THE LIBRARY

A Fragile History

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PROFILE BOOKS

First published in Great Britain in 2021 by
Profile Books Ltd
29 Cloth Fair
London
EC1A 7JQ
www.profilebooks.co.uk

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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset in Garamond by MacGuru Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

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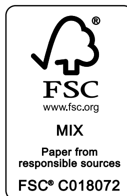
A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 78816 342 2
eISBN 978 1 78816 344 6



Dedicated to the memory of
Felicity Bryan
(1945–2020)

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You have before you a short work on libraries, that is to say, on books. What subject could be worthier for those of us who constantly use them?

Justus Lipsius, *De Bibliothecis* (1602)

Prologue

CURATING THE RUINS

For the Dutch scholar Hugo Blotius, appointment as librarian to Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian II in 1575 should have been the crowning achievement of his career. Yet when Blotius arrived in Vienna to take up his new responsibilities, he found a scene of devastation. 'How neglected and desolate everything looked,' he wrote, plaintively:

> There was mould and rot everywhere, the debris of moths and bookworms, and a thick covering of cobwebs. The windows had not been opened for months, and not a ray of sunshine had penetrated through them to brighten the unfortunate books, which were slowly pining away: and when they were opened, what a cloud of noxious air streamed out.[1]

This was the emperor's court library, the Hofbibliothek, a collection of 7,379 volumes (Blotius's first task was to make a catalogue); and it was situated not in the imperial palace but on the first floor of a Franciscan convent, a place of refuge for an orphaned collection which clearly played no part in the emperor's cultural programme.

When Blotius arrived in Vienna, it was over a hundred years since the invention of printing, a technological marvel that would bring the joys of book ownership within the reach of many thousands of Europe's citizens. Yet, in the midst of this great flourishing of literary culture, one of the principal libraries of Europe had become a dusty mausoleum. This was not an isolated example. The famed library of Matthias Corvinus, King of Hungary, one of the wonders of the first great age of book collecting, was completely destroyed; the rare and precious books of Cosimo de' Medici in

Florence had been absorbed into other collections. The spectacular collection of Fernando Colon, son of the explorer Christopher Columbus, was intended to rival the fabled ancient library of Alexandria; but it too was also largely dispersed, ravaged by time, the disapproval of the Inquisition, and the depredations of the King of Spain.

The library of Duke Federico of Urbino, a collector so grand that it was said that he would allow no printed book to pollute his wondrous manuscripts, also fell into neglect. When the famous library scholar Gabriel Naudé visited in the 1630s, he found Duke Federico's library 'in such a deplorable state that the readers despair of finding anything there'. Naudé was a young man on the rise, the author of one of the first guides for book collectors, aimed squarely at the elite buyers who might offer him a comfortable post building them a library (which they duly did).[2] What Naudé did not discuss in his writings was the uncomfortable truth of libraries throughout the ages: no society has ever been satisfied with the collections inherited from previous generations. What we will frequently see in this book is not so much the apparently wanton destruction of beautiful artefacts so lamented by previous studies of library history, but neglect and redundancy, as books and collections that represented the values and interests of one generation fail to speak to the one that follows. The fate of many collections was to degrade in abandoned attics and ruined buildings, even if only as the prelude to renewal and rebirth in the most unexpected places.

If we leave Naudé scrabbling around the faded glories of Italy and scroll forward 400 years, we find the library still going through an existential crisis of relevance, even if a collection of 7,000 volumes is a less remarkable achievement. Today, public libraries face falling budgets and the maintenance costs of old and decaying buildings, at the same time as demands for new services and declining interest in their legacy collections. During our research for this book, we witnessed at first hand the struggle over the Durning Public Library in Kennington, which Lambeth Council planned to turn into a community resource (council-speak for defunding it and allowing it to be run by volunteers). This ran into determined

resistance from a group of local residents campaigning to keep it open. Does the campaign represent public-spirited altruism that we should applaud – or is it a nostalgia for a world that has now disappeared and will never return? The educated and affluent part of our community takes it for granted that public funding of the arts and the facilitation of recreational reading is part of the core functions of government. But the public library – in the sense of a funded collection available free to anyone who wants to use it – has only existed since the mid nineteenth century, a mere fraction of the history of the library as a whole. If there is one lesson from the centuries-long story of the library, it is that libraries only last as long as people find them useful.

In other words, libraries need to adapt to survive, as they have always adapted to survive, a feat very successfully accomplished in recent years in France, with its network of Médiathèques, albeit with a huge commitment of public funds. University libraries, responding to student demand, are now social hubs as much as places of work, the cathedral silence that once characterised the library a thing of the past. In this, libraries actually hark back to an earlier model, pioneered in the Renaissance, when libraries were often convivial social spaces, in which books jostled for attention alongside paintings, sculptures, coins and curiosities.

This history of libraries does not offer a story of easy progress through the centuries, nor a prolonged lament for libraries lost: a repeating cycle of creation and dispersal, decay and reconstruction, turns out to be the historical norm. Even if libraries are cherished, the contents of these collections require constant curation, and often painful decisions about what has continuing value and what must be disposed of. Very often libraries flourished in the hands of their first owner, and then wasted away: damp, dust, moths and bookworm do far more damage over the years than the targeted destruction of libraries. But while growth and decline are parts of the cycle, so too is recovery. In 1556, the University of Oxford, its book collection despoiled, sold off the library's furniture. Fifty years later Sir Thomas Bodley established the greatest university library of the next three centuries. Fire ravaged libraries with remarkable frequency, only for the collections to be rebuilt,

more easily with each passing generation as the number of books available on the open market multiplied.

