

Instruction, Leisure, and National Heritage: The Arenberg Libraries in Belgium from the Seventeenth to the Nineteenth Century

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Why invest precious time researching old aristocratic libraries? Are there reasons to believe that it is more than just an exciting activity for bibliographic sleuths? Using the example of one of Belgium's major aristocratic families, the Arenbergs, I will show that this research can contribute to a better understanding of how representatives of the elites dealt with knowledge and information not only as private individuals but also as public figures with important civic responsibilities. More importantly, this case demonstrates that aristocratic libraries, by virtue of the fact that they usually remained in the same family for several generations, could play an important role in the preservation of a country's written heritage. The intense and purposeful collecting activity of several dukes of Arenberg in the nineteenth century was fundamental. Its traces can be found in the family archives and in a long series of libraries in Belgium and abroad.

This chapter briefly presents the Arenberg family, discusses the libraries they assembled in their residences, and examines the activities of some dukes as collectors of rare books and the role they played in preserving Belgium's written heritage. In doing so, this chapter

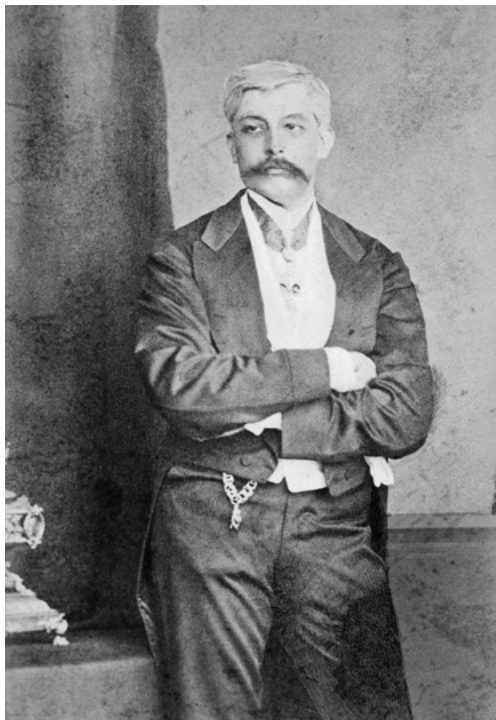
provides useful comparative material concerning the significance of aristocratic libraries in Europe.

Arenberg

The Arenberg name is connected with a small principality in the Eifel region, the Land of Arenberg, where they have ruled since the twelfth century. In 1576, the land was elevated to the status of princely county, and the head of the family held a seat in the Reichstag of the Holy Roman Empire. This conferred on them the splendour of a sovereign lineage, a status that no other nobles residing in the Southern Low Countries achieved. In the seventeenth century, the county was raised to the rank of duchy. This gradual promotion of their core territory explains why the dukes of Arenberg considered themselves first and foremost as German princes and only secondarily as the first noblemen in the Low Countries, although their feudal domains were much more extensive in that part of Europe.

The expansion of land ownership, the basis of their wealth, was a constant concern of the Arenbergs. They first extended their holdings to properties in Liège, Luxembourg, and Brabant, and later in Holland. The main extension of the feudal estate took place at the beginning of the seventeenth century, when the family came into possession of significant properties of the De Croÿ family, whose last descendant had died childless in 1612. Through this inheritance, the family became one of the most important noble landowners in the Habsburg Low Countries; they were also recognised as dukes of Aarschot, the oldest and for a long time the only ducal title in the Low Countries. In 1607, the family bought the town and fiefdom of Enghien, in the county of Hainaut, where they built a summer castle that later became famous for its park.

From the middle of the sixteenth century, the family's position was mainly characterised by loyalty to the Habsburg sovereigns of the Southern Low Countries. The dukes acted as political advisers and diplomats, held posts of command in the army, or took on the administration of provinces in the country. Their prestige was also



Engelbert-August, Eighth Duke of Arenberg (1824–1875). Photography by J. Albert, Munich, [1868]. Enghien-Edingen, Arenberg Archives and Cultural Centre, Photographic Collection. Copyright Studio Berger, Enghien.

evident in the capital city of Brussels, where they purchased the old Egmont Palace and converted it into a prestigious building complex.

