ITALY

[A list of books published in 2013. More recent publications will be listed in subsequent issues.]


Catalogue of an exhibition held at the Brera Library in Milan in May–June 2013 to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the death of Giambattista Bodoni.


Emanuele Casamassima (1916–88) had two careers, as a librarian and, from 1970, as a university professor of palaeography. But he is remembered mostly for a chance event, or, rather, an event that was avoidable. In April 1965 he was appointed director of the National Central Library in Florence, in a building constructed on the North bank of the Arno and opened in 1915. A year and a half later, on 4 November 1966, a devastating flood engulfed the library and a large part of its collections, which, unwisely, had been placed in the cellars. Having received no warning, Casamassima found himself trapped on the wrong side of the river, with all communications broken, and it was only possible to reach the library, through thick, treacherous slime, on the following morning. What happened next has entered into the myth and mythology of the alluvione: the director opened the doors to the world, chains of ‘mud angels’ manhandled the sopping books up and out of the fango in an extraordinary rescue, and the whole operation became a prototype of modern disaster management. Although the library’s catalogues were (and still are) in chaos for years as a result of the flood, in the end relatively little was lost. The National Central Library and the 1966 flood has already been described in a 2009 book by Elisa di Renzo; some of the same ground is inevitably covered in the present work, though it includes other aspects of Casamassima’s career and work as a librarian, and adds a lot of new information, including an important documentary appendix. Its weakness, perhaps, is that it betrays rather too easily its origins as a Ph.D. thesis, with a plethora of footnotes and an unwillingness to leave anything out. Nevertheless it is an important biographical study of a great librarian.


This book is an afterthought based on a chance discovery. The author some time ago completed a lengthy monograph, in German, on the figure of Avraham ben David Portaleone (1542–1612), a Hebrew writer and thinker living in Renaissance Italy. Research in the State Archive at Mantua subsequently uncovered the inventory of the goods in Portaleone’s home at his death in 1612, which is the document, partly in Italian and partly in Latin (for the titles of the many books), edited here.