This is a story, then, of many unexpected twists and turns. What makes a library is, to a great extent, something each generation must decide anew. Some of those we discuss here are personal, workaday collections, reflecting the personal taste of an individual, while others are vast endeavours, established as monuments to national civic pride or even pursuing the Alexandrian notion of collecting the sum of human knowledge. Some were housed in richly decorated palaces and others, like that of Erasmus, had no home at all, being carted from house to house after their itinerant owner. Just as the books themselves have followed unexpected courses, flowing from collection to collection in the wake of war, social upheaval or light-fingered bibliophiles, the evolution of the library is far from linear.

Books on the Move

After the splendours of the great library at Alexandria, an inspiration for each subsequent generation of collectors, the muted contribution of the Roman Empire to the history of the library is something of a surprise. It was as if this military people could understand the purpose of an aqueduct, but could not quite work out what a library was for. Many great Roman libraries arrived in the baggage train of conquering generals: the great library of the Greek philosopher Aristotle found its way to Rome in this way. In this robust approach to intellectual property the Romans would find many imitators. In the first decade of the nineteenth century, Napoleon employed the author Stendhal to cherry-pick the libraries of Italy and Germany on behalf of the French national library.[3] Two centuries previously, in the Thirty Years' War, the Swedes had created an efficient bureaucratic process for appropriating the libraries of captured German cities. Transported back to Sweden, many of the books are still in the university library of Uppsala; the French Bibliothèque Nationale, in contrast, was obliged at the Congress of Vienna to repatriate Napoleon's trophies, something that caused no little indignation, given the amount they had spent on having the books rebound.[4]

The most substantial legacy of Rome, none of whose libraries survived the fall of the western empire, was the gradual transition from papyrus scrolls to parchment books as the medium of storage. Parchment, made from animal skins, was a much more resilient surface, and it was on parchment that the learning of Rome lived out the next millennium in the monasteries of the Christian West. This thousand-year supremacy of the manuscript book provides us with some of the most hauntingly beautiful products of medieval culture: today, these manuscripts are the most treasured possessions of the libraries where they have found their final homes.[5] By the fourteenth century, the works of monastic scribes and illuminators were increasingly reinforced by a secular market for beautiful books, as these became one further way for the leaders of European society to display their cultural sophistication.

Muslim caliphs in Baghdad, Damascus, Cordoba and Cairo also assembled libraries, famed throughout the Islamic world for their size. The caliphs attracted the best calligraphers to furnish these collections, and enticed scholars to visit them, enriching the courts with their rhetorical talents. In Persia, India and China the collecting of fine manuscripts, embellished with elegant decorations, lavish colours and superb calligraphy, was a favoured pastime of princes and emperors.

Thus, when in the mid fifteenth century Johannes Gutenberg and others began experimenting with a mechanical process for supplying the ever-increasing number of books required by churches, scholars and discerning collectors, they had a lot to live up to. Gutenberg's printed books dazzled the first generation of readers with their technological intricacy, but it still proved difficult to persuade established collectors that drab black-and-white texts were an adequate substitute for their beautifully illuminated manuscripts. Nor was it very clear how these thousands of printed texts could be brought to a market spread around Europe, something that caused some heartache to early investors in the medium. But once these teething problems were solved, the printed book brought the possibility of building a library to ever greater numbers of potential customers – even as it limited the appeal of book collecting as a form of aristocratic display.

Print also represented a decisive fork in the road in one other respect, for the vibrant manuscript cultures of Africa, the Middle East and East Asia did not follow Europe in embracing the mass production of print. The Ottoman Empire largely eschewed print altogether. The unhappy Venetian who presented to the Sublime Porte the first printed copy of the Qur'an was condemned for blasphemy. China, despite remarkable early experiments with woodblock printing, did not embrace metal type, for principally technical reasons. These cultures generally stayed loyal to woodblock or manuscript bookmaking, though not before they had shared with the West one further remarkable gift: paper. Made from cloth rags, paper was a far cheaper medium than parchment, and exquisitely well suited for partnership with the printing press. But without the multiplying capacities of print, book collecting outside of Europe and European colonies remained largely an elite privilege. For the next three centuries the vast proliferation of libraries, public and private, serving ever-expanding circles of readership, remained predominantly a phenomenon of Europe and its global diaspora.

This growth of book ownership was driven forward by a steady growth in literacy. At first, this was largely a case of professional necessity, evident among those who had to read for their work: merchants, clerks, lawyers and officials, medical doctors and priests. Print offered these emerging, aspirational professional classes the chance to own and collect books. Soon they were accumulating libraries of a size – several hundred items – that would only have been possible in the manuscript era for those at the apex of society. This democratisation of luxury, making widely available what was once rare and precious, is a recurrent phenomenon in every era of human history, but it has often had painful consequences for book collecting. An aristocrat could hardly expect the same reception for their collection of 300 texts when the local cloth merchant had as many: better to buy a sculpture, a painting or a lion. Emperor Maximilian II sent his books off to the attic because they no longer featured in this lexicon of conspicuous display.

