Every so often a book comes along which grabs the reader’s attention from the very first page and then holds it for the next few hundred. Such books are rare and are to be treasured. Such is *The Catalogue of Shipwrecked Books. Young Columbus and the Quest for a Universal Library* by Edward Wilson-Lee. This is a truly remarkable book, a work of immense scholarship, and of history that reads like fiction, with a protagonist from the early sixteenth century who would not be out of place in our modern world as he grappled with the growing and almost insoluble problem of what to do with more and more data, how to organise it, how to catalogue it, how to manage it. Just as we recognise and sympathise with Hernando Colón’s efforts to control the vast amount of information that the printing press had made available to early modern man and woman, so too would he have recognised and sympathised with our efforts in the early twenty-first century to get on top of ever increasing amounts of information pouring out of the internet. Although five centuries separate us from him, the problems were very similar, and, as a result, Wilson-Lee’s extremely readable account of Hernando Colón’s life has a very modern ring about it.

He is helped of course by the fact that his protagonist, the illegitimate second son of the explorer Christopher Columbus, is a very engaging and likeable character. Hernando was an obsessive: he wanted to create the universal library, containing as many printed works as were circulating in the early sixteenth century, and he spent many years and a vast fortune buying up everything he could get his hands on, on some trips returning to Seville with over a thousand books. Of particular interest and importance is the fact that he was especially interested in what we now call ephemera: broadsheets, ballads, musical items, publications that almost no one else was interested in. It is in large part thanks to the young Columbus that we even know that some of these items existed. As his library increased in size, he then obsessed over how to organise it, how to make it manageable, how to know what he had and where. This led to him creating various cataloguing systems that would be recognisable to most librarians today, although his unique system or blueprint for the whole library, kept on thousands of scraps of paper (an early form of file cards), each bearing a different hieroglyphic symbol, would have defeated most of them. He soon learnt that each method of cataloguing and ordering his books had its pros and its cons. If you order them alphabetically, you separate authors who are writing on the same or a similar topic; if you order them by theme, you separate works by the same author; if you order them by size (clearly the most space efficient and the system most commonly used in libraries today) you end up with works that have little or nothing in common next to each other. As Wilson-Lee rather more elegantly explains: ‘As anyone who has ambled through a library will know, order is everything. The ways in which books can be organised multiplies rapidly as the collection grows, and each shows the universe in a slightly different light. Order the books alphabetically by author and the wanderer will find all of the Pérezes and the Patels together, whether or not their books share anything else. Ordering by size will save space by fitting books of the same height into snug shelves, but this puts pocket novels in the same place as prayer books’ (4). Towards the end of his life, Columbus tried yet another order: sorting books by language,
but this created a new set of problems, ‘effectively walling the thought of one culture off from another and giving the impression that each had a unique and independent existence’ (328). As any bibliophile and librarian knows, there is no perfect ordering system, and most contain a mixture of the systems tried out by Hernando Colón in the early sixteenth century. Even the bookcases in which he kept his thousands of books were a novelty then; previously, owners kept their books in chests or stacked on tables. As Wilson-Lee notes, ‘Visitors to the library would have been greeted by the strangest of sights. The scale of the collection must surely have been impressive, by far the largest private library of the day, blurring the vision as the number of individual items expanded beyond what could be taken in at a glance. Contributing to this disorientation, they might have noticed next that the walls of the library had disappeared. In their place were row upon row of books standing upright on their spines, stacked in this new vertical way in specially designed wooden cases’ (3). This of course had an immediate impact on the design of the books themselves, since now it became imperative that the spines contain some basic information — name of author (possibly), title of work (certainly) — information which we now take for granted when we buy a book, but which in Columbus’s day was not the case.