The French Republic and the Napoleonic regime dealt the family heavy blows. The old principality of Arenberg in the Eifel region ceased to exist with the Treaty of Lunéville (1801), when the left bank of the Rhine was incorporated into France. The family was compensated with secularised church property on the right bank of the Rhine. In May 1815, however, their new principality was divided between Prussia and Hanover; in 1866, it was incorporated into Prussia. Despite all this, the dukes continued to prosper, retaining the right to ten per cent of the gross revenue from the mining of their

lands. The explosive growth of coal mining in the Ruhr region in the second half of the nineteenth century considerably increased the family's fortune. In the Low Countries, the family estates remained largely intact after the decades of annexation by the French Republic. In independent Belgium, after 1830, the dukes were still very important landowners, and they could count on high rents.

In short, in the *ancien régime*, the oldest core of the family's feudal estate was located in the German realm, but the dukes mainly owned land in the Low Countries. At the beginning of the twentieth century however, the family more explicitly turned towards Germany. When war broke out in 1914, the duke enlisted in the army of Emperor Wilhelm II. After the First World War, the dual nationality of the past proved to be irreconcilable with the sharp boundaries of twentieth-century nation states. In 1919, the Belgian government confiscated all the ducal properties in Belgium.

Over their long history, the Arenbergs brought together important libraries. Let us now examine some of the book collections they assembled in the course of three centuries.

Instruction and Leisure

A central place must be given to the large library in the Arenberg palace in Brussels. It was gradually formed over the eighteenth century. Most probably, the library was the result of bringing together books that had previously been collected separately in the various family residences. Unfortunately, the preserved archives are too fragmented to reconstruct this process with any precision. We can only glimpse at fragments of collections, and we do not know how they related to one another.

The first preserved list of books dates from 1616. After Charles of Arenberg (1550–1616) died, some of his volumes were listed as part of the post-mortem inventory of the family residence at Enghien. These 34 books, which were probably located in his bedroom, covered subjects as diverse as botany, navigation, astronomy, and mili-

tary science; they were published in Latin, French, Dutch, Spanish, German, English, and ancient Greek.

At the dawn of the eighteenth century, Duke Leopold-Philippe (1690–1754) systematically bought books not only in local bookshops but also from French and English booksellers. His purchases reflected a pronounced taste for literature, but his favourite fields seem to have been history, natural sciences, and the great intellectual debates of his time. He also subscribed to several scholarly journals.

The formation of a library in the Arenberg palace in Brussels is attested to in the second half of the eighteenth century. It appears to have been quite important. Duke Charles-Marie-Raymond (1721–1778) continued his father's acquisition policy and had a large number of volumes of the Brussels palace library uniformly bound.

The development of the Brussels family library did not prevent other members of the family from buying books for their own personal pleasure. Thus, around 1763, a list was compiled of the 108 books (in 336 volumes) that Louise-Marguerite van der Marck-Schleiden (1730–1820), Charles-Marie-Raymond's wife, kept in her flats at the castle at Enghien. Most of these books, published exclusively in French, were very recent and reflected a strong interest in literature and history.

By the second half of the eighteenth century, the management of the central family library needed to be improved. Between 1766 and 1768, the collection was catalogued for the first time by an anonymous, not very expert hand. Only one of the two volumes of this catalogue has been preserved: it lists the books under the headings of *Théologie*, *Jurisprudence*, *Sciences & Arts*, and *Belles-Lettres* and therefore refers to four of the five classes of the classification system known as “des libraires de Paris”. It can be assumed that the second volume listed the books on history. At the time, the library comprised between six and seven thousand volumes. It was intended for scientific purposes although titles about leisure, general education and the understanding of society were also listed.

A more professional approach to the library began in 1772 when a former professor and librarian at the University of Leuven, Jean-Noël Paquot (1722–1803), was hired. In addition, Paquot had authored the monumental book *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire littéraire des dix-sept provinces des Pays-Bas* (1765–1770); he was an authority on bibliography and literary history. Using cards to describe each book, Paquot resumed the work of cataloguing the library. This catalogue, completed in 1778, lists nearly 5,000 titles for a total of some 12,000 volumes. Most of the works were published after 1670; the presence of numerous auction catalogues testifies to the duke's habit of using the auction circuit to enrich the library.

