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In Memoriam

Jean-François Gilmont (1934–2020):
From Rome to Geneva, via Leuven



Writing is often a bit like throwing a bottle into the sea. While I was finishing my first book, I often thought of Jean-François Gilmont, even though my only acquaintance with him at that time was as author of some of my reference books. When my book came out, I wanted to send him a copy, but I didn't dare to. So the reader may imagine my surprise one day when I answered the telephone and heard the assured voice of Jean-François Gilmont himself, who had, apparently, read my book and wanted to see

me.¹ The first meeting took place on the campus of his alma mater, at Louvain-la-Neuve (ucl). He had just obtained his 'Agrégation de l'enseignement supérieur' diploma (1997), twenty years after his thesis on Jean Crespin, and shortly before his retirement as emeritus (1999): his academic career did not reflect the international influence of his work. Dr. honoris causa of the Catholic University of Milan (2006), Jean-François Gilmont amused himself by repeating: 'No one is a prophet in his own country.'²

This may explain why he was so attached to his last 'home', the Royal Academy of Belgium (to which he was elected in 2004). He was very proud that two women, renowned scholars, had proposed him as a candidate. Deeply 'feminist', he always valued the work of his wife, Martine Jacobs, who was then working at the Royal Library of Belgium, at the Archives and Museum of Literature. She accompanied him on his various bibliographical journeys during which he scoured the old collections of libraries in America, Switzerland, Germany, France, and Italy. They always worked together. It would not have been possible to carry out his extensive bibliographical work without his wife's attentive presence at his side. Jean-François Gilmont had his own particular way of preparing for his study trips: 'neither too much nor too little', he used to say. He set his goals and stuck to them. As he wrote in his charming 'Letter to a Beginning Bibliographer' in 1991, as an editorial for the first issue of the *Bulletin du bibliophile*: 'Let's be methodical. A bibliography is, first of all, a project. Then

- 1 The Royal Academy of Belgium has two sound recordings of lectures by Jean-François Gilmont (<https://lacademie.tv/>, all online sources last accessed 14 June 2020). One produced in 2009 ('Le livre imprimé. La Renaissance et ses découvertes'), the other in 2010 ('Les humanistes face à la Bible ou le retour au texte'). His voice does sound a little tired in these. It sounds more lively in the following: 'Un tournant majeur dans l'histoire de la Réforme: le surgissement de Jean Calvin', 2012, VDE-Gallo, CD-1274/1275/1276, (<https://vdegallo.com/fr/produit/un-tournant-majeur-dans-l-histoire-de-la-reforme-le-surgissement-de-jean-calvin/>).
- 2 Jean-François Gilmont joined the academic staff of ucl in 1968. He became Curator of the theology library there in 1977. After a two-year mission in Geneva to publish the bibliography of Calvin's works published in the sixteenth century (1989–1991), he returned to Louvain-la-Neuve as Curator of the General and Human Sciences Library. Although he was appointed part-time lecturer only in 1992, he had been teaching since 1975: heuristic in religion (1975–1989), history of books and reading (1984–1989 and 1991–2000), a course on the historical origins of western civilization (1993–1999), history of humanism (1995–1999). He became an emeritus fellow of Louvain-la-Neuve on 1 April 1999. He was President of the Professional Association of Librarians and Record Managers from 1984 to 1988 and a member of the Editorial Board of various journals (*Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique*, 1983–1987; *Lectures*, 1984–1999; *Cahiers de la documentation*, 1987–1989; *Nederlands Archief voor Kerkgeschiedenis*, 1992–1999; *Quærendo*, 1994–1998).

it is a survey. Finally, it is a publication' (reprinted in *Le livre et ses secrets*, p. 17). He rarely got lost along the way and hated digressions that diluted the subject.

