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Foreword

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Things Not Easily Believed: Introducing the Early Modern Relation

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Foreword

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Sleuthing in rare book libraries and poring over antiquarian catalogues, scholars of early modern times delight in coming upon books and manuscripts whose titles start off *True Relation*, *New and Accurate Account* or *Relatione*, *Relatione venuta novamente* or *Vray Discours*, *Relation veritable* or *Kurze Erzaehlung*, *Wahrhaffte Relation* or *Relacion cierta y verdadera*. Of these titles, the *relazione* (to use our modern spelling), in the form of the extended reports made by Venetian ambassadors to the Senate of that illustrious republic, has had the oldest and longest appeal to historians. For Leopold von Ranke, almost two centuries ago, these diplomatic reports were the path to a new empirical history of a whole era. For Garrett Mattingly, in the mid-twentieth century, they were the source on which he could build a pioneering history of Renaissance diplomacy. In 1949, when I was a student at Harvard in Myron Gilmore's doctoral seminar on the Renaissance, the single word "*relazioni*" automatically meant the Venetian diplomatic reports, and they were spoken of with awe, ideally a rite of passage for all of us.

Nowadays, the Venetian *relazioni* are still very much alive as a source, though often explored in ways undreamed of by Ranke. But other kinds of "Relations" have also been centre stage, yielding stories and events of great interest for the understanding of the early modern period. So a *Warhaffte Relation* brought German readers in 1588 news of King Philip's assembling the Spanish armada against England at the mouth of the Tagus River; a *Relation Sommaire* told French readers in 1563 about a siege of the town of Oran by the ruler of Algiers; and a *Relatione venuta novamente da Modone* informed Italian readers in 1572 of an attack on the Turkish fleet in the eastern Mediterranean. A *Brief recit et succincte narration* opened up to a travel account, as in Jacques Cartier's 1545 recital of his voyage up the St. Lawrence River (fortunately, not as short as its title promised); Jesuit *Lettres* and *Advis* from Japan in the late sixteenth

century became *Relations* in a 1602 report from that land, its title anticipating the great series to be sent from Canada later in the century.

Meanwhile any number of *Discours* and then *Relations* brought French readers (and listeners to those reading aloud) news of political and religious events, natural catastrophes, crimes, miracles, and monstrosities. On the whole, the word *Relation* was reserved for political and religious news, while the older term *Discours* persisted and was also used to title the shocking, piteous, miraculous, or uncanny event.

Texts such as these have become part of the study of European travel literature and political and religious polemic. They have expanded the history of the book and have helped create the whole field of the history of “news.” Scrutinizing the titles of these books, scholars have reflected on what the “true,” the “veritable,” the “*wahrhaftige*,” the “*verdadera*” might signify for publishers, buyers, and readers. But we have rarely been attentive to the *nouns* by which these texts describe themselves—*Relation*, *Discours*, *Erzählung*, *Bericht*, *Relazione*, and the like—all of them referring to *speech acts* in a certain kind of setting.

Then Filippo de Vivo changed our perspective in his *Information and Communication in Venice*, where he recreated the oral performance of the Venetian *relazione*, let us hear the diplomat speaking for hours to the Senate, and traced the subsequent transformation of the *relazione* into a written and often printed text. Reading Vivo’s book, the historian Thomas Cohen, deeply familiar with the multiple forms of communication in sixteenth-century Rome, realized that the Venetian case opened the door to a whole pattern of reporting, narrating, writing, and circulating information in early modern Europe—a pattern asserting strong truth claims. The same insight struck the literary scholar Germaine Warkentin, herself responsible for new ways of understanding the communication strategies of indigenous peoples and European explorers of Canada. Together they called a workshop on “The Relation: the *Relazione*” at the University of Toronto in 2009.

The Relation workshop was perforce multidisciplinary, including literary scholars of the major European tongues and genres, and historians of Europe, the Mediterranean, the Ottoman Empire, and Canada. Together we struggled to find a common language to identify the characteristics of the genre which had “the act of telling” in its title, an act that, in a sense, served as the guarantee for the content of the book it introduced.

Things Not Easily Believed, this special issue of *Renaissance and Reformation*, brings us the abundant fruits of that interchange. Together with a masterful overview by Cohen and Warkentin, these essays describe the antecedents of the Relation in earlier genres, the historical circumstances that favoured its flowering, and its partial retreat as a form of authentication by the late eighteenth century. Since the genre had diplomatic reporting from foreign lands as a core (summed up vividly here by Filippo de Vivo), most of these essays explore the play of voices in travel relations, including the voices of indigenous people being described by Europeans. Self-portraits emerge along the way. Meanwhile the one woman writer represented here craftily turns the close-in account of her life into a “true relation,” as if she were narrating a foreign visit. Andreas Motsch’s long view of “travel relations” suggests that when a method for observing and reporting counts more than the personal voice of the traveller, the genre has been transformed.

These essays will leave readers with many new insights and questions for the future. The picture they give of the history of communication is not the simple replacement of one mode by another, but of overlaps and porous boundaries among forms of telling. They urge us to reflect on the oral links in other early modern genres. And they inspire us to ask what role the “narrator-responsibly-relating” played in the communication of news and information in other literary traditions, say, in Jewish travel accounts and in the various genres of Arabic literature. Among Arab geographers, travel had been a preferred way to assemble believable information already in the tenth century: “I tasted the air, I evaluated the water,” al-Muqadassi assured the readers of his *Best Divisions for Knowledge of the Regions*. The *rihla* or personal travel account was a major way to convey information about the Abode of Islam and beyond, while *isnad*, a line of oral transmission from one trustworthy person to the next, was obligatory to authenticate reports about the sayings and deeds of the Prophet, as well as for legal opinions, rules for literary forms, and much more. Of course, such a requirement led to vigorous argument about who said what to whom as well as to the invention of sayings and of chains of transmission. But that may be one of the valuable consequences of relations: they open debate rather than close it.