

Introduction: sources and methodologies for the history of libraries in the modern era

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The history of libraries in the modern period is rich in the resources, both specific and more general, which are required to prosecute the subject.¹ More history has been written about the past 150 years – witness the explosion of studies on the Victorian period since its rehabilitation in the mid-twentieth century – than about any other comparable period. This means that library historians have at their disposal a considerable amount of contextual knowledge to help them situate and make sense of the subjects they research. Secondly, modern organisations – organisations forged from the bureaucratic efficiency of maturing modernity – have generated vast swathes of archival documentation. As solid administrators, librarians have been busier than most over the past century and a half in documenting the activities of their organisations. Hence we have been bequeathed an abundant store of primary evidence, a good amount of which, owing to librarians' penchant for preservation, has thankfully survived.

Sources for modern library history can be divided into two basic categories. First there are library-centred administrative sources, which are derived mostly from instrumental needs to manage and improve library services, and to which one might add, for many types of library, the archives of their parent institutions. Secondly there are sources generated outside the library profession or the administrative domain of the library by those who have had something to say about them, whether as users or non-users.

Library-centred and administrative sources are extensive. They include library committee minutes, rule books, printed catalogues, annual reports, financial reports, registers of borrowers and members, statistics of use and of stock, the contemporary library press, architectural plans and drawings, photographs, brochures and official reports, as well as a wide variety of ephemera,

¹ For a succinct discussion of sources, see J. G. Ollé, *Library history* (London, 1969).

INTRODUCTION

from everyday documents like library tickets and promotional posters, to objects such as the indicator boards common in closed-access public libraries before the First World War, and, of course, the extant built forms of libraries themselves. The archives of the parent institutions – whether universities or cathedrals, government departments or industrial concerns – may also shed light from an angle that is not always the same as the library's own view of its activities. This can be true in respect of buildings and accommodation especially, but also of the institutional policies (or external pressures) which libraries have to respond to.

Librarians have been enthusiastic autobiographers, eager to pass comment in written testimonies on the systems and users they have managed and on the contribution they have made to the profession.² Library historians have also at times used interviews and oral recordings to capture the history of the profession 'in its own words'. In the 1970s David Gerard and Mary Casteleyn conducted a series of interviews with prominent librarians, including Frank Gardner, K. C. Harrison and W. A. Munford.³ Some studies have made use of career-history interviewing.⁴ Tapping into this healthy tradition, in 1999 the Library History Group of the Library Association began constructing an electronic archive of professional reminiscences, now incorporating the professional memories of around a dozen librarians.⁵ A similar archive, 'Pioneers of Information Science in North America', has been constructed by Bob Williams of the University of South Carolina.⁶

Turning to popular, user-centred sources generated outside the library domain, three types of documentary evidence are worth highlighting: fiction and narratives in other media; autobiographies and diaries; and newspapers. Libraries have frequently found their way into cultural and media

2 For example D. Gerard, *Shrieking silence: a library landscape* (Metuchen, NJ and London, 1988), or K. C. Harrison, *A librarian's odyssey: episodes of autobiography* (Eastbourne, 2000), both describing careers in English public libraries. Examples of autobiography from other parts of the British library scene are D. Urquhart, *Mr. Boston Spa* (Leeds, 1990) and B. Vickery, *A long search for information*, Graduate School of Library and Information Science, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Occasional Paper 213 (Urbana-Champaign, 2004).

3 *Librarians speaking* (London, 1974–6), 23 tapes (British Library National Sound Archive). In 2002 a similar but smaller exercise was mounted by the Health Libraries Group of the Library Association: *Health Libraries Group oral history project*, 5 tapes (also British Library National Sound Archive).

4 E. Kerslake, 'A history of women library workers in English libraries 1871–1974', unpublished PhD thesis, Loughborough University (1999).

5 www.cilip.org.uk/groups/lhg/e-memory.html.

6 www.libsci.sc.edu/bob/ISP/ISP.htm.

Sources and methodologies

productions of various kinds, and these have proved useful primary sources for library historians. Libraries have often featured in contemporary imaginative literature.⁷ Some recent studies have examined libraries through the lens of children's literature.⁸ Comics and film have also been mobilised as sources.⁹ Imaginative cultural and media productions reflect the 'reality' – or at least perceptions or dramatisations of reality – of the user's view of libraries at the time they were 'authored'.