Print and Power

Resentment of this democratisation of luxury, and the intrusion of more plebeian collectors into the refined world of books, continued for the best part of three centuries. The desire to accumulate knowledge competed with the desire to control access to it, or use it to somehow 'improve' its readers. This was most obviously manifested in disapproval of the reading tastes of these new readers: from the sixteenth-century war on chivalric fiction, to criticism of the novel, to disapproval of female reading tastes and particularly female authorship. Sir Thomas Bodley's great work in the re-foundation of the University of Oxford library is rightly celebrated, but he was adamant that he would not tolerate 'idle books and riffe raffes' in the collection: by which he meant texts in English rather than Latin. When Oxford received, by donation, a copy of the famous First Folio of Shakespeare's plays, they sold it a few decades later. In 1905, a copy was bought back for the university, at enormous public cost, to prevent it from falling into the hands of the American collector Henry Folger.[6]

With each century, new readers were brought into the compass of book ownership, and the same battles were repeatedly replayed, marking out the library as a political space. Should readers in the new nineteenth-century public libraries have the books that they desired, or books that would make them better, more cultured people? This raging debate was still echoing deep into the twentieth century: in the lists of 'recommended' texts issued for public libraries in America; in the prejudice against fiction in general, tolerated only in the hope that it would lead readers to more demanding literature (it did not); and in the anathematising of certain genres, such as romance. In the first half of the twentieth century in provincial England, Boots Booklovers Library provided a refuge for respectable women who sought such guilty pleasures. Even as late as 1969, the former director of the library service in the London Borough of Haringey could write mournfully: 'There is nothing more deadly to a public library service than pandering to a taste for "light" fiction.'[7]

In the fifteenth century, hostility towards the depreciation of what had previously been an elite currency – books – greatly

complicated the history of the library. The first consequence of the temporary retreat of kings and princes from the building of libraries was an era of tribulation for institutional collections. The first great institutional libraries, like the Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan, were often based on the donation of a distinguished private collector; or, in the case of university libraries, the accumulation of multiple smaller donations. Hardly any institutional library before the nineteenth century had a budget for the acquisition of new books, so donations were essential for growth (even if this meant receiving multiple copies of the same worn-out class texts).

The fate of these collections demonstrates that the history of the library is not a story of relentless progress. During the two centuries after the invention of printing, most institutional collections went into decline. In universities, the repudiation of the medieval curriculum made much of their stock redundant. The conflicts of the Reformation era, and the division of Europe's libraries into contesting Protestant and Catholic blocs, led to the painful examination of existing holdings for heretical content. The complete closure of the English university libraries was drastic and unusual: elsewhere institutional libraries simply faded away. In Copenhagen in 1603, the university library possessed a paltry 700 volumes, and with the exception of Leiden, none of the new Dutch libraries fared much better. It was not unusual for professors to accumulate personal libraries three or four times the size of the university collection – a reversal of roles inconceivable today.[8]

Indeed, for much of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the history of the library was driven forward largely by personal collecting. Books became simultaneously more affordable and more necessary to the professional life of lawyers, doctors and ministers of the church. By the mid seventeenth century, many could boast collections of over a thousand books. In contrast to the rapacious Renaissance book hunters of the manuscript era, who plied their trade in remote monasteries and religious houses, these men found books relatively easy to come by. Their correspondence is full of chatter about books: lending books back and forth, exchanging news about new titles, passing on their own newest publications

(many collectors were also authors) or recommending books written by their friends. This was an era in which books were valued not just for the knowledge they contained, but as a commodity: innovations in the market such as book auctions meant that collectors could continue buying, secure in the knowledge that on their death their families would be able to realise something close to the real value of the collection. The result was a virtuous circle in which collectors could indulge their passions, while also doing something that passed for inheritance planning.

Histories of libraries have thus far concentrated disproportionately on the world's great libraries, particularly those that have survived the ravages of time and lived on through the ages. One can well understand why: they are the charismatic megafauna of the library world, often occupying striking or historic buildings. Who can resist an example of eighteenth-century Austrian baroque, the quintessential cathedral of knowledge? But these were less temples to learning itself than buildings that were created to make a statement, whether the civic pride and values of a new elite (the Boston or New York Public Library) or the evangelical fervour of a missionary faith (the Jesuit libraries of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries). Other libraries memorialised the success of the king's favourite raised above his peers (the Bibliothèque Mazarine in Paris) or the imposition of western culture in the non-European world (the Imperial Library in Kolkata, now the National Library of India).

This was the library as a symbol of power: a statement of what a nation or a ruling class stood for. Inevitably, when this power was challenged these monumental buildings bore the brunt of the cultural or intellectual insurgency. In the German Peasants' War of 1524–5, the rampaging armies made monastic libraries a deliberate target, a symbol of their detestation of their clerical landlords, who appeared to show greater devotion to their treasures and their incomes than to the humans from whom they extracted service and painful rents. Four hundred years later, in the wars of the twentieth century and since, libraries remain vulnerable for their cultural capital. In Sri Lanka, the public library of Jaffna was one of the largest libraries in Asia, and the pre-eminent repository of

the written record of Tamil culture. On the night of 31 May 1981, the library was razed to the ground by a Sinhalese crowd, one of the principal examples of ethnic biblioclasm of the twentieth century.[9] A similar melancholic drama was played out in Sarajevo in 1992, when the Bosnian state library was deliberately targeted by the Serbian militia attacking the city. The entire collection of 1.5 million books and manuscripts was consumed in the resulting inferno.

