An Italian census

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In the first century of printing Italy was at the centre of the European printing industry; in the period up to 1550, more books were printed in Venice than in any other European city. Or perhaps one should say that more books are thought to have been printed there than anywhere else. For there is a difficulty. While the fifteenth-century picture is extremely well documented, for the sixteenth century, when the bulk of this activity occurred, it is impossible to get complete and accurate information about Italian printing, since none of the major Italian libraries has ever published even a partial catalogue of its printed books; some of them have not even got on their premises a single, unified catalogue of their holdings for use by readers. The most informative publication on the subject is still the British Library’s Short Title Catalogue of its own holdings of Italian books before 1601; but these, at the British Library’s own estimate, do not comprise more than a quarter of the surviving production.

Now, however, the situation is being transformed, thanks to the initiative and enthusiasm of a handful of librarians working for an Italian government department, who are compiling a census of sixteenth-century Italian printing, which aims to fill once and for all this huge gap in our bibliographical knowledge. The census will benefit not only what are generally called Italian studies, but also, owing to the central position of Italy in European Renaissance culture, a whole range of other disciplines, such as classical studies, law, Church history, Hebrew studies, the history of ideas, the history of science and technology and the history of medicine.

The census – the Censimento delle edizioni (continued overleaf)

Kennedy, William. Ironweed. Legs. Billy Phelan’s Greatest Game 1116
Koller, Ann Marie. The Theater Duke 1138
Kraus, Karl. In These Great Times: A Karl Kraus reader 1121
Kühn, Dieter. Die Kammer des schwarzen Lichts 1136
Lilliu, G. La civiltà nuragica 1131
Murray, Denis. The Duck Street Gang 1139
McSweeney, Kerry. Four Contemporary Novelists: Agnes Wilson, Brian Moore, John Fowles, V. S. Naipaul 1112
Miller, Henry. The Time of the Assassins 1124
Miskimin, Harry A. Money and Power in Fifteenth-century France 1122
Mochulsky, Konstantin. Aleksandr Blok 1135
Montague, John. The Dead Kingdom 1124
Mordden, Ethan. Broadway Babies 1137
Pasolini, Pier Paolo. Selected Poems 1130
Pawel, Ernst. The Nightmare of Reason: A life of Franz Kafka 1120
Rimer, J. Thomas, and Yamazaki Masakazu (Editors and translators). On the Art of the Nô Drama 1138
Réda, Jacques. L’Herbe des talus 1117
Šaradze, Guram. Bednirebisa da Satnoebis Saunji: Wordrop’ebi da Sakartvelo 1133
Stannard, Martin (Editor). Evelyn Waugh: The critical heritage 1111
Steinberg, Ada. Word and music in the novels of Andrey Bely 1135
Sterchi, Beat. Blösch 1136
Stevenson, John. British Society 1914–45 1123
Thorne, Jenny. Dolly: The story of a London mouse 1139
Tulard, Jean. Napoleon: The myth of the saviour 1122
Turani, Giuseppe, and Luigi Landa (Editors). L’Annuario Italiano 1114
Warren, Roger. A Midsummer Night’s Dream: Text and performance 1138
Waugh, Evelyn. Waugh in Abyssinia 1111
Weidenfeld, Werner. Die Identität der Deutschen 1114
Weigelt, Klaus (Editor). Heimat und Identität der Deutschen 1114
Weizäcker, Richard von. Die Deutsche Geschichte geht Weiter 1114
Wright, Anne. Literature of Crisis, 1910–22 1125
italiane del XVI secolo, to give it its full title – is organized by the Laboratoria per la Bibliografia Retrospettiva, a section of the Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo Unico delle Biblioteche Italiane e per le Informazioni Bibliografiche, with the collaboration of about a thousand public and private libraries in Italy (more than 90 per cent of the total). It is conceived as a short-title catalogue on the British model, and the influence of the most recent of the British Library’s short-title series, the Eighteenth-Century Short Title Catalogue (ESTC), is visible in a couple of fundamental features.

To begin with, the results of the census are being prepared in machine-readable form, and will eventually be published both conventionally and on microfiche. There is at present no bibliographical data-base in Italy (though the compilers of the Censimento have a project for this, too), but the census material, once published, could easily be incorporated into an already existing data-base, such as BLAISE (British Library Automated Information Service).

Secondly, the Censimento, like ESTC, aims to include not only books and pamphlets, but also all single-sheet publications, such as broadsheets and proclamations, a type of item not systematically covered in earlier British Library STCs, including the Italian one.

It departs from, and I believe improves on, the ESTC model in one important respect, the use, at least experimentally in the compilation stage, of the “fingerprint”, a non-bibliographical method of discriminating between editions which has an important future in the short-title type of catalogue.

A valuable spin-off of the Censimento is the stimulus given to small Italian libraries to catalogue, or re-catalogue accurately, their sixteenth-century material. This will be of great practical help to scholars working in Italy, even before publication of the complete Censimento.

At present the census is confined to the holdings of Italian libraries. The compilers realize that many Italian sixteenth-century editions survive only in copies outside Italy, and intend, when they have finished the census of Italian libraries, to see how they can incorporate these foreign holdings into the Censimento.

Work on the Censimento began in 1980 and the active compiling of the census is now well under way. Those responsible estimate that it will be at least ten years before they are ready to proceed with the publication of the complete data. Scholars all over the world would rejoice if they could be persuaded to begin partial publication on microfiche before the Censimento is complete. The microfiches could be updated as necessary, on the model of the computerized library catalogue.