Users' written accounts of libraries in autobiographies, diaries and social commentaries are invaluable sources in library history. Such accounts are an important primary source for historians seeking to learn about the part that events, people, social practices and institutions have played in people's lives, as well as the meanings that autobiographers attach to these. Libraries have also featured in users' life histories, a significant number written by members of the working classes.¹⁰

Notwithstanding these efforts on a 'domestic' scale, library historians have been largely inactive in capturing the history of libraries in the words of users.¹¹ Evidence of library use can be found in large-scale, general oral-history projects, but such references are extremely rare and difficult to detect. Unfortunately, despite the importance of the topic and the considerable potential

7 A. Black, 'Representations of the public library in Victorian and Edwardian fiction: assessing the semiological approach', in P. Vodosek and G. Jefcoate (eds.), *Libraries in literature / Bibliotheken in der literarischen Darstellung* (Wiesbaden, 1999), 151–66; J. W. Singleton, 'The library in fiction', *Library Association Record* 20 (1918), 210–18.

8 E. Kerslake, 'Angry sentinels and businesslike women: identity and marital status in 1950s English library career novels', *Library History* 17 (2001), 83–90; E. Yontz, 'Librarians in children's literature, 1909–2000', *The Reference Librarian* 78 (2002) (Special Issue: The Image and Role of the Librarian), 85–96.

9 Regarding comics see D. Highsmith, 'The long, strange trip of Barbara Gordon: images of librarians in comic books', *The Reference Librarian* 78 (2002), 61–84. Regarding film see J. Williamson, 'Jungian/Myers Briggs personality types of librarians in films', *The Reference Librarian* 78 (2002), 47–60, and M. Nagl, 'Stille, Ordnung, Katastrophen: Bibliotheken im Film – Bibliotheken aus männlichem Blick?' (which also covers television), in Vodosek and Jefcoate (eds.), *Libraries in literature*, 115–26.

10 B. Wiltshire, 'The public library in autobiography', unpublished MPhil thesis, CNAA, North London Polytechnic (now London Metropolitan University) (1982). Many instances of library use are indexed in J. Burnett, D. Vincent and D. Mayall (eds.), *The autobiography of the working class: an annotated critical bibliography*, 3 vols. (Brighton, 1984–9). See also J. Rose, *The intellectual life of the British working classes* (New Haven and London, 2001).

11 There are some exceptions, for example Alistair Black's use of the Mass-Observation Archive: see A. Black, 'The past public library observed: user recollections of the British public library recorded in the Mass-Observation Archive', *Library Quarterly*, forthcoming.

INTRODUCTION

value of the evidence, no systematic oral-history study of library patrons has been attempted.¹²

Articles in newspapers, both local and national, often offer an ‘outsider’s view’ of libraries. Care has to be taken, of course, to distinguish genuine, detached observation from that which has been inspired or moulded by librarians or those connected with the library movement. Library historians will continue to be indebted to those librarians of the past who demonstrated great diligence in extracting material about libraries from contemporary newspapers and magazines and organising the cuttings into files and volumes, such as those that form part of the archives of the Library Association, of the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust and of many local studies departments of public libraries.¹³

Methodological issues in library history

The growth and diversification of history generally in recent decades has proved to be a mixed blessing for library history. On the one hand, library history has benefited from the arrival of the ‘new history’ and ‘history from below’, where the traditional emphasis on the history of great individuals and events, and on military, diplomatic and political history, has been challenged by historians seeking to give greater attention to the history of ordinary people and to the perspectives of those not in positions of power: the history of people and practices previously hidden from history. In keeping with this shift of emphasis, the library, as an ‘everyday’, seemingly innocuous institution, has been retrieved from the archives of history and rightly written into the historical record. This is true not just of popular, ‘social’ libraries, but also of those in ‘establishment’ institutions like the church, government and the professions, where libraries and their staff have for the most part occupied a relatively low status in the hierarchy of power. Library history has undoubtedly been invigorated by increased activity in local history and in such ‘modern’ subjects as the history of women and the working classes, as well as by the growth and increasing sophistication of areas like architectural and management history.

On the other hand, it is probably fair to say that, while contributing to, and feeding off, the development and diversification of modern history, library

12 Some studies have incorporated interviews with users, for example N. Moody, ‘Fashionable design and good service: the spinster librarians at Boot’s Booklover’s Libraries’, in E. Kerslake and N. Moody (eds.), *Gendering library history* (Liverpool, 2000), 131–44.

