

In the air

## Frankfurt the Fair

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Most book-lovers know about the annual Frankfurt Book Fair. Fewer perhaps realise that the fair is a venerable institution, dating back to the 15th century.

Frankfurt grew up out of a city built by the Romans in the 1st century AD. By the Middle Ages it had become an important centre for exchange, both commercial and cultural, attracting merchants, artists and scholars from all over Europe and beyond. With its geographical location on the two principal axes of the Holy Roman Empire, the decline of the fairs of Champagne and the expansion of European markets beyond the Elbe, its increasing prosperity and growth were guaranteed. And vital to that growth were Frankfurt's international fairs.

The first fair was authorized by Emperor Frederick II in the autumn of 1240 – one hundred years before John the Blind instigated Luxembourg's *Schueberfouer*. A spring fair was added ninety years later by King Ludwig the Bavarian. These fairs seem to have been pretty extravagant events, offering a vast range of merchandise from gold and tapestries to stallions and spices. They drew down on Frankfurt the thunder of Martin Luther, who poured scorn on „*that silver and gold hole through which flows out of German lands everything that flows, grows, or is coined or beaten.*“ Luther went suddenly quiet though when in 1519 his „*Disputations*“ sold 1,400 copies.

As proof of the significance it had achieved, Frankfurt became the venue, in 1356, for the election and coronation of the Holy Roman emperors. It was granted the status of „Free Imperial City“ in 1372 and in 1402, the first Exchange Office opened its doors.

Although manuscripts had been on sale at the Frankfurt fairs long before printing was invented, the first official book fair only took place in 1480 – five years before William Caxton, England's first printer, set up his press at the Red Pale in the City of Westminster and Wynkyn de Worde, one of his apprentices, opened printing shops of his own in Fleet Street and St Paul's Churchyard, the future hub of London's book trade.

The opening of the first printing presses in 1530 paved the way for Frankfurt's becoming the most important market for books in Europe. Dealers valued the fair for the personal contacts essential to their trade and writers and scholars were attracted by its cosmopolitan



Photo: Peter Hirth

The official design

character and the forum it provided for exchanges of ideas and intellectual debate: one visitor even compared the atmosphere of the fair with the Lyceum in ancient Athens.

The fair grew up around „Book Street“, the centre of Frankfurt's permanent book trade. Booksellers gathered there at the appointed time, set up their stands, hung out their signs and went about the business of selling their wares. The first ever catalogue of books for sale was drawn up by Georg Willer for the fair of 1564, the year Shakespeare was born. Religious works were popular in the 16th century, as were mystical writings and legal tomes. Those less learnedly inclined carried off collections of stories, tales of chivalry and...cook-books.

The fair attracted the famous and the infamous: Giordano Bruno, scholar and philosopher, dropped in during his wanderings around Europe – before he was arrested in 1591 by the Inquisition, and the Earl of Essex, Elizabeth I's wayward favourite, also found time for a visit during his short but eventful life. Another English visitor proclaimed in 1608 that Frankfurt „*far excelleth Paul's Churchyard in London, Saint James Street in Paris, the Merceria in Venice, and all whatsoever else that I saw in my travels.*“

The 16th century proved to be the Golden Age of the fair, for during the 17th century it fell into a long process of decline. Prolonged conflict in the Low Countries at the turn of the century followed by the Thirty Years War made travel increasingly hazardous. In addition, harsh censorship by Frankfurt's Imperial Book Commission and the introduction of a tax on books led booksellers to abandon Frankfurt in favour of the Leipzig fair. Finally, in 1749 – the year that famous son of the city and future hero of German letters, Johann Wolfgang Goethe, was born – the fair was abandoned. It was to be 200 years until it was finally resuscitated in 1949 and went on to regain the success and

popularity it enjoyed in its 16th century heyday.

Today's Frankfurt Book Fair is once more a thriving market place in our global village. The figures tell the story: 6,400 exhibitors from over 110 countries; more than 170,000 visitors from the publishing trade and hundreds of literary agents, scouring the 335,000 titles on display for that potential best-seller... Over 2,000 special events – authors' presentations, readings, discussions, talks, concerts – turn the fair into a mammoth cultural happening. And 12,000 journalists from 80-odd countries come to tell the tale.

The most reported-on event is probably the Peace Prize, which has been awarded by the German publishers and booksellers association each year since 1950 for „*an exceptional contribution to the promotion of peace, primarily through activity in Literature, Science and Art.*“ This year's winner, the American writer and thinker Susan Sontag, has enjoyed virtual links to Frankfurt since, as she tells us in her acceptance speech, she found some relief from the tiresome duties of being a child by poring over her teacher's tattered volumes of Goethe.

She concludes her address with words that could stand as a mission statement for the Frankfurt Book Fair:

„*To have access to literature, world literature, was to escape the prison of national vanity, of philistinism, of compulsory provincialism, of inane schooling, of imperfect destinies and bad luck. Literature was the passport to enter a larger life; that is, the zone of freedom.*“

*Literature was freedom. Especially in a time in which the values of reading and inwardness are so strenuously challenged, literature is freedom.*“

▷ Sources: R. Bolt: *The Main event*; R. Porter: *London A Social History*; Larousse Encyclopaedia; Frankfurt Book Fair website.