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Interview with Prof. Andrew Pettegree Author, “The Book In the Renaissance”

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KENNEALLY: It is the dawn of a new age in publishing, and there is no such thing as a sure bet when it comes to business. How do you market books? How do you make money as a publisher or author? What do you do if someone pirates your work? Great questions for 2010 and for 1450. Yes, that’s right – for the 15th century and the very dawn of the printing age. And joining us today is the author of a wonderful new book about those very first years in the history of the book, Professor Andrew Pettegree, on the line with us from St Andrews University in Scotland. And welcome to *Beyond the Book*, professor.

PETTEGREE: Thanks very much, Christopher. It’s very good to be talking to you.

KENNEALLY: Well, it’s a pleasure to speak with you because we’ve been reading a great deal about your new book. It received a wonderful review in *The New York Times* from Robert Pinsky, the former poet laureate of the United States, and much praise throughout the U.S. and the UK for this book, which is just out this summer from the Yale University Press.

And what’s particularly drawn many people are the parallels that they’ve drawn – not necessarily that you’ve drawn – between the very dawn of printing and book publishing in the 15th century and our own age today.

But before we go to that piece of the discussion, I want to chat with you a bit about what made books such a revolutionary development in the history of Europe. And we should point out that you are a British historian and one of the leading experts on Europe during the Reformation. One of your much-praised books previously is *Reformation and the Culture of Persuasion*, which came out in 2005 from Cambridge University Press. You are, as we said, a professor at St Andrews



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University in Scotland, and director of the Universal Short Title Catalogue Project, which we'll probably ask you about as well. And you're the founding director of St Andrews' Reformation Studies Institute.

And I guess my first question is, set the stage for us. Give us a notion of what the cultural circumstances were in Germany and in Europe in the mid-15th century.

PETTEGREE: Well, I think the first thing to understand about this period is that this was a world already full of books. Of course they were manuscript books – hand-copied. But there were an awful lot of them already in circulation. And some people with means could already put together substantial collections. We already know of libraries of 200, 300 – even, in the case of Europe's leading rulers, of over 1,000.

And people used books. Students used books for their studies. Noblemen read books or had books read to them for recreational purposes. And the leading scholars of the age also were interested in books as the repositories of the learning of classical Greece and Rome. And it was the hope that it would make this learning more accessible. That was one of the leading motivations behind the move to mechanical manufacture of books in the mid-15th century.

But the point needs to be made that there were a lot of books around even before this. People were very comfortable with books. There was a trade in books. There was an industrial production of manuscript books.

KENNEALLY: Right. So the book and reading and sharing of knowledge that the book allows, because it's portable – it's one of the great inventions simply because of that. It could be put on a shelf and the batteries never wear down – none of that sort of thing happens. And you can just pick it up tomorrow or 100 years from now or pass it along to a friend or send it to someone across the continent. All of these things were possible before the printing press came into being.

PETTEGREE: Yeah.

KENNEALLY: But the printing press takes this and just sort of leaps ahead in a kind of exponential way. Talk about the great change that the printing press made on that culture of the book.

PETTEGREE: Well, I mean one other thing I'd add to your list of the great advantages of the book is that it was very flexible. Many manuscript books are, in fact, collections of many different texts, which the owner had collected and ordered according to their own preferences.



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And actually one aspect of printing that we mustn't ignore is that, in some respects, it cut down the flexibility that you had with these texts. Instead of the texts coming in in order of your own desiring, and you sent them along, a bookbinder would bind them up as you wished, suddenly the book had an unexpected fixity. And that's one aspect of my story – that to some extent the invention of printing is a story of unintended consequences. People's hopes for print and what actually occurred go in very divergent directions.

But if we're talking about what people expected of the new invention, they expected that it would produce more books, many more books, at cheaper prices. But these books would be very much the sort of books they were used to, the sort of books which were familiar to them from the pre-print era.

KENNEALLY: And what in fact did happen then? What kind of books, what kind of printing did appear, almost from the very beginning?