13 At the time of writing, the archives of the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust are deposited in the National Archives of Scotland. Those of the Library Association are deposited in the archives department of University College London.

Sources and methodologies

historians could have done more over the decades to integrate their field with other fields of historical study. In being less attentive than they might have been to 'mainstream' history, library historians have laid themselves open to the accusation – albeit an unfair one – that their field has not moved far enough away from its antiquarian past. As well as borrowing too little from the rich endeavours of 'other' history, library historians have also been sparing in their employment of theory drawn from other disciplines, whether from sociology or cultural studies, philosophy or architecture. There are, of course, many exceptions to this general observation – indeed, this volume is densely populated with them. It is also the case that the search for facts and evidence in library history remains crucial and should not be abandoned in any mad 'rush for theory'. However, it has to be said that the better library history is often that which is infused and illuminated in some way by knowledge and contexts extracted from outside the primary and secondary sources of the subject. Such discursive studies are characterised by a willingness of library historians to admit that they need something on which to hang their work.

During the course of its recent development a tension has emerged in library history between description and analysis, between fact-grubbing and theory. However, the tension is much less pronounced in some areas of library history than in others. In considering the relationship between fact and theory in library history, it is possible to construct a taxonomy of institutions that warrant varying mixes of factual and theoretical approaches. Theory-rich approaches have been relatively common in public library history and in the history of the profession of librarianship. Here, although there is always more to be discovered, the facts of past development are fairly well known and widely available in secondary sources. Hence, the emphasis is now more on the development of theoretical interpretations rather than on disclosure of fresh primary sources. Topics where the need for factual discovery and for theory are more or less equally weighted include libraries in higher education, middle-class subscription libraries and specialist libraries of various kinds. Finally, situated at the far end of the spectrum are libraries that we might include in a category labelled 'hidden': libraries of a marginal and often ephemeral nature.¹⁴ Here, the general priority has been – and will continue to be – the gathering of raw evidence, although exciting theoretical perspectives and opportunities inevitably present themselves and should be encouraged.

Library history thus has the opportunity to display a wider conception of topics worthy of research than has been evident in the past. This is also the case

¹⁴ The concept of 'hidden libraries' is explored in chapter 1, below.

INTRODUCTION

in respect of theoretical approaches. The history of libraries can be researched at a 'macro' level – at the level of general development, policy formulation, class use, professional expertise and religious, political or civic influence. The 'macro' level can also address issues arising from the multi-layered nature of libraries, which can respond to a kind of stratigraphic approach, revealing the different approaches to similar issues at different times. However, precisely because they are such highly textured, idiosyncratic worlds of cultural activity, they can also be studied at the 'micro' level, with researchers addressing questions, for example, of how people behaved in libraries, the nature of disciplinary controls imposed, the detailed motives underpinning specific instances of library use and the nature of interpersonal relationships, whether between user and user, user and staff, or staff and staff. As one of us has written elsewhere:

The study of minutiae in library history provides ammunition for fresh theoretical perspectives revealing the meaning of common, microscopic social practices and beliefs leading to the decoding of the discourses and practices of librarians, readers, benefactors or promoters. Attempts might thus be made to obtain the meaning of opening ceremonies; or of architectural styles; or of the 'haven' or 'rural' and other metaphors employed in respect of libraries; or of the change in emphasis in public library hygiene in the late-Victorian age away from ensuring clean air and good ventilation, towards fears concerning the lending and circulation of supposedly disease-ridden books, thereby reflecting the medico-moral discourse concerning the source of disease – said to be foul air in the mid-nineteenth century, but Pasteur's germs by the late nineteenth century. Whether one spoke in a library, returned books late deliberately or queued quiescently for long periods at the closed-access counter or the open-access wicket gate can reveal much, for example, about issues of discipline and rebellion in both the library and wider social setting.¹⁵

The way in which these methodologies have been applied in this volume, explicitly or implicitly, will become apparent in the text, varying from chapter to chapter depending on the availability of sources and the approach dictated by the subject matter.

¹⁵ A. Black, 'New methodologies in library history: a manifesto for the "new" library history', *Library History* 11 (1995), 76–85.