The Perils of Modernity

Between 1800 and 1914, the population of Europe increased from 180 to 460 million. In the United States, growth was even more spectacular, from 5 to 106 million. Much of this population growth was fuelled by immigration, providing a workforce for the new industrial economy. Integrating these new citizens into the social fabric required, above all, a vast increase in educational provision. This stimulated a concerted drive towards compulsory education, at least for early years learning. By the early twentieth century, western societies were approaching universal literacy for both men and women. This permitted a parallel impetus towards a radical idea: a network of public libraries, free to all, catering to the reading needs of the broad mass of the population.

This bold vision took a long time to achieve. In the United States, the densely settled New England states led the way. In Britain, the critical moment was the passage in 1850 of the Public Libraries Act, empowering local authorities to establish libraries in their town or borough. The impact was, on the face of it, remarkable. By 1914 there were over 5,000 library authorities established in Britain under the terms of the 1850 Act, collectively circulating between 30 and 40 million volumes a year. By 1903, the United States boasted at least 4,500 public libraries, with a total book stock of some 55 million volumes. This growth would continue: by 1933, Germany had over 9,000 public libraries, while the collective book stock of American libraries then exceeded 140 million books.[10]

Behind these impressive statistics lies a more difficult struggle

than this upward trajectory would suggest. In the nineteenth-century industrial world, where many still endured poverty, poor housing and appalling working conditions, not everyone believed that libraries were a priority for public funds. In Britain, where the establishment of a local library board required a taxpayer levy, the take-up rate was initially sluggish. Even when a library rate was proposed, hostile campaigning, often underwritten by the powerful brewers' lobby, could ensure that it was defeated. But for the impetus provided on both sides of the Atlantic by the Scottish-American steel magnate, Andrew Carnegie, the spread of this network of libraries would have been far less rapid. It is on such individual passions and obsessions as well as on vast global changes that the history of the library hinges.

Communities were certainly proud of their new libraries, often provided with a prime location in the centre of town. Yet when the ribbon was cut and the band had played, serious questions still had to be addressed. Who was the library intended to serve? Should children be admitted? What of those who saw the library mainly as a warm place to shelter while leafing through a newspaper? The issue was complicated by the fact that neither Andrew Carnegie, whose fortune funded a swathe of civic libraries across America and the United Kingdom, nor the British Public Libraries Act made provision for the purchase of books. These decisions lay in the hands of the library committee, usually dominated by the same local worthies who had previously populated the more exclusive subscription libraries.

The decisions these guardians made regarding access and library stock set off a new round of culture wars. Technological revolutions in the nineteenth-century print industry had greatly extended the range of reading matter that could be placed in the hands of neophyte readers. Publishers quickly developed a literature specifically aimed at this fresh market of the newly literate: books designed not to improve or educate, but to entertain. But if these tales of adventure, gore and criminality, with few pretensions to literary merit, caused horror in the traditional book trade, publishers had only themselves to blame. Their cosy understanding with commercial circulation libraries, most notably Charles

1. The mockery of plebeian reading tastes has been a ubiquitous feature of library history. As in James Gillray's *Tales of Wonder!* (1802), the object of this mockery was often the reading tastes of women, and their taste for light fiction of the sort few librarians took seriously before the twentieth century.

Edward Mudie's library empire, had kept the price of new books unnecessarily high, excluding all but the prosperous middle classes from new literary fiction.

For librarians and those who populated the higher reaches of the literary establishment, the story papers and yellowbacks represented a significant basket of deplorables, though it was more difficult to work out precisely what belonged in the basket. Low-life tales of the criminal underworld were obviously bad, but then detective thrillers were fast becoming one of the glories of twentieth-century fiction. Leaders of the library profession did their best to steer librarians through these turbulent waters by issuing regular lists of approved titles. Often the passage of time canonised a work such as Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, thought too dangerous on first appearance. It was left to the library assistant on the front desk to answer difficult questions about why a looked-for title was not available.

Critics of the new reading public received unexpected support from many of the twentieth century's literary elite. Aldous Huxley, George Moore and D. H. Lawrence all deplored the reading preferences of the great unwashed. In particular, D. H. Lawrence (who had read too much Nietzsche) was, like T. S. Eliot, an enemy of mass education: 'Let all schools be closed at once ... the great mass of humanity should never learn to read and write.'[11] Ironically, Lawrence first came across Nietzsche in Croydon Public Library, one of many institutions animated by the desire to make the fruits of learning available to a mass readership.

This disdain for new readers did little justice to the seriousness of the engagement with literature of at least a portion of this new reading public. When the journalist and social commentator Henry Mayhew examined the bookstalls of mid nineteenth-century London, he found working men already regular customers. Their preferences were largely for established classics of the English literary canon: the novels of Goldsmith, Fielding and Sir Walter Scott, Shakespeare of course, the poems of Pope, Burns and Byron.[12] Dickens made a fortune by understanding the temper of this expanding market and in due course the publishers cashed in with series of 1-shilling reprints of out-of-copyright materials.

What these readers lacked was not ambition or intellect, but time. This helps to explain why nineteenth-century legislation for shorter working days helped boost the library movement, and why libraries were also more intensely frequented in times of war and economic depression. Wars inevitably closed down other opportunities for recreation, leading to an increase in the demand for books, both from troops in the field and on the home front. While libraries were all too often on the frontlines of the industrial warfare of the twentieth century, war did a great deal to inculcate the habit of reading: the raw material without which the library cannot survive.

