous in France compared with the rest of Europe? Were there other European models that France might have imitated that would have better served the interests of the French monarchy? A second more legitimate desire for context would be more detail on the economic costs of the inefficiencies in the French book trade from the customs reviews and the confiscation of books since Dawson alludes to these factors.

In sum, Dawson has written an excellent scholarly work supported by extensive documentation in both printed and online formats. With the emphasis on policies, procedures, and politics rather than on the intellectual content of the works, I believe that it will be more of interest to scholars of the book trade and French history than those with an interest in censorship and intellectual freedom.