There is no doubt that the modern reader and book collector owes a massive debt to the pioneering work of Hernando Colón, as he shaped the way we read and the ways we try to order the world. But he had other obsessions too, not least that of protecting the name and achievements of his famous father, Christopher. Hernando had accompanied his father on his fourth voyage to the New World in 1502 and suffered with him all the trials, tribulations and dangers of seafaring then. After the Admiral’s death in May 1506, Hernando made it his life’s purpose to ensure that his father’s achievements and legacy would live on and not be sullied by critical or negative reports, which began to circulate even during the explorer’s life. He thus set out to write a biography of his father that would put the record straight, ‘[i]ndeed, one might even suggest his life of Columbus is the first modern biography — not an exposition of theology (like a saint’s life) or of national history (like the chronicles of kings), but taking a private individual as its subject, and attempting to understand not the example he provides for others but rather his uniqueness, and doing so moreover not using received traditions but documentary evidence and eyewitness report’ (303). For this enterprise his vast library came into its own, though even it could not solve Hernando’s principal problem: ‘If Hernando could not prove, using documentary evidence, that his father was the first to discover the New World, and could not provide him with a life that led naturally towards the act of discovery, what was left to him?’ (307).

The writing of his father’s biography and the collecting of thousands of books go hand in hand in this immensely satisfying account of the life of Hernando Colón. The modern reader can only sympathise with the efforts of this remarkable man to make sense of the world, of knowledge, of the exponential rise in information that he grappled with on a daily basis. In his last will and testament, he gave clear instructions to his heir, his nephew Luis, as to how the library (some 15,370 books along with over 3,000 printed images) was to be maintained and secured against depredation and theft, but the one thing Hernando could not do was control the future. Of the original 15,000–20,000 volumes, fewer than 4,000 remain: ‘Hernando’s collection of images, the greatest of the Renaissance, has disappeared in its entirety […] The originals of Columbus’s logs, recording the discovery of the New World, have vanished […] Hernando’s card catalogue to this library, containing the final order of his library and the potential to make the collection infinitely sortable, is likewise lost’ (327). His dream of a universal library, ‘bringing together every book without distinction of creed or language or subject matter,
also went with him to the grave’ (327). Thanks, however, to Edward Wilson-Lee’s magnificent biography of Hernando Colón, we can at least, and at last, appreciate what this young Columbus set out to do in his Quest for a Universal Library.

Trevor J. Dadson
Queen Mary University of London
t.j.dadson@qmul.ac.uk


Published concurrently with the influential historical drama Suffragette (2015), in which director Sarah Gravon puts on the screen the hard struggle for female suffrage in the United Kingdom in 1918, the counterpart Mulheres no poder offers valuable data for research on female suffragism in Brazil. In particular, Chapter 2, ‘Por que não votamos? O movimento sufragista no Brasil’, stands out amidst ongoing celebrations of the centenary of the promulgation by the British Parliament of the historic ‘Representation of the People Act’. The topicality of a book that rescues from oblivion the participation of women in Brazil’s formal and informal politics also relates to the 50th anniversary of the sexual revolution of 1968. Illuminating introductory studies for each main period of Brazilian history – from the beginning of the nineteenth century until 2010, the year of the election of Brazil’s first woman president – make up the comprehensive diachronic research which further includes the political biography of countless pioneering women rendered invisible by official history, particularly the ‘natives’ and the ‘blacks’.

The research embeds a political aim: to provide insights for a change in the persisting reality of political under-representation of Brazilian women in a power space traditionally occupied by men. The book, by disseminating valuable information, already, in part, fulfils its aim. The authors bring out, for example, the leading role of the native woman Clara Camarão, a heroine in the fight against the Dutch invaders of Pernambuco in the seventeenth century. It also foregrounds the protagonism of nineteenth-century women, despite the fact that in Colonial Brazil education was restricted to the ruling class of white men and prohibited to women, the ‘natives’, and the ‘blacks’. The educator Maria Firmina dos Reis is a prime example of a black woman who, overcoming intersecting racial and gender barriers of the slave-patriarchal system, pioneered in publishing, under a pen name, the abolitionist novel Ursula (1859).

Schumacher and Seva also bring to light what I have been referring to as Rio’s role, persisting to this day, in ushering in gender emancipation, in that, as early as the nineteenth century, it stood out as the main stage for new and diverse forms of female performance. They cite, for example, black women as street vendors; these posed a threat to the slave system, as they enjoyed freedom of movement and financial autonomy from the commercialisation of their products. Within the study of the matriarchal logic in positions of power, I highlight the biographies of the princesses Leopoldina and Isabel, who, in the same century, changed the course of Brazilian history. Leopoldina, an Austrian of remarkable intelligence and culture, crowned Empress of Brazil in December 1822, is cited for her ‘decisive […] defence of Brazil’s sovereignty’ and as the ‘champion of the country’s Independence’ (28). In