The history of the library, it turns out, is a story with many such paradoxes, false dawns and a laborious struggle to foster a reading public. Now we talk of its very survival, even though the death of the library has been predicted almost as often as the death of the book. Yet when, in the spring of 2020, a global pandemic forced all libraries to close their doors, the sense of loss was

palpable. We should not romanticise libraries, not least because their owners seldom did. For much of their long history, libraries were primarily an intellectual resource and a financial asset. Only the very rich could afford to treat their libraries as shiny toys with which to impress their friends, passers-by and, more incidentally, posterity. The physical remains of these display libraries should not beguile us into confusing the impressive facade for the substance: the numberless collections of books assembled in private homes did every bit as much to sustain a vibrant book culture as institutional libraries. That, as we have seen repeatedly in times of loss and tribulation, is likely to remain the case. It is also the reason why, in the endless cycle from destruction to greatness, libraries have always recovered: it is in our nature to leave our own stamp on society. It is by no means clear, however, that what we preserve for the future will be similarly valued by our descendants.

Part One

INCEPTION AND SURVIVAL

Chapter One

A CONFUSION OF SCROLLS

On 16 October 2002, an impressive cast of world dignitaries gathered in the Egyptian city of Alexandria for the formal opening of one of the most remarkable cultural initiatives of the modern age: a new waterfront library resurrecting one of the wonders of the ancient world. Thirty years in the making, its genesis dated back to a visit to Egypt by American president Richard Nixon in 1974, during which the ill-starred president asked if he could be shown the site of the fabled library of Alexandria. Embarrassment ensued, since no one knew exactly where it might be: along with the buildings and its multitude of scrolls, even the place on which the ancient library stood had vanished into the sands of time.

Nixon would resign two months later, but local academics sniffed an opportunity. Frustrated by Alexandria's loss of influence to Cairo as a consequence of Gamal Abdel Nasser's Pan-Arabism and anti-colonialism, they saw the chance to revive a cultural icon, and with it Alexandria's place in the intellectual world. The appeal to universal civilising values embodied in the ancient library secured the influential support of UNESCO, leading in 1990 to the portentous Aswan Declaration, which committed the governments of Europe, the United States and the Arab world to building a new library as a monument to the 'quest for universal knowledge'. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States pledged substantial sums, only to be trumped by Saddam Hussein, whose pledge of $21 million secured for Iraq the place of honour at the 2002 ceremonies.[1]

With so much international enthusiasm, it seemed almost impolite to question the wisdom of building a library in a run-down Egyptian port with no discernible need for such a facility. Certainly there would have been other ways to spend a grand total

of $210 million that would improve the lives of Egyptian citizens. In the twelve-year period between the Aswan Declaration and the library's grand opening it was not difficult to find critics of 'Mubarak's new pyramid', painstakingly erected in a nation with widespread illiteracy and a far from unblemished record with regard to intellectual freedom. Much of the pledged help came in the form of donated books, including half a million in French, many of which were functionally useless and had to be discarded. The decision of Alexandria University to sell much of its own collection in anticipation of these new riches proved woefully premature.

In the twenty years since its opening, the new library of Alexandria has struggled with an insufficient acquisitions budget, disaffected staff and accusations of corruption, not to mention the upheaval of the Arab Spring and its aftermath. But regardless of whether you see the new library of Alexandria as a quixotic monument to the tortured politics of international cultural diplomacy, or the visionary celebration of a unique experiment in the history of human knowledge, it certainly points to the distinguished role of the ancient library of Alexandria in the history of libraries. Part fable, part historical reality, the ancient library of Alexandria has been a powerful symbol of intellectual aspiration throughout the history of book collecting. When the libraries of Rome burned to the ground in the heyday of the Roman Empire, it was to Alexandria that Emperor Domitian sent his scribes to create new copies for his library. When Fernando Colon decided to assemble a library encompassing all the world's knowledge in the sixteenth century, it was Alexandria he claimed as his inspiration.[2] Renaissance champions of scholarship evoked Alexandria as regularly as have the new barons of the digital age. The progenitors of Amazon, Google and Wikipedia can all, in this sense, lay claim to Alexandria's mantle.

The foundations of western civilisation owe so much to the inspiration and achievements of Greece and Rome that it is no surprise that we look there for models of library building and the roots of our culture of collecting. This expectation is, to an extent, justified. The Greeks required, and devised, the means to capture the intellectual achievements of the age of Aristotle, and

the Romans appropriated this cultural legacy with their customary ruthless efficiency. But even the Romans, with their apparently limitless resources for major infrastructure projects, struggled to resolve the problems that would bedevil the history of book collecting for the next two millennia: the provision of reliable texts and the principles governing who had access to them; the optimum means to store knowledge; and most of all how to establish stable collections that would pass down through the generations. All of this somehow eluded these most gifted architects of civilisation. Later scholars would take from Greece and Rome an inspiring vision of the empowerment of knowledge, and the potentialities of collecting – as well as a lesson in how easily attempts to embody this vision could turn to ashes.