PETTEGREE: Well, from the very beginning, the printers printed the sort of books they were encouraged to by their patrons and their first customers. And these tended to be the traditional buyers of books in manuscript society. These were the humanist scholars who had been at the forefront in the rediscovery of the classics and institutional customers – the religious orders and clerics around Europe. Now, for these traditional customers, they printed very much the sort of books that these people wanted.

Unfortunately, what they found was that, whereas in the manuscript period someone would be looking for a single copy of a book, and that was a very simple retail transaction. Producing the same sorts of books for these people left them with, let's say, another 299 books which this customer, this patron, did not want, which had to be disposed of in the open market. The problem with that was that the sort of books that had been particularly popular in the manuscript age were soon produced in far too great numbers, in oversupply. The market was glutted, and the first printers, generally speaking, went out of business.

It's at that point that business pragmatism has to take over. They have to readjust their market and start printing books which have more commercial appeal and can be disposed of more simply.

KENNEALLY: Well I think the point you're making here is that it was one thing to invent the printing press. It's an entirely different matter to invent the publishing business.

PETTEGREE: Exactly so. And that perhaps is the more difficult invention to make. I mean, as in all periods, the people in the 15th century most involved with the new



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printed books were fascinated by the technology – those who were engaged in perfecting the new technology, who spent many, many thousands, mostly money they did not have, on the experimental phase, and the people who saw the first books were equally fascinated by this new invention. People recognized it at the time as something of great significance.

But they paid far less attention to the commerce of books, to how you're going to raise the capital for these great projects, how you're going to dispose of books in what is, at least for Latin books, one single, integrated European market. And that's a far, far more complex operation than in the manuscript age, when you're dealing with far smaller numbers and, normally, single retail transactions.

What they have to invent, in fact, is a wholly new wholesale market for books, which works not as a cash economy but largely by exchange and often through the major centers of commerce. This is why, from a very early stage, printing settles down in the major commercial centers of Europe rather than in the main intellectual centers of Europe. You can make quite a long list of Europe's university towns which never have a very active printing industry, whereas almost all of the major centers of trade have a very vibrant commercial printing and publishing industry.

KENNEALLY: And, very briefly, because it's coming up on the annual appearance of the Frankfurt Book Fair, Frankfurt was just one of those towns.

PETTEGREE: Frankfurt establishes itself very quickly as the major book market. And the whole trade organizes itself around the Frankfurt fair. You see printers working exceptionally long hours in the run-up to Frankfurt to get their books ready. You see authors even beginning to time their books to be ready for the Frankfurt fair. Frankfurt is vitally important. And the major publishers always reckoned that they needed to dispose of about 50% of a print run at Frankfurt by wholesale transactions with the other major publishers who'd be represented there.

KENNEALLY: Fascinating because very little indeed has changed, at least in principle. There's a point that has occurred to me in the past and I think was reinforced with your book. And that is the way that book publishing – book writing, even – is a kind of venture capitalism of the mind.

PETTEGREE: Absolutely, yeah.

KENNEALLY: Talk about that.

PETTEGREE: Well, it swiftly becomes clear that you need pretty deep pockets to publish big books in the first age of print because for the very simple reason that you can't sell anything until the last sheet of print is printed. So if you've got a big



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book in folio of about 400 pages, let's say, that's a considerable number of days, weeks and months before the whole edition is ready.

Now that involves extremely serious, delicate and difficult decisions for the publisher who's taking this on, not least, how many copies to print, because that decision has to be made at the very beginning. So you have to know your market very well. And you have to also be prepared at this end of the market to hold stock for a very long time before you'll get back your full investment.

Now that's not unlike the sort of transactions that major international merchants were engaged in in this period, when they'd raise a lot of money on credit, send off a consignment, and it might be many months before a consignment would come back and they'd make some profit. And at that end of the market, it's only really the very well-capitalized firms who can take part.

As a result, these are sited in only a handful of towns around Europe. And a very large proportion of the learned book market, that is the market in serious Latin books, which is the heart of this international trade, is in the hands of a relatively small number of people in places like Basel, Venice, Antwerp, Paris, Frankfurt, Cologne, and Leipzig.

Now, what happens around this is that you get a penumbra of much smaller operations dealing with much smaller books for essentially local markets. And it must be said, these small books were not unprofitable. Indeed, in many respects they were some of the most profitable books you could take on.

