



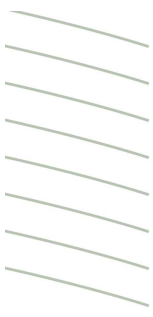
Rare Book Cataloguing: Melbourne Australasian Rare Book Summer School

Miranda Fyfield

Librarian, St Paschal Library, Order of Friars Minor

The Franciscan Order has a collection of about 800 books and manuscripts housed in the Rare Books room of St Paschal Library, Melbourne. Chief amongst these special books are two which are now held for safe-keeping at the State Library of Victoria – the *Codex Sancti Paschalis* (dated at about 1290) and the *Conflatus in primum sententiarum / Franciscus de Mayronis* (about 1450). The St Paschal Library catalogue lists most of the items in the library which appear to be rare or unusual. However there are in addition old and possibly rare items still waiting in cupboards to be assessed and catalogued. Recently I have initiated a project with Dr Anna Welch, who is a historian of the book working at the State Library of Victoria. Anna has offered to assess the St Paschal Library collection of rare books and to advise on care and maintenance of each item. We will work together and I foresee that she and I will also scrutinise and improve the descriptive cataloguing of each item.

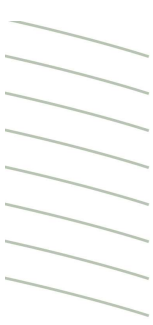
In the light of this important library project, I applied to attend the Melbourne Australasian Rare Book Summer School. I was fortunate to be accepted into the three-day course in rare book cataloguing. In all there



"What a treat!"

were twelve participants, some of whom had travelled from New Zealand and interstate to attend. The course was given by the State Library of Victoria's rare book cataloguers, librarians Richard Overell and Derrick Moors. Chief amongst the many highlights was the fact that Derrick and Richard shared with us so generously their wonderful wealth of experience and knowledge. I found it stimulating that there was also a huge amount of expertise amongst the participants. These experienced librarians work in collections specialising in many areas - for example, a privately-owned modern art gallery (MONA), a university rare books department (Melbourne University), etc. Hence there were interesting discussions around the table, with everyone contributing ideas and experience.

The course was very practical. Derrick and Richard brought with them many examples of rare books and these interesting items were passed around for our handling and inspection. What a treat! We also visited the State Library's own conservation laboratory; here again, the conservators were generous with their time and information. Their passion for their work was evident in every word. On the evening of the second day, we were able to spend over an hour visiting the newly-acquired Emerson Collection (2015, April) in the basement of the State Library. History of the Book Department Manager, Des Cowley, showed us many fascinating items from this unique and highly valuable collection of early printed books and manuscripts (even handwritten letters from England's King Charles I). On the final morning we worked in the computer laboratory, assisted by Derrick, Richard and Kate Monypenny (Digital Resources graduate working as assistant to the cataloguing course). We tested our skills by some serious cataloguing and loaded the resultant records into the National Library's collection.