Behold Alexandria

The Greeks were not the first to create libraries. The rulers of the Assyrian Empire of Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq) gathered considerable quantities of documents, all carefully inscribed in their distinctive cuneiform script on to clay tablets. These baked clay tablets survive remarkably well, since they are virtually impervious to damp or fire; but they were enormously bulky to store and too ponderous to move around easily. These cuneiform libraries were located in royal palaces or temples, and intended exclusively for the use of scholarly staff and royal owners. They were not open to the public, as was made clear by this inscription at the end of one such text: 'One who is competent (or knowledgeable) should show this only to one who is also competent, but may not show it to the uninitiated.'[3] In any case, in societies where literacy was confined to the ruling class, and their officials and spiritual guides, few would have aspired to access these early monuments of written culture.

Some of these elite libraries were quite considerable. Collections of 700 or 800 items have been excavated, and the royal libraries of Nineveh stored 35,000 tablets. All of these libraries were destroyed when the Assyrian Empire was conquered by the Babylonians in 614–612 BC. The Babylonian libraries faded from

view more gradually, rendered redundant by more functional alphabetical writing systems, and new media more convenient than clay tablets: parchment and papyrus. The discovery of the papyrus plant, and its excellence as a writing medium, was an essential requirement for the translation of the emerging Greek culture from an oral to a written form: papyrus grew abundantly in the Nile delta, and the techniques of splitting the reed stalks and weaving them together as writing sheets were easily mastered. Papyrus became the pre-eminent writing medium of the ancient world, exported from Egypt to Greece and later Rome, and made possible the extraordinary experiment in knowledge acquisition that became the library at Alexandria.

By the fourth century BC, Greece was a highly literate society, at least at the elite level.[4] A flourishing commercial book trade ensured that the milestones of literature and texts taught at schools were fairly freely available, and those with an occupational need for books (always in this period papyrus scrolls) could find them easily enough. Aristophanes mocked Euripides as a journeyman writer who 'squeezed [his plays] out of books'.[5] By 338 BC, Athens was sufficiently concerned about the poor copies of plays in circulation that they established an official archive of authoritative texts. The philosopher Aristotle, who tutored the young Alexander the Great and deserves credit for infusing the young warrior with a similar love of book learning, assembled a personal collection of considerable size. His books would eventually make their way to Rome, removed in 84 BC from the conquered city of Athens by the victorious general Sulla, though not before this remarkable personal library had helped inspire the organisation of the new institution in Alexandria.

The planting of a Greek city on the northern coast of Egypt played a key role in the expansive imperial vision of Alexander the Great, though he did not live to see the creation of the great seaport or its library. This was the achievement of the first two Ptolemaic kings, the dynasty born of Ptolemy the First, who secured Egypt when Alexander's empire was carved up among his leading generals. The library of Alexandria was first and foremost a scholarly academy: the rapidly developing collection of texts was essentially

their research archive. Scholars who agreed to join the community in Egypt received benefits few academics could even dream of: a lifetime appointment, with a handsome salary, exemption from tax and free food and lodging. Among those tempted by these blandishments were the scientists Euclid, Strabo and Archimedes. From these names we can judge that the Ptolemies furnished their library not only with the classics of literature, but serious texts in the fields of mathematics, geography, physics and medicine. The pace of acquisitions was dazzling. Agents travelled throughout the Greek territories purchasing books on an industrial scale. Less creditably, scrolls were forcibly removed for copying from any ship entering the port. Many ships' captains would have needed to continue their journey before the originals were returned.[6]

We will never really know how many texts were accumulated by this library: scholars have spoken of 200,000 or even half a million scrolls. Whatever figure we choose, this was a library of a size that would never again be achieved until the nineteenth century. A collection of this magnitude necessarily required careful organisation. Scrolls were stored in recessed alcoves, where they could be stacked in organised groups. The sheer size of the Alexandrian library demanded far more systematic cataloguing, with books split between many different chambers. The texts were stored alphabetically, though presumably also organised by genre, the leading principle of classification in every institutional library thereafter. A feature of the Alexandrian library was the high quality of the scholars recruited as librarians. One, Callimachus of Cyrene, completed the first ever bibliographical dictionary of authors. Like so much connected with Alexandria, this has not survived. The scholars of Alexandria also took advantage of the inevitable presence of many duplicates to attempt to establish authoritative editions of the major texts, a quest that would be resumed in the Renaissance with the exhumation of classical texts from monastic libraries.[7] In Alexandria, as also in the Renaissance, this endeavour inevitably spawned another critical genre, the scholarly commentary.

When Rome seized leadership of the ancient world, the Alexandrian Academy would recede in importance. What became of

the contents of the library is one of the great mysteries in the long history of libraries. In Plutarch's *Life of Caesar*, the destruction of the library is presented as a tragic by-product of the campaign of Julius Caesar to secure Egypt for his lover, Cleopatra. When Caesar ordered the burning of the Egyptian navy in the harbour, the fire spread to a dockside warehouse, consuming many books. These were likely to have been new acquisitions awaiting cataloguing, rather than the main library: as we have already seen, Emperor Domitian relied on Alexandria to restock Roman libraries lost in the fire of AD 79. A more plausible explanation sees the destruction of the library as a consequence of the Egyptian campaign of Emperor Aurelian in AD 272, when the palace quarter of Alexandria was laid waste. The polemical contribution of the relentlessly anticlerical eighteenth-century English author Edward Gibbon, who blamed the loss of the library on the campaign against pagan structures waged by the Christian Emperor Theodosius in AD 391, can largely be disregarded; likewise the suggestion that the books were destroyed on the orders of Caliph Omar after the Arab conquest of Egypt in the seventh century.[8]

The truth is that none of these explanations need be true. The major disadvantage of papyrus, otherwise an excellent medium for information storage, is its susceptibility to damp. Even in a well-curated collection, texts need to be recopied after a generation or two. The sheer size of the Alexandrian library militated against its survival. As with so many of the libraries we will meet in this book, neglect was a much more potent enemy than war or malice.