KENNEALLY: Professor, I'm sorry, but I was going to say, tell us about those small books. And of course I have to say that, in our own age, we can't refer to small presses anymore. At least in the United States, we have to describe them as independent publishers, so we'll use that phrase, because there are no more B movies, there are only independent films. And so likewise, in the book publishing businesses. But those small books, those independent publishers in the less – the sort of not the first level of publishing, what were they publishing? And what kind of authors were they attracting?

PETTEGREE: Well, the sort of people who took on these small books were often extremely canny, because let's consider – I've described the economics of the large book, let's say an edition of one of the church fathers. Let's think of a small book, a typical small book, a two-sheet pamphlet on recent events in Hungary or an almanac or a small schoolbook. Well, that would take less than two days to go through the press. So already, within half a week, you're beginning to get return. It would often be directed towards a local market. It would talk about things that would interest local people. It would be in the local vernacular language, very



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often, rather than Latin. And these books were very cheap, but they were often very popular.

And, particularly after the Reformation, which led to an enormous surge in cheap print because of the great interest in Luther, this new profitable business helped give the printing industry throughout Europe a sort of second boost of energy and led to the reestablishment of printing in many places which hadn't been able to sustain a printing firm during the first years of the print explosion.

The most profitable of all types of printing of these small books, in fact, was printing for the local authorities – if you printed broadsheets for the local town council, if you printed copies of edicts of the king, or if you printed small books for the local religious authorities. The great advantage of that sort of work is you'd be paid, very often, a lump sum by the commissioning authority, who'd take the whole edition off your hands, so you didn't even then need to go to the trouble of sending it through a bookshop and sharing the profit with the bookseller. So printers absolutely loved that sort of work.

KENNEALLY: And we can see why they might. We are talking with Professor Andrew Pettegree, author of the book, *In the Renaissance*, just out from Yale University Press. And what, I think, that leads us to, Professor, is an interesting, potentially much longer discussion about printing and publishing as a corrupting force. You spoke about the expectation, which was very lofty and obviously looked back to the way that books had been consumed and treated in the pre-printing world. And then print comes along, and it has a sort of a transformative role for the way people think about the text itself, the way that people think about what books will mean to the public, the way that people think about what libraries are for.

Tell us about that.

PETTEGREE: Well, I think with all revolutions you get the first generation of revolutionaries, who are then extremely disappointed by the consequences of the great movement they've unleashed. And this is exactly so with print. The first boosters of printing were often humanist scholars. And they had a very precise intention. They wanted more books for people like themselves because they wanted to be able to own more books and get them more easily. In the old manuscript age, it was often very difficult to source the text you wanted to own. And when you'd sourced it, you had to persuade the owner to lend it so you could have it copied up by a scribe. Commercially available texts of the key texts of the classical authors were right at the heart of the project.

But then, of course, they found the printers were soon fed up with producing multiple editions of these sorts of texts because they couldn't make money from



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them. The scholars found that the texts weren't as accurate as they'd hoped, and printers introduced errors into them. And they also began to wonder whether print was such a good thing after all if it was making books available to the uneducated. Until this point, books had been very much the possession of a rather closed caste. And they were by no means happy at the idea that print would now be available to all. That wasn't – hadn't been part of their agenda at all.

KENNEALLY: It's fascinating. And I'm going to get to the very nub of the call here, which is to sort of ask you to draw out your own conclusions around what we can learn from the very first days of printing and how it applies to our era today. I started by saying we're at the dawn of a new age in publishing. I think that that's – we've been promised that for some years now, but it really does seem to be happening with the adoption of e-books and just the explosion of the e-book catalogue that's available at Amazon and anywhere else.

What can we see as similarities? And what perhaps do you see as really disjunctions in that history? I mean, do you think that we're about to see something repeated here? Or is it going to be an entirely different story?

PETTEGREE: I think we'll only know what's going to happen when it's happened. I think that's the lesson of the invention of printing. The invention of printing was accompanied by as much false prediction and disappointed expectations as has the new media age today.