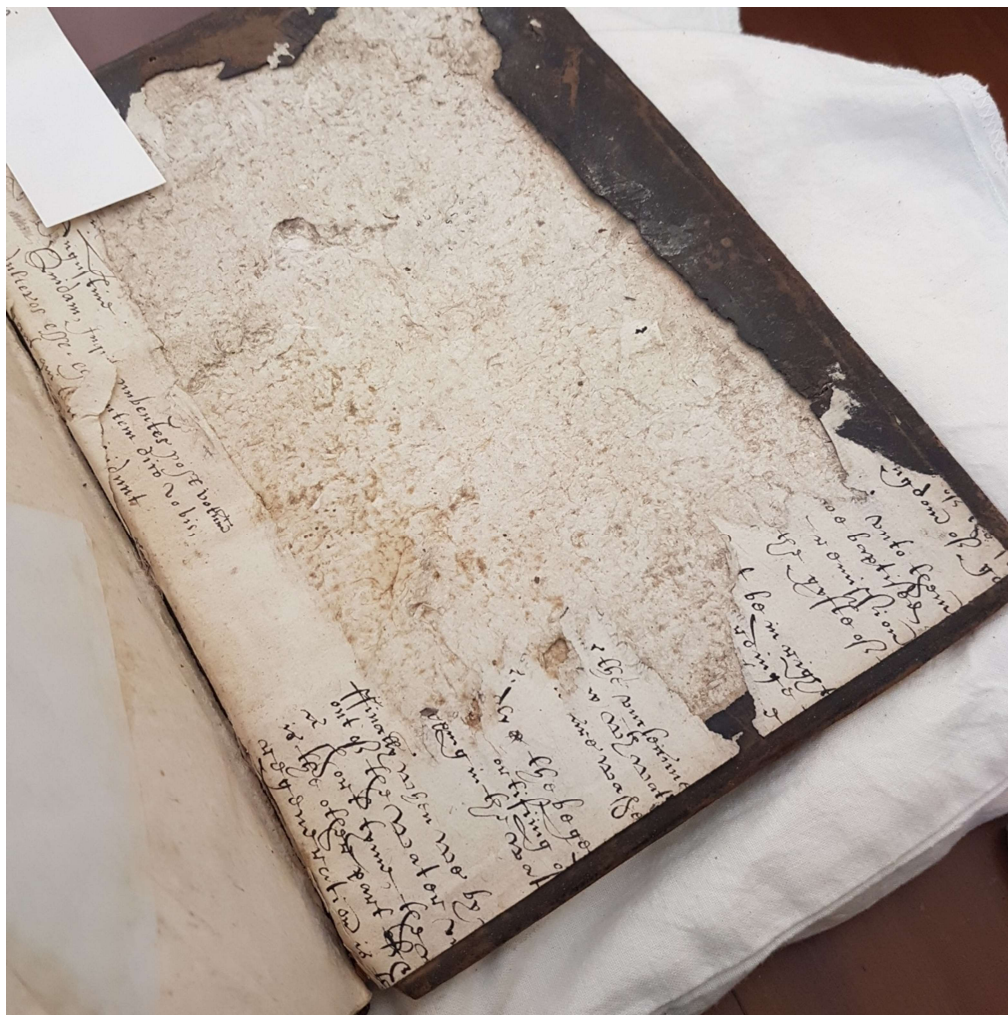


*"It's the
cataloguer's keen
eye for detail,
specialist
knowledge and
skills..."*

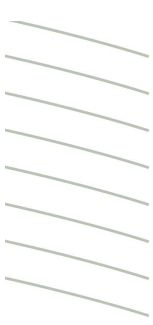
It is not possible to document everything we learned in a brief review. I'll concentrate on the absolute highlights of these three days, which were named 'Introduction to rare books cataloguing', 'Learning the book' and 'Putting it all together'. Des Cowley introduced the first morning with a historical overview of the world of rare book collections. I knew that in my own librarianship studies in the mid-1960s there wasn't a 'Rare Books Collection' in the State Library. Amazing as it may now seem, books were not arranged this way in the State Library until the 1970s. Everything was in together. Then in the 1990s the State Library set up a conservation storage area; into this area went books which had been printed before 1801, or had substantial commercial value, or were known to be scarce, or had unique features (eg special bindings), or which were known to be historically important. Today this area is called 'The History of the Book Collection' and the specialist rare book librarians perform an active role, collecting for the future as well as preserving the past. In his interesting overview, Des pointed out that the current method of contributing copies to a shared catalogue (as is the National Library of Australia's Trove) leads to a downgrading of cataloguing skills: a single digitized record now stands for all copies held. Hence the essential importance of a course like this, where cataloguers can be educated into the detail of cataloguing a unique and individual item. Time and again it's the cataloguer's keen eye for detail, specialist knowledge and skills which prove to be of prime importance to academic researchers.