The two books on Crespin (1981) – the essay published in Switzerland, the bibliography of the publisher-printer's editions in Belgium – were monumental in terms of methodology, accuracy, and precision. Jean-François Gilmont was quick to perceive the new challenges of the electronic dissemination of knowledge. So, without neglecting the publication of printed books, he devoted immense energy to completing a database which, in many respects, remains his masterpiece: GLN 15–16 (*Les éditions imprimées à Genève, Lausanne et Neuchâtel aux xv^e et xvii^e siècles*).³ He could proudly proclaim in 2015 that it could be 'considered complete, even though corrections and additions are made regularly.' This database contains 5,111 records. Of these, 4,158 indicate well-documented editions or issues. 99.6% of them are described with a physical copy in hand. Few bibliographers can say the same. The GLN 15–16 database contained information about no less than 68,057 copies in 2015 when Jean-François Gilmont stopped making changes!⁴

Jean-François Gilmont had a mathematical mind. He loved numbers, statistics, and machines. At the beginning of the 1980s, enthusiastic about such innovations, he bought one of the first personal computers in the Macintosh family. This was the '128 K', launched on 24 January 1984, with the famous advertising clip shot by Ridley Scott. Jean-François Gilmont was able to produce his bibliographies with meticulousness because, very early on, he had himself designed just the tool he needed (i.e., a relational database). Designed in File Maker Pro software, the GLN 15–16 database is based on a tree structure of twenty linked files.

I remember the first time he explained how his program worked. This helped me to create the Erasmus Museum's database of Erasmus editions from GLN 15–16; I was somewhat astonished when I discovered the colours that had been used. In fact, Jean-François Gilmont was colour blind and had used colours to embellish the database in a rather disconcerting way. In fact, for

3 This database offers a bibliography of the fifteenth and sixteenth century print production of the cities of Geneva, Lausanne and Neuchâtel, as well as Morges, cf. <http://www.ville-ge.ch/musinfo/bd/bge/gln>.

4 In 2015, Jean-François Gilmont explained in detail the functioning of his database to the managers of the Antiquarian Books Department of the Library of Geneva who, since 2017, maintain and enrich GLN 15–16. The last update took place on 7 January 2020.

a long time, the image was clearly not his priority. Gradually, he became aware of the shortcomings of his efforts, which had often omitted reference to such things as illustrations and printers' marks, and eventually incorporated them into GLN 15–16.

Jean-François Gilmont was a recognised specialist in 'physical bibliography', a term he had little taste for, preferring to evoke the notion of the archaeology of the book. He did indeed work as a kind of archaeologist. He noted, described, and recorded, paying attention to the slightest typographical error. But, above all, he put into perspective the data collected. These bibliographies are the result of the encounter between his keen sense of observation and his desire never to separate the book from the text. He read carefully all the texts of the books he described (*Bibliographie ignatienne*, 1958; *Jean Crespin*, 1981; *Bibliotheca calviniana*, 1991–2000; GLN 15–16, 2015).

From Rome to Geneva, from Saint Ignatius of Loyola to John Calvin, his intellectual journey was first and foremost that of a man for whom texts have a meaning. After the Greco-Latin humanities (1944–1950), Jean-François Gilmont entered the Society of Jesus, an order he left in 1964. He said little about the reasons for his departure. Jean-François Gilmont was a talkative but modest man. He spoke frequently of his stay in Rome at the Gregorian University (Pontificia Università Gregoriana) and the teaching that was given there, in Latin. During these 'Jesuit years', he acquired a degree in philosophy (Eindhoven-Leuven, 1957) and a degree in ecclesiastical history (Rome, 1962).

Jean-François Gilmont was at the time much influenced by the 'Tuesday seminar' given by Roland Crahay at the University of Mons. One of the first non-Anglo-Saxon scholars Roland Crahay had assessed the importance of research that had been carried out on ancient prints, and created a Seminar of Historical Bibliography, from which emerged the famous *Bibliographie des éditions anciennes de Jean Bodin*. Jean-François Gilmont conceived and produced his publication on Jean Crespin's bibliography (1981) in the same spirit of research and rigour. Following Roland Crahay, Jean-François Gilmont conceived of the study of the history of books as one expression of the history of ideas.