A lot of people then lost a lot of money by backing the wrong horses, as indeed people have in the last 20 or 30 years. People found it very, very difficult to make money from the new technology in the first hundred years, as they have with the new technologies now. And so what I'd say initially is that it's extremely difficult to predict the consequences of a technological change as fundamental as this. Nor does the new technology drive out the old anything like as fast as people are predicting. In the 15th and 16th century, manuscripts remain an important part of information culture. And they remain that right through until the end of the 18th century.

I'm moving on from my work on book history to write more specifically now on the history of news. And what I'm finding is that manuscript news retains an authority and a prestige and a popularity far beyond the first printed periodicals, which begin to come in in the 17th century. And so it's not really in fact until the 19th century that print dominates the market in news. People still look for a multimedia experience of news.

So my sentiment is that you mustn't write off the book yet. The book is so convenient and flexible in so many ways, it is an invention, an artifact, of genius.



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And the book has survived the technological change from manuscript to print. And I would not be surprised if it did not survive quite robustly into the 21st century.

KENNEALLY: Well it's a pleasure to hear you say that. And I would second it. I have a feeling the book will be around for quite some time.

And I'd like to close our discussion here today with Professor Andrew Pettegree for *Beyond the Book* – and it's been fascinating, Professor – to ask you about your own sentimental feelings about the book. I love books. I love reading. And I have learned that to love books is to love not only what's in them but how they are made – the printing, the typeface, the jackets and all of that. And you are privileged to be looking at these books, these very rare books, some of them perhaps unique editions. How do you feel about the book itself? And wax poetic, if you will, on your own love of the book.

PETTEGREE: Well, it's strange in a way because I've spent much of the last 10 years looking at some of the grubbiest books produced during the 16th century. I mean –

KENNEALLY: It gives a whole new meaning to dirty book, right?

PETTEGREE: And this is in fact the great untold story of the 16th century book, and that is cheap books. Unfortunately perhaps naturally, libraries have always collected the most beautiful books. They've wanted the most beautiful, the most expensive, the most illustrated. But in fact those are not the heart of the experience of printing in the 16th century.

So my group in St Andrews has made a point of trying to collect as many examples as we can of what you might call wholly ephemeral books – broadsheets, little pamphlets, the sort of thing that barely survive. In fact, of all the books published in Europe before 1600, most survive in only one copy, which makes you wonder just how many are lost altogether or might still be to be found in out-of-the-way libraries tucked away here and there around the world.

But in a way this is what I like about books. It's their place in material culture. It's the appearance of the type on the page, the organization, the paging to these books – the craftsman's skill that goes behind organizing a page of black on white, which is very distinctive, which is almost a sort of painting and an artwork in itself.

And I suppose it also tells you things of importance about why people buy books. I mean I buy books. I buy lots of books. But I often buy books that I've already read. I often buy books that I know the contents of. I buy books often simply to have it, because it should be in my collection. And that's why, I think, we have to



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credit the 16th century with some of the same sort of motivation. It's by no means certain that people in the 16th century bought books just to read them.

And that introduces another level of complication, which we haven't got time for today, I suspect.

KENNEALLY: Well it would be delightful to continue the conversation. I do want to just be sure though that that effort you're talking about is indeed what's called the Universal Short Title Catalogue. Is that correct?

PETTEGREE: That's right. That's what we're just in the process – we'll publish this online, free access, in 2011, at which point our users will be able to search by multiple criteria all books published throughout Europe before 1601 – something like 350,000 separate editions with about 1.5 million located copies.

KENNEALLY: Well I just want to thank you on behalf of book lovers everywhere for your work and for this new book – the book *In the Renaissance*, just published by Yale University Press. We have been speaking today for *Beyond the Book* with Professor Andrew Pettegree, a British historian and currently holding a professorship at St Andrews University in Scotland, where he is director of the Universal Short Title Catalogue project. And Professor Pettegree, thank you very much indeed for joining us today.

PETTEGREE: My pleasure. Very nice to be with you.

KENNEALLY: And indeed very nice to have all of you as listeners for *Beyond the Book* from Copyright Clearance Center. For all of my colleagues here at CCC, thank you very much for listening.

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