Des pointed out a few of the important things which are now part of a catalogue record for a rare item: provenance, ownership marks, book plates, bindings and re-bindings, binders' tickets, watermarks, owners' annotations, dust wrappers. In modern specialist productions, the book designer should be noted as creator of a contemporary rare book.

Richard gave the second session, on the technical equipment of the cataloguer's tools (Library of Congress 2011 descriptive standards; the British Library's and European libraries' procedures). He then outlined the history of the printing press from the 18th century onwards, noting changes in production methods as the hand-presses were superseded. Books printed before 1801 show many more variations because they are the result of far more manual methods. Showing several examples from the SLV's collection, Richard noted details of particular bindings, endpapers, misspellings (which add to uniqueness), the use of waste printed leaves in binding, and so on. Detailed cataloguing gives the reader and the researcher good direction. Useful clues can be found by the keen-eyed cataloguer: one example was the original dealer's note, pasted on to the binding at the front of a 1517 edition of Seneca's works. Richard showed us the State Library's equal-oldest fragment of manuscript music (from the 11th century) which, because the binder had regarded it as waste scrap, had been used in the binding of a later book.



In one of the books in St Paschal Library we can see that a piece of scrap 16th-century manuscript was used to reinforce a binding dating to the same century.

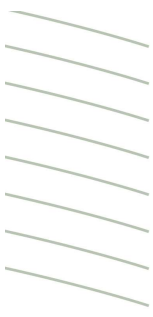


Richard and Derrick taught us the details of transcription of 17th century books. Each day a pile of old books was brought to our seminar table and we were given one of these treasures to use in our transcription exercises. Derrick enlightened us about terminology and abbreviations: what at first appeared to be algebraic formulae were revealed to us as the succinct language used when describing physical aspects of each book - paper measurements, signatures, gatherings, pagination. We learnt about watermarks and about types and sizes of paper. We learnt how to discern what size the original full sheet of paper sheet had been, before the printed book was bound. We were so fortunate to be able to spend several hours examining 17th and 18th century books in order to describe them physically, and having our efforts assessed and corrected by Derrick and Richard. A few of the books were in fact theological and of particular interest in the light of St Paschal Library's collection. Alongside the practical opportunities, Richard and Derrick made constant references to essential works of bibliography. It was most helpful that both lecturers made frequent references to particular library websites and their online catalogues, where we could see examples of descriptions of early printed books. They also provided reading lists of essential bibliographical textbooks and cataloguing tools, as well as helpful websites.

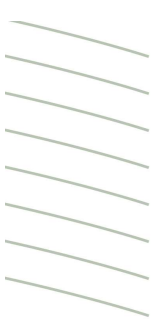
The early printed books we were shown came from the Netherlands, England, Germany, France and Italy. Many were in Latin. Abbreviations of words on the title pages were quite common. Because rare books librarians are working with manuscripts, printed books, maps and music written, printed and published before the 20th Century, facility in Latin, old German and Romance languages is extremely useful – if not indeed essential. However, it surprised me that in present-day Australia, unlike in Europe and the UK, these languages are unfortunately not widely known even by rare books librarians.

On the Thursday afternoon we were taken to the Conservation laboratory of the State Library. It was so interesting to see the stages in a conservation job, and the extreme care with which each item was treated. The chief conservator certainly shared her passion for her job as she showed us several examples of her work.