Geneva and Strasbourg were two other essential centres in his intellectual development. I shall confine myself to recalling the names of Henri Meylan, Alain Dufour, Jean Rott, and Rodolphe Peter, whose work on Calvin's bibliography he took over and completed. In Brussels, at the Royal Library, Jean-François Gilmont had

the good fortune to leave seclusion by discussing his research with Marie-Thérèse Lenger and Elly Cockx-Indestege. Aware of having received much himself, he gave much. Jean-François Gilmont liked to help young researchers, and many of them have benefited from his in-depth re-readings as well as his wise, and sometimes prickly, advice. Jean-François Gilmont preferred wit to flattery. The best that one could get out of him as a compliment was: 'not too bad.'

His latest book, GLN 15–16 in 2015, is a tool, as we would say in computer language. It accompanies his database. When I suggested to him during the course of a meal in Geneva in 2014 that I would like to edit a book based on his database, he looked up and said, 'this is a foolish project.' Familiar with his often rather blunt remarks, I did not immediately give up. I managed to convince him that the time had come to establish an account of his research: it would be useful to have a manual that could be flipped through, complete with unpublished indexes, which would enable him to test out his electronic database with even greater finesse.

He then set to work extracting a short title catalogue and composing these new indexes. He was already over 80 years old, but as always, when we worked together, I was amazed to see him work very quickly. When Jean-François Gilmont had decided to carry out a project, nothing could stop him. In his house, his office was on the first floor. To get there, he had to take a steep staircase, which a friend had nicknamed 'Froben's Staircase',⁵ after Jean-François Gilmont had survived a tumble. Every day and evening, he worked on whatever his project was until it was completed, whether it took a few weeks for an article or 20 years for GLN 15–16. He was always convinced that he would finish what he started, and life proved him right.

There is no need to list his bibliography. He compiled it and kept it up to date to the end.⁶ Most specialists of the Reformation are familiar with his bibliographies of Crespin (1981) and Calvin (1991–2000), as well as his research on *The French evangelical book before Calvin* (2004). He accompanied this work with essays in

5 The Basel printer Johann Froben almost died when he fell off a ladder at the beginning of the sixteenth century.

6 The bibliography is published on GLN 15–16: <http://www.ville-ge.ch/musinfo/bd/bge/gln/bio.php#biosci>. It contains 19 monographs (several of which have been republished and completed, and some of them translated into English, Italian and Japanese). He edited nine volumes, some with Marie-Blanche Delattre, William Kemp or myself. His bibliography contains 178 articles from journals and collective works, nearly 90 articles from dictionaries and encyclopaedias. He produced 1,465 short reviews, from which about thirty more were developed, a list of which can be found on the website GLN 15–16.

which he drew on the discoveries made during his patient work as a bibliographer. In particular, I would mention his book *Calvin et le livre imprimé* [*Calvin and the printed book*] (1997) and this rather special collection, *Le livre et ses secrets* [*The book and its secrets*] (2003), a mixture of published and rewritten texts, as well as unpublished articles, which opened up avenues for reflection on the survival of ancient books, and offered suggestions on how to read, and compile, bibliographies. Like many other Belgian historians, Jean-François never lost sight of the fact that there was an individual behind a historical figure. *Insupportable mais fascinant. Jean Calvin, ses amis, ses ennemis et les autres* [*Unbearable but fascinating: Jean Calvin, his friends, enemies, and others*] (2012) is a good illustration of his biographical approach.

Jean-François Gilmont had retained from his Latin studies a taste for sharp writing, enlightened by aphorisms. Each of his books is a pleasure for the mind, an applied exercise in historical criticism, and a literary surprise. He wrote, under the pseudonym Jean-Gilles Monfroy, a lively short story: *Maître Abel ou l'imprimeur trompé* [*Master Abel, or the deceived printer*] (1990).

He edited about ten collective works and created the collection *Nugæ humanisticæ sub signo Erasmi*. We had the pleasure of co-directing 16 volumes in this collection (2000–2014) published by Brepols. Each of these books was an adventure, as they were conceived to open up new avenues of research. The volume on *La page de titre à la Renaissance* (2008) [*The title page in the Renaissance*], produced with the collaboration of Françoise Deraedt, is representative of this conception. While Jean-François Gilmont proclaimed that ‘vagueness is not admissible in bibliographical doctrine’ (*Le livre et ses secrets*), he was not afraid of imperfection when it came to the history of ideas, because he knew that a successful book is a work to be continued.

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