Rome

The contribution of Rome to the foundation of western civilisation – roads, aqueducts, the postal service, a host of administrative systems and legal codes – is so profound, that it is natural to expect a major contribution also to the development of the institutional library. In fact, in this respect at least, Rome fell short. The government of a large empire certainly generated an enormous amount of wealth and required considerable development in the bureaucratisation of administration. A vibrant commercial book market

facilitated the accumulation of significant collections of books. Statesmen, authors and philosophers all gathered great libraries, often in each of their several residences. But for all that, Rome boasted nothing that we would recognise as a public library.

By far the most prominent and visible libraries in Rome were those established by the emperors, beginning with Augustus. This built on a scheme first conceived by Julius Caesar, thwarted by his assassination, to include libraries in his plan for 'adorning and building up' the city of Rome, a phrase which hints at the true purpose of these collections. Emperor Augustus placed libraries in the Temple of Apollo, establishing a widely imitated practice of dividing the Greek and Latin texts into separate collections. Most imperial libraries, like those of Augustus, were situated in a palace or temple. Libraries were seldom, if ever, housed in a separate building.

The establishment of such libraries greatly excited Rome's poets, who heaped praise on Asinius Pollio, the friend of Julius Caesar who would bring his plan for a library to fulfilment. According to Pliny the Elder, Asinius was 'the first to make the genius of man public property', a phrase echoed by Suetonius when he described the library as 'open to the public'.[9] We have to be careful with these phrases: authors in Rome, from Cicero to Pliny, were almost by definition members of the elite, and the public they had in mind was composed of people like themselves. When Pliny the Younger capped a successful public career by establishing a library in his home town of Comum, the opening was not accompanied by celebratory games or gladiatorial contests of the sort likely to engage the local population. Pliny's speech at the dedication of the library was given to a far more select audience in the council building. Here the library was primarily a monument to its founder. The role of the townspeople was largely to admire the library as they walked past, and thus recall the brilliant career of their most prominent local son. As we will see, this was not so very different from the motivation of many generous philanthropists in the nineteenth-century United States when they gave their home town a public library (often adorned by classical colonnades in the Roman style).[10]

The imperial libraries were, nevertheless, important public institutions. They served as venues for gatherings of prominent citizens who would frequently be treated to poetic declamations. They also played a role, by their choice of texts, in establishing a canon of admired authors. The most distinguished would sometimes be honoured by a bust in the library; those overlooked fretted about how their masterworks could be insinuated into the collection. Emperors were also not slow to intervene in banning the circulation of disapproved texts, or works thought to be personally embarrassing, as Augustus did in the case of three pieces of juvenilia written by his ancestor Julius Caesar. In one particularly egregious case, Emperor Domitian ordered not only the execution of the author and bookseller of an offensive text but also the crucifixion of the unfortunate enslaved scribes responsible for producing the actual copies.[11]

A far larger number of people would have attended events in the imperial libraries than the much more restricted circle who needed access to the texts. Active users would have been limited to a small number of imperial officials, favoured poets and members of the Roman legal establishment and ruling classes. The library, like access to the imperial households, was an important part of the nexus of patronage, and the example set by the emperors in this regard was imitated by statesmen and generals such as Sulla, who returned from campaigns bearing valuable collections of books. The great library of Lucullus, booty from the Mithridatic War, became a magnet for Greek scholars in Rome. Even Cicero, who had significant collections of books at all of his residences, found it opportune to consult in the library of Lucullus texts that he did not own himself.[12] By opening their collections to visitors, ambitious public figures could simultaneously consolidate their reputations as men of letters while building a personal following. In the case of statesmen and generals, this did not necessarily involve an intimate acquaintance with their own books. Seneca considered a library a necessary part of a stylish home – but he also complained of the overabundance of unread books that this collecting generated. According to the waspish Lucian of Samosata, in the second century many politicians acquired a library

purely to win the favour of Marcus Aurelius, a notably bookish emperor.[13]

The Avoidance of Grief

Books served many purposes in Rome, not always having much to do with reading. For all that, the accumulating wealth of learning made its way through radiating circles of readers on to the shelves of many private libraries. We see this not only in the libraries of distinguished scholars like Cicero, Pliny, or the great Greco-Roman medical authority Galen, but in the extraordinarily rich library excavated from the ruins of a private house in Herculaneum entombed after the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79. In this expansive villa, archaeologists discovered a small storeroom containing 1,700 scrolls. These were not administrative or estate records, but a collection of Epicurean philosophy.[14] From circumstantial evidence it has been established that this collection belonged originally to Calpurnius Piso Caesoninus, father-in-law of Julius Caesar, who was the patron of Philodemus of Gadara, the philosophical writer whose works were so generously represented in this collection. Most of the writings were over a hundred years old when the villa was buried in the eruption. The room in which they were stored would have been too small for reading: doubtless they were brought to a well-lit chamber elsewhere in the house by the enslaved worker charged with curating the collection.