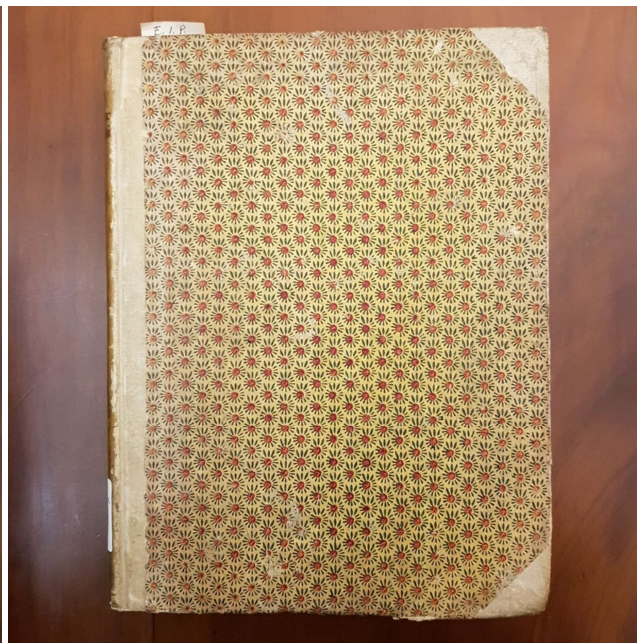
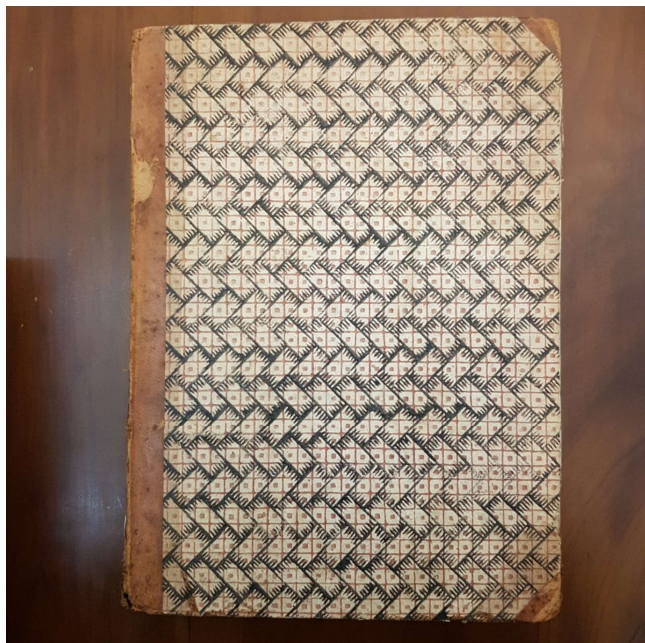
Richard gave us a fascinating Friday morning on bindings, illustrated as ever by examples from the State Library's collection. We became familiar with vellum and morocco (or turkey) leather bindings, gilt edges, Cambridge-styled panelled calf, yapp edges, fore-edge painting on vellum, blind-stamped panels, mottled calf, cat's-paw binding, tree calf, marbled boards and deckled edges. We saw what's meant by 'quarter bound' and half-bound' calf, goffering and Etruscan colours. I'm sure I was not alone in starting to appreciate the detail of these early printed books with completely new eyes.

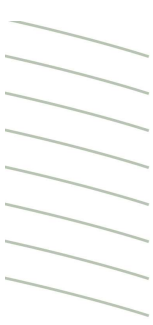


This example of an incunabula is held in St Paschal Library and as you can see, it is a prime candidate for the conservator’s skill and care. It’s wonderful that the original binding has survived 500 years – and with the metal clasps still attached!



Here are three interesting and attractive bindings from the collection in St Paschal Library:





In the final session, Richard made the interesting point that the rare book librarian is very wise to maintain firm links with the antiquarian book trade – antiquarian booksellers and rare books librarians do indeed work hand-in-hand, to ensure the best of these early books are preserved either by collectors or by librarians. Here again, I found a resonance with the history of the *Codex Sancti Paschalis*: an anonymous benefactor enabled the Franciscans to acquire this precious manuscript from the dealer, Phillips. And now this rare codex is held in the State Library of Victoria. Having been through the conservation laboratory and having been given a new binding, it is now housed in the Rare Books safe, preserved in the correct environment on behalf of the Franciscan Order. This is a perfect example of cooperation for which generations will be grateful.

Picture credits: The pictures included in this article were taken by Dr Anna Welch, librarian at the State Library of Victoria's History of the Book Collection, during the first of her sessions assessing the St Paschal Library, Order of Friars Minor (Box Hill, Victoria) collection.