

National Trust libraries: an untapped resource.
A pilot study of Italian holdings at Belton House, Lincolnshire

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The National Trust owns and manages over 150 properties in the U.K. that contain collections of books, the majority still housed in the buildings where they were assembled and read by their original owners. Between forty and fifty of the libraries in National Trust properties have been described as being of ‘major national significance’ (Purcell and Shenton, 2005), constituting an unparalleled resource for the study of the history of private book ownership in the United Kingdom. To date, almost no work has been done on most of these collections, although the process of cataloguing the major libraries is underway and ongoing, the results accessible to researchers on the Copac Catalogue as they become available. This project functions as a pilot study, in order to showcase future research potential in these exciting collections, which form an intrinsic part of our national cultural heritage. The project brings together interested parties from a variety of backgrounds to discuss initial findings and collaborate on the way forward in future.

The pilot study examines the place of Italian books in an English great house library in the wake of the Reformation. The opportunity to map the passage of Italian texts across the English Channel enriches the picture of Italian cultural vibrancy after the Council of Trent, directed outwards towards Protestant nations despite the religious conflicts. It highlights related questions concerning the impact of Italian works within the English context, probing issues of acquisition, reception and dissemination of ‘Catholic’ models. The holdings of an early modern private library help map the competing influences on that house and family, the works arriving from other contexts, their passage from reader to reader within the household and beyond it. Thus a library, more than simply a collection of books, becomes a repository of the social history of a place. More widely, the findings of this study engage with larger questions about English ‘cultural permeability’ in the early modern period.

The pilot study takes place at Belton House in Lincolnshire. Belton houses the Trust’s second largest library (over 11,000 titles), assembled by successive generations of the Brownlow family, and the collection has now been fully catalogued. 229 works are in Italian, published between 1500 and 1800, across a variety of genres and subjects. Analysis of the Italian holdings form the basis for two themed workshops and an exhibition of books at

Belton House. One workshop, to be held at Belton House, will explore the theme of ‘Cultural mobility in the early modern library’, considering the passage of continental books into English collections, and the social and cultural history contained in these texts. This event will rely on direct access to texts from the Belton collection to guide discussion, and will aim to map the various ways in which the books in National Trust libraries can and should be drawn into the narratives that these houses tell about the families that owned them. The other workshop, hosted by the Centre for Material Texts at the University of Cambridge, will explore the theme of ‘Great House libraries: an assessment of impact’, and will seek to advance new ideas about the curatorship of great house libraries, in discussion with the curators themselves. An exhibition of Italian books will be held at Belton House during 2013, showcasing the connections between book and place for a general audience. Finally, a planning meeting will put in place the framework for a larger project, spanning major European languages, and looking at the acquisition and reception of continental books in a number of English great house libraries after the Reformation.

For further information about the project and related events, please contact Dr Abigail Brundin: asb17@cam.ac.uk