Creating and maintaining a library of this size would have been an expensive undertaking. While texts were easily accessible in the markets of Rome, concerns about their accuracy impelled serious collectors to employ their own scribes to make copies of trusted texts on their behalf. Access to texts required the mobilisation of well-placed friends; Cicero relied on the library of Atticus, a well-connected patrician deeply engaged in the Roman publishing industry. Even if a friend could be prevailed upon to furnish the text, copying was expensive, since a slave trained as a scribe was hard to find. One could buy a small library for the price of an enslaved scribe capable of writing both Greek and Latin.[15] For this reason, if we set aside the show collections of retired generals

and the main imperial libraries, the more serious collections were usually those assembled by professional men such as Galen, the lawyer Cicero, or men who combined a career in public life with philosophical enquiry, such as the Elder and Younger Pliny.[16] In these lives, books played an indispensable part. Galen's library is known to us through his plaintive treatise written after the fire in the Temple of Peace in AD 192 where much of his collection was stored.[17] This work, the evocatively titled *On the Avoidance of Grief*, painfully recreates the process by which Galen had built his collection: consulting texts in numerous Roman libraries, sometimes making copies, sometimes epitomes and compilations of texts. The flexibility of the compilation, the ability to create bespoke texts from segments of other works, was one of the key features distinguishing the manuscript book world from the age of print, where the order and nature of texts was established before they came into the hands of the purchaser. This loss of autonomy in the creation of books would be one of the major sources of regret among established collectors in the transition from manuscript to print in the fifteenth century.[18]

Some books had to be purchased, and others arrived as gifts; some works came to Galen in exchange for his own voluminous works (these on their own were enough to fill 700 scrolls). This pattern of collecting could also describe the experience of professional men eager to build a library at any point between the sixteenth and the nineteenth century.[19] Exploring every avenue to obtain books, perhaps even strategically forgetting to return books loaned by friends, helps explains why so many doctors, lawyers, ministers or professors in this later era of book collecting could build very considerable libraries, often with only a fraction of the financial resources on which a man like Galen could draw.

The literary output of the Roman Empire, along with the inherited culture of Greece, would shape western civilisation; if, that is, it could be preserved. None of the imperial libraries, and certainly none of these personal collections would survive the ravages of time, except for the library of Herculaneum, preserved by the calamity that destroyed both this coastal resort and the neighbouring Pompeii. But even with this imperfect historical record, and

recognising how little we know about how Romans read or stored their books, this early period of library formation lays bare many of the dilemmas of collecting that would shape the library world in the succeeding two millennia.[20] What was a library: were books for display or working tools? Should collectors aim to emulate the universalist library of Alexandria, or the more focused collections of Galen or Cicero?

What, crucially, was the public for a public library? Was the key motivation for building a library accessibility, or the demonstration of elite power? Should the library be a place of sociability or silence, a meeting place or a place of study? In Roman libraries, it seems quite frequently to have been the case that the scrolls were stored separately before consultation in a study or a more public gallery. Certainly, on the few occasions when contemporary accounts give us a glimpse of the workings of the imperial libraries, there is little sign of space set aside for quiet perusal of the library's riches. The Romans promoted important innovations in indexing and cataloguing; they sold books at auction, a practice which, when reinvented in the seventeenth century, completely transformed the process of building a library. They also faced the problem, common to all ages of collecting, of what to do with redundant texts; should they be stored for future generations as memorials of previous historical eras, or cast out to make room for new books? In the age of the papyrus this was a particularly urgent question, since neglect would eventually imply extinction. With papyrus, one did not have the luxury of the age of paper or parchment, of allowing books to slumber unread on the shelves for centuries without the need for further curation. Even when one welcomed a flourishing book market, how should the circulation of information be controlled? We have seen that the Romans would take decisive and sometimes cruel steps to remove seditious or embarrassing literature from the market-place: it did not need the invention of printing to convince authorities of the potential dangers of unfettered access to texts.

The Romans faced all these issues and more. Despite the glamour of the imperial libraries, the Roman Empire points to private collections as the natural locus of the library, and principal

vectors of public discourse; largely because the public admitted to allegedly public libraries was so shallow and narrow, as it would continue to be, right through until the end of the nineteenth century. Collectively, the libraries assembled in villas and town houses in Rome and scattered through the empire offer a more promising road map to the future of book collecting than the imperial libraries or, it must be said, the semi-mythical beast that was the library of Alexandria.

Finally, we must pay tribute to two unsung heroes of the Roman book world: the enslaved scribes who ensured that texts would be preserved through their copying, and the Christian Church, initially reviled, but ultimately the salvation of Roman culture. In the first centuries after the birth of Christianity, Romans became accustomed to the spectacle of watching Christians being torn apart by wild animals in the Colosseum; many others died a less theatrical but equally painful death. So it is a neat irony that ultimately the fruits of Roman learning would depend on the resilience of the Christian faith for their survival. For while the Vandals, Goths and Ostrogoths feasted on the wreckage of Roman civilisation, its culture would find its ultimate refuge in that quintessentially Christian institution, the monastery. Here, the works of Cicero and Seneca would nestle peacefully among Christian texts, temporarily safe from the ravages of time and plunder, to take their place as cornerstones of library culture after their rediscovery in the Renaissance. This was but one of many examples we will see of the operation of a whimsical lottery that ensured that some texts would survive, poked away in some Bavarian monastery, while others would be lost for ever. That was the fate that awaited the intellectual harvest of this most remarkable civilisation as the tides of history swept away the glories of Rome.