Surprisingly, Louis-Engelbert of Arenberg (1750–1820), who was blinded by an accident in 1775, spent even greater sums on expanding the library, taking advantage of his many trips to visit bookshops abroad. Without neglecting law, history, and travel writing, his purchases concentrated on the Enlightenment, the natural sciences, the ecclesiastical polemics of his time, freemasonry, newspapers and magazines, and contemporary literature, published almost exclusively in French. Because of his blindness, the duke had his books read to him aloud by an assistant whom he called “his eye”.

In 1820, Prosper-Louis (1785–1861) took over from his father, and from the outset showed great interest in the organisation of the family library in the Brussels palace. As early as 1822, he had the ground floor of the main wing refurbished. The library was now set up in a luxurious neoclassical décor. A very detailed catalogue was compiled: the eight volumes describe approximately 15,000 titles in 23,000 volumes placed in no less than seven rooms on the ground floor.

Bibliophily and National Heritage

In 1850, Duke Prosper-Louis appointed the artist Charles de Brou (1811–1877) as librarian to the Brussels family library. De Brou, who had studied drawing, painting, and engraving, was originally hired to provide artistic education for the duke's children. However, in

1841, he suffered from a serious back injury, from which he only recovered in 1863. As a result, the duke changed De Brou's duties to managing the library. De Brou was very interested in the oldest books in the collection. In 1848/49, he published two articles on Dutch language incunabula and post-incunabula from the duke's collection, which were unknown at the time. These texts certainly did not fail to arouse the interest of philologists, historians and bibliophiles. They were the first – and probably the only – contemporary accounts revealing some details about the collection. Later, Prosper-Louis moved the most valuable books from the library in the Arenberg palace to a smaller residence in Brussels, where De Brou lived. Thus, this *Collection spéciale* acquired the status of a separate, very exclusive collection.

In 1861, Duke Engelbert-August (1824–1875) inherited the library. He added to the collections, both to the large palace library and to the *Collection spéciale*. For the latter, he increasingly concentrated on early printed books from the Low Countries, where the Arenberg family had played such a prominent role. He purchased books from auctions in Belgium and abroad. But the main purchase that he made, the one that strikes the imagination for its scope and rarity, is the substantial set of volumes sold to him by the Ghent professor and bibliophile Constant-Philippe Serrure. This acquisition was spread over several years and illustrates one of the directions that bibliophily took in Belgium after the 1850s, concentrating on the written heritage of this country, which had gained the status of an independent kingdom in 1830.

The collector Constant-Philippe Serrure (Antwerp 1805–Moortsele 1872) was a historian and philologist typical of the first generation of professors at Ghent State University: he was appointed professor of mediaeval and Belgian history in 1835; later he was given a chair in Dutch literature. A passionate lover of the Dutch language and of the literary history of the Low Countries, he was particularly concerned with the publication of mediaeval Dutch texts. Above all, he was the owner of an exquisite library, which made his reputation

but also absorbed all his savings. From 1859, his lack of money forced him to sell his collection. Contacts with the Royal Library in Brussels were unsuccessful, but he found an interested party in the Duke of Arenberg's librarian, De Brou, whose articles on the incunabula of his employer he had probably read. We are well-informed about the outcome of these contacts thanks to the extant correspondence between Serrure and De Brou (1862–1871). As early as 1862, they agreed that the major part of Serrure's collection would be sold to the duke and that De Brou would act as a go-between. The transaction included a promise of exclusivity for De Brou, who would first be able to express his preferences (i.e., those of the Duke of Arenberg) for all the volumes Serrure wanted to dispose of, especially when the latter moved from Ghent to a spacious country house. Serrure explained this exclusivity as a result of his desire to keep most of his collection together and to be able to consult it from time to time.

The transaction's main characteristic was the coherence of the collection purchased – a reflection of the coherence of Serrure's private library. By his own admission, the Ghent professor had built up his library by buying at all the major book auctions of his time. He had purchased his first books at the age of eighteen and had bought volumes from the monastic libraries that had been scattered during the Austrian and French regimes. He had made friends with some famous book collectors such as the Ghent bibliophile Charles van Hulthem (1764–1833), whose library would form the nucleus of Belgium's Royal Library in 1837, and the English collector Richard Heber (1773–1833), whose catalogue of books acquired in Belgium Serrure had compiled in 1835. In 1866, Serrure himself characterised his collection as “essentially Belgian”. It was divided into the following sections: books written and/or printed by Belgians in all genres, even abroad; everything related to Belgian history, including the lives of Belgian saints and a considerable number of pamphlets as well as all the major works, often high-quality and complete copies; everything related to the Dutch language and literature such as dictionaries and grammars, poets from the sixteenth to the nineteenth

century, theatre texts, songbooks, popular books, and especially romances of chivalry; and editions of the Bible and ascetic books published between 1540 and 1600.

