

HOW OLD IS IT?
Roaming Numerals and Amster's Dam Dates
by James Dawson

Book collectors are fortunate in that most of their treasures can be dated to an exact year. Other collectables like glassware and furniture usually have guesstimate ages as they seldom have dates. One exception is maps, which were almost never dated. That way they could be sold as being new over a period of years or decades. Even now, maps seldom have dates. Even if most books are dated, sometimes the dates are hard to read if they are written in Roman numerals, or misleading because a book might have several dates-which one is correct?

You can't handle many old books without coming across Roman numerals. Their use was dying out in the late 19th century and are seldom used these days except for the copyright dates of movies, numbering movie sequels such as Rocky V or Halloween II and on the occasional analog clock or watch face. Not everyone knows how to read them and customers often ask me to translate a Roman numeral date in a book for them. It's easy once you get the hang of it. So here is a short course in Roman Numerals 101 or rather Roman Numerals CI.

Roman numerals (actually capital letters) are used for a numbering system developed by the ancient Romans, in case we didn't have enough trouble already with Latin. I=1; V=5; X=10; L=50; C=100; D=500 and M=1,000. These can be added together to make in between numbers: II=2; VII=7; XXX=30. Subtraction can also be used to save room. A numeral before another in a sub group is subtracted from it. For instance IX is used for 9 because it is easier to write it that way than VIII and it is easier to write 40 as XL than XXXX. The date 1748 would be written M DCC XL VIII. I put spaces between the sub groups for clarity, but that isn't always done. Roman numerals used before another are subtracted from it, when used after it they are added to it. IV is 4 and VI is 6. Because a numeral can be moved around that way, you might call them roaming numerals.

It is a rather lousy system particularly for a people who conquered most of Europe. There is no zero and I have no idea how the ancient Romans did multiplication and long division. Sometimes previous owners of old books have inked in their translation of the Roman numeral date on the title page. This is a bad idea even if they did get the date correct. If you must do that, at least use a pencil.

Surprisingly, the use of Roman numerals to date a book does not necessarily predate the use of Arabic numerals. I've seen books from the 1500's which used Arabic numerals, and books from the 20th century which used Roman numerals. It depends on the whim of the printer. Probably Roman numerals look more high falutin' than Arabic numerals.

As if Roman numerals couldn't be confusing enough, there was a time when books printed in Amsterdam had their own special dating system. The first time I saw an example, I didn't know what the heck was going on. It was a date that looked something like this: a lower case c followed by a capital I followed by an upside down lower case c; then a capital I followed by another upside down lower case c and then a capital C; then a more normal ending XXIV. What date is this? Give up? It is 1624. Why for? Because, for some demented reason, someone decided they would print Roman

numerals without using the very crucial M and D numerals. To print an M for instance, they would use a c then an l and then turn the type with a c on it upside down. Approximately like this clc) if you pretend the second c is flipped. Then if you squint, it looks slightly like an M. The D is made in a similar manner.

Why anyone would chose to do this is anyone's guess. Were they being cute? was it a drunken bet? Did a rival printer steal all their M's and D's? Did they think it looked good? Were they trying to be obscure? I don't know and I don't know of anyone else who knows the answer. This didn't last very long. It is a curiosity. I call them Amsterdam numerals, or maybe in frustration, Amster's dam dates.

Sometimes people want to start a new calendar. I once found an old book dated the year 9. Wow! that's the oldest book I've ever had...hey wait a minute. It was old, but not that old. It was a book printed in Paris so the mystery was solved. After the French Revolution, the French wanted a new start with their "Calendar of Reason". All months were 30 days long and the left over days were tacked on somehow as holidays at the end, and their calendar clock was restarted in 1792. The year 9 would be 1800 in our Gregorian calendar. Napoleon quietly abandoned this alternate dating system in 1806 leaving behind some books with very low odometer readings.

Other cultures have their own calendar, but I won't get into that. It is unlikely that either one of us will come across a Mayan Codex.

Even if you find a date in a book, it might not be the book's printing date. A title page date can usually be trusted, unless it is a modern facsimile of an old book. A customer once brought in what she thought was a first edition of Keat's *Poems* dated 1817. She knew it was worth tens of thousands of dollars. Sadly, I had to inform her that it was a facsimile reprint done early in the last century. For one thing, its publisher wasn't even in business in 1817 and for another, the forward to the book stated that it was printed in 1922. Sometimes it pays to read more than just one page of a book.

I've had people tell me that their book was so old, that it didn't have a date in it. Actually, this usually means that it is a much later printing. Virtually all first editions are dated. Later editions often drop the date. Even when a book is copyrighted, the copyright is only legally binding for a certain period of time. If the copyright has expired, the book becomes public domain and anyone can print it and not pay royalties.

Most of the old books with no date are from the turn of the last century. They are cheap editions offered to the public of non copyrighted editions. They are usually on cheap acidic paper which is now turning brown and crumbling. This plus the fact there it is not dated, is a sure tip off that it is a reprint. Typical publishers would be A.L. Burt, Altemus, Hurst and Co and a few others. I don't think that these publishers ever did a first edition of anything. The copyright date only means the date the book was copyrighted, not when it was printed. The copyright date might be on a book for decades.

Sometimes publishers date later editions of books. This can be on the title page, but more often it is on the back of the title page which is called the copyright page. Once someone brought in a book that had several dates in it including the date of the first edition and the date of its several reprints. He wanted to know the date of this book. He thought it was probably one of the earlier dates. I very gently let him know that the crucial date was the most recent date. I mean I don't want to be insulting or anything but that should have been common sense. When things are dated, they are dated when

they are made, not with some date from the future (but if you have a working time machine, let me know as I'd like to pick up some investment ideas. Thanks.)

Modern book dating is mostly standardized on the copyright page with a line of numbers which give the printing and edition of the book. The lowest number gives the information. 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 would be a third printing. For the fourth printing the 3 would be lopped off and the 4 would be the lowest number. This can be combined with the date in the same way: 89 90 91 92 93 9 8 7 6 5. This book was printed in 1989 and is the fifth printing.

Early English documents were dated to what ever year it was in the reign of whatever King or Queen was then reigning. A deed might be dated in the eighth year in the reign of Edward or whoever. This was awkward and required a knowledge of English monarchs to decipher the year.

Earlier I mentioned that maps are rarely dated. it strikes me that old state road maps are now collected and can be approximately dated in a similar manner by who was Governor. Their picture is usually on it somewhere. Thus history repeats itself repeats itself.

Written in the year MMII.

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