I

Libraries and the modern world

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Libraries and modernity

The 150 year period that this volume covers witnessed the emergence and development of what can justifiably be referred to as the ‘modern library’. It coincided with the maturation of modernity: a change of gear within the broad epoch of modernity that was set in motion by the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century and the intellectual revolution of the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century.¹ During our period, industrial production moved on to a more technical plane, and became irrevocably determined by the outputs of applied science (the ‘knowledge economy’, we might observe, existed for a century or more before its ‘rediscovery’ in the late twentieth century). Society underwent a process of massification. This was as much the case in terms of political arrangements (universal suffrage), communications (the mass media, including the book trade and newspapers) and social provision (education, welfare and housing) as it was in respect of production, consumption and advertising. The ‘control’ dimensions of modernity, such as surveillance, bureaucracy and standardisation, intensified alongside its liberating tendencies, such as the free flow of ideas and the operation of a public sphere, which was extended via a variety of rational and accessible institutions – although restricted, some would argue, by others, especially as the twentieth century progressed.

Libraries mirrored and influenced each of these aspects of a mature modernity. Indeed, library development after 1850 is best understood as a function of the ‘modern’ society that began to emerge from around the middle of the nineteenth century. Most library activity of the past century and a half, we suggest, can be viewed in the context of the changing contours of modernity. Modernity has not, of course, been a static phenomenon. Theorists point to

¹ P. M. Heimann, ‘The scientific revolutions’, in P. Burke (ed.), *The new Cambridge modern history*, vol. 13: *Companion Volume* (Cambridge, 1979), 248–70.

INTRODUCTION

various phases in its evolution.² Indeed, some believe we have recently witnessed the culmination of modernity's final phase. A shift to a post-modern world and an information society, in which the grand narrative of modernity has become irrelevant and outdated, has been widely discussed and accepted.³ On the other hand, those suspicious of the post-modern and information-society propositions conceptualise instead merely a new phase of 'late', or 'high', modernity and justify their position by pointing to the unvanquished, and even strengthened, continuities of the 'modern project': a deep residual faith in progress, in critical reasoning, in the freedom of the 'self', in capitalist production and market economics and, despite the risks they reproduce, in science, technology and expert knowledge.⁴ It is not hard to see how the enduring components of the modern mind and modern culture listed here have generated – and continue to generate – high levels of library activity.

Pre-modern societies are essentially 'stationary societies', characterised by a slow pace of cultural, technological and economic change. The accumulation of knowledge occurs at a creeping rate, and its dissemination is patchy and parochial. By contrast, modern societies are societies in a state of flux, where technologies, economies, cultures and cultural production develop and change rapidly. To counter the unsettling experiences and unpredictable effects of sudden change, modern societies instinctively generate 'strategies of stability' that seek to restore a measure of continuity. One such strategy, it might be argued, is an increased emphasis on preserving and organising recorded knowledge in libraries and other kinds of repository.

The organisation of knowledge, a key factor in the concept of modernity and linked to its 'control' dimension, is fundamental to the work of libraries – through their management of patterns of use and through the standardised

2 M. Carleheden, 'Rethinking the epochs of Western modernity', in M. Carleheden and M. H. Jacobsen (eds.), *The transformation of modernity: aspects of the past, present and future of an era* (Aldershot, 2001), 83–115.

3 D. Harvey, *The condition of postmodernity: an inquiry into the origins of cultural change* (Oxford, 1989); P. A. Rosenau, *Post-modernism and the social sciences: insights, inroads and intrusions* (Princeton, NJ, 1992); S. J. Grenz, *A primer on postmodernism* (Grand Rapids and Cambridge, 1996); D. Bell, 'The social framework of the information society', in T. Forester (ed.), *The microelectronics revolution: the complete guide to the new technology and its impact on society* (Oxford, 1980), 500–49; A. Toffler, *The third wave* (London, 1980); United Nations World Summit on the Information Society, *Declaration of principles. Building the information society: a global challenge in the new millennium* (Geneva, 2003), www.itu.int/wsis.

4 A. Giddens, *Modernity and self-identity: self and society in the late modern age* (Cambridge, 1991); A. Giddens, *The consequences of modernity* (Cambridge and Oxford, 1990); F. Webster, *Theories of the information society* (London, 1995); A. Duff, *Information society studies* (London, 2000); D. Muddiman, 'World gone wrong? Alternative conceptions of the information society', in S. Hornby and Z. Clarke (eds.), *Challenge and change in the information society* (London, 2003), 42–59.

