Introduction

In May, 1987, the Editorial Board of the Collected Works of Erasmus (CWE) sponsored a conference in Toronto to do with the correspondence of Erasmus. The proceedings were open to the community and received financial support from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. Like an earlier conference on Erasmus' New Testament scholarship, this one coincided with the annual meeting of the Editorial Board, and was intended both to bring together scholars who were participating actively in this aspect of CWE, and to make their discussions available to the wider interested public.

Erasmus' correspondence had a particular topicality both for the scholars and for the lay public. The editorial undertaking in Toronto had begun with the Englishing of P.S. Allen's remarkable edition of the *Erasmi epistolae*, whose successive volumes in CWE have formed a kind of backbone to the whole. The first volume, published in 1974, launched CWE with an introduction by Wallace K. Ferguson which described the correspondence of Erasmus as of "inestimable value, not only for the biography of the great humanist himself, but also for the intellectual and religious history of the northern Renaissance and Reformation." For the wider public concerned with our history and with literacy and education, the letters remain the most vivid and personal introduction imaginable both to their author and to the world he lived in, whose legacy is with us still.

In the years that followed, it became clear that, regardless of the reputation of CWE as a whole, the correspondence series was the one part that was unquestionably indispensable to modern scholarship. The reasons for this will become clear in the papers that follow, more particularly in that of James Estes, perhaps the best place to begin. As a group, these essays illuminate various facets of Erasmus' personality and intellectual mission through the framework of the letters, and set their study firmly in the context of contemporary interest in rhetoric, linguistics, and the revival of Renaissance scholarship.

The papers of Charles Fantazzi and Erika Rummel deal in different ways with the place of Erasmus' production in the epistolary tradition of the day. For our understanding of the northern Renaissance, this is a topic of the greatest interest in light of the view now long-held that the historic roots of Renaissance humanism are to be found in the medieval *ars dictaminis* and in a conscious revival of Ciceronian and in some instances Byzantine models, which predated the epistolary formularies in use since Carolingian

times. Dr. Rummel's paper examines the more particular issue of the relation between Erasmus' manuals on the art of letter-writing and his own practice, and with the principles of his predecessors, upon whom he loved to pour scorn. She finds that, as is often the case, his departure from the tradition is anything but radical.

Alexander Dalzell's study of what is seemingly a rather arcane issue – the formulas of greeting and salutation in the letters – shows the wider implications of a rhetorical convention both to the historian and to the translator. It is pleasant to recall that the difficulty of rendering these phrases was discussed at the very outset of the whole Toronto enterprise, and labelled by the first translator of the letters, Sir Roger Mynors, the problem of "tops and tails."

Finally, Judith Rice Henderson narrows the focus in another way, to confront the dating of a brief pamphlet on letter-writing which is a part of the larger story of the evolution of Erasmus' style and self-discovery as one of the greatest teachers in the history of European culture. The Editorial Board of the Collected works of Erasmus is grateful to *Renaissance and Reformation / Renaissance et Réforme* for the publication of the fruits of a conference that would have been done by the Bulletin, *Erasmus in English*, until recent funding decisions brought that useful production to an end.

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