A concern for completeness characterised Serrure's collecting activities. As for incunabula, he made a distinction. Unlike most bibliophiles of his time, he did not value them as witnesses of the early days of printing: the value he imposed on them was related either to history, numismatics, or Dutch language and literature.

The profile of the books collected by Serrure directly influenced the collecting choices of the Duke of Arenberg and his librarian. When Serrure asked De Brou to be more specific about the acquisitions he wanted to make, De Brou explained that he was interested in all the categories Serrure had used to describe his personal collection. Clearly, the Duke of Arenberg had gradually made the profile of Constant-Philippe Serrure's library his own. This explains how the Arenberg *Collection spéciale* became an indispensable resource for the history and philology of the early Low Countries, especially in the Dutch language.

An exhaustive catalogue of the *Collection spéciale* was compiled, probably by De Brou, around 1875, the year Engelbert-August died. The catalogue lists no less than 1418 entries, including numerous pamphlet volumes, totalling 1668 titles. This list probably followed the chronological order in which the volumes entered the collection. The first part mainly lists incunabula, probably the ones removed from the large family library in the Arenberg Palace in the 1850s. The second part mainly describes sixteenth- and seventeenth-century editions published in the Low Countries; most of these books had been bought from Constant-Philippe Serrure.

The Arenberg *Collection spéciale* gradually gained in reputation, especially among bibliographers studying books printed in the Low Countries. For example, Jan-Willem Holtrop (1806–1870), director of the Royal Library in The Hague, cited the Arenberg *Collection spéciale* in his *Monuments typographiques des Pays-Bas au quinzième siècle* (1868). In 1913, Wouter Nijhoff visited the collection when he

was preparing his bibliography of post-incunabula from the Low Countries. However, the outbreak of the First World War put an end to this opening to researchers. The volumes were packed in crates and stored in the safety of Nordkirchen Castle, a castle in Germany that Duke Engelbert-Marie (1872–1949) had bought in 1903. The boxes were returned to Belgium in the 1930s, when they were temporarily stored in an Antwerp convent. Engelbert-Marie intended to donate the collection to the University of Leuven, but his intention was aborted, first by the outbreak of the Second World War and later by his death.

Engelbert-Marie's son, Engelbert-Charles (1899–1974), was not particularly interested in the collection. He had the boxes moved to the villa he occupied in Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat in the south of France, where he had the books catalogued one final time. In 1954, he decided to sell most of the titles and approached a number of American booksellers. The New York bookseller William Schab visited the duke in Saint-Jean-Cap-Ferrat in 1955. The two parties agreed on a first sale of 147 items. The set was purchased by the businessman, philanthropist, and bibliophile Lessing J. Rosenwald (1891–1979), who later donated the books to the Library of Congress in Washington D. C. William Schab sold an even larger set, 235 titles, to Bernard Brenninkmeijer (1893–1976), a London-based industrialist, philanthropist, and bibliophile. In 2013, his library landed in the Dreiflessen Collection in Mettingen, Germany, where the Brenninkmeijer family has its origins. Other sales followed; they explain why today the traced volumes of the Arenberg Special Collection are to be found in 38 libraries, both private and public, in six countries, mainly Belgium, Germany, and the United States. The copies can be identified either by mentions in antiquarian booksellers' catalogues, by the presence of Serrure's handwritten signature, or by the typical label attached to the upper part of the spines.

Clearly, the libraries once owned by the Arenberg family deserve to be studied in detail. They illustrate the successive dukes' need for instruction and information in the context of their duties as lords

and high-ranking officials. They reflect an intention to gain a better understanding of the society of their time and give an idea of the family's leisure reading. Finally, by building their *Collection spéciale*, the Arenberg family played a pivotal role in preserving printed traces of Dutch cultural life in the Low Countries. Indeed, the volumes were scattered in the twentieth century, and they are now primarily kept in libraries in Germany and the United States. But they continue to reflect the ambition of some nineteenth-century collectors to preserve Belgium's printed heritage and therefore deserve to be cherished both by their current owners and by the international research community.

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