Libraries and the modern world

catalogues and classification of their stock, but also through the efforts of librarians and 'information professionals' for greater effectiveness in that organisation. This has grown well beyond national boundaries in the past century and a half, with the establishment of bodies like the Fédération Internationale de Documentation with its concern for universal subject control of published information.⁵ In the last quarter of the twentieth century popular, indeed almost universal, access to the Internet, and particularly the development of search engines, has raised in the public mind questions of information management that reflect much of what the library profession has seen as its primary role. How that will affect the libraries of the future it is too soon to say; but most of today's concerns about information retrieval, from the efficiency of natural-language use in search engines to the sheer bulk of the amount of information available, had been addressed in libraries many years before.

The purpose and role of a library will vary from one to another and will interface with the driving forces of the modern age in different ways. However, generally speaking two basic factors have shaped the 'modern library', one practical, the other intellectual. Addressing the Library Association in 1938, its then president W. C. Berwick Sayers proclaimed that a collection of books was 'a modern Delphi, as much an oracular shrine as it is a laboratory'.⁶ In this brief sentence Sayers succeeded in crystallising the dual essence of a library: its spiritual and material functions. On the one hand, a library fulfils an idealistic, poetic and mystical role. A library represents 'holy ground' where the wisdom of the ages can be consulted and absorbed and where the inner self can be explored and developed – a role which can perhaps be stretched to include the recreational function which for many library users has long been a major element. On the other hand, of increasing importance in the modern period is the library's utilitarian role. A library is often a place of worldly discovery, a citadel of science, a practical workshop.

In the name of individual and social progress, libraries have invariably accommodated both material and spiritual functions but, depending on type, they vary in the extent to which these are prioritised. Multiplicity of function is a common aspect in many libraries, and in the way they are supported by their parent institutions. One of the most prominent examples of this is the 'Fiction Question' which dominated public library discussions for many years

5 W. B. Rayward, *The universe of information: the work of Paul Otlet for documentation and international organisation* (Moscow, 1975); and W. B. Rayward (ed.), *International organisation and dissemination: selected essays of Paul Otlet* (Amsterdam, 1990).

6 Sayers, W. C. B. 'Presidential address', *Library Association Record* 40 (1938), 291–6 (citation p. 291).

INTRODUCTION

around the turn of the twentieth century, and which still recurs in political debate about the role of the library: How far should public funding support a purely recreational use of fiction? (The question can also be asked of music and other media.) Is there a distinction between ‘good’ fiction and the worthless, literally insupportable kind? In fact libraries have always faced such questions, which take different forms in different contexts. Should medical libraries in hospitals serve (and be accessible to) patients as well as clinical and nursing staff – and what alternative or recreational provision is needed for what has been termed ‘bibliotherapy’? Should a factory or department store supply books for leisure reading by its employees as well as for technical use – and what is the cost-benefit analysis for this? What is the right balance in an academic library between provision for research and scholarship on the one hand, and student needs on the other? All these apparent dilemmas in fact beg the question, since borderlines can rarely be drawn precisely and the essence of a library will often be seen in its inclusivity.

The ‘local’ perspective: hidden libraries

We have noted in the preface to this volume the impossibility of covering the history of all libraries, of every type, within a single volume such as this. The growing diversity of forms over the past 150 years makes it worth dwelling for a moment on those libraries of one particular obscure kind that we have been unable to accommodate to the full, which seems to be especially a feature of the modern world, in this country as elsewhere, partly because of wider literacy and the explosion of print culture (though there are also plausible sociological explanations of the phenomenon). Under the broad miscellaneous description of ‘hidden libraries’ we might list those in prisoner-of-war camps,⁷ army installations,⁸ hotels,⁹ the home,¹⁰ launderettes, alternative communities,¹¹ holiday camps, community centres, pubs, restaurants, coffee houses,¹²

7 L. Newcombe, ‘A prisoner-of-war library’, *Library Association Record* 18 (September 1919), 271–83.

8 T. Koch, *War libraries and allied studies* (New York, 1918). A. Hepworth, ‘Desert information room’, *Library Association Record* 44 (September 1945), 175–7.

9 M. D. Lopez, ‘Books and beds: libraries in nineteenth and twentieth century American hotels’, *Journal of Library History* 9 (1974), 196–221.

10 P. S. Morrish, ‘Domestic libraries: Victorian and Edwardian ideas and practice’, *Library History* 10 (1994), 27–44.

11 P. Jackaman, ‘The library in Utopia: libraries in nineteenth-century alternative communities in Britain and America’, *Library History* 9 (1993), 169–89.

12 P. Kaufman, ‘Coffee houses as reading centres,’ in his *Libraries and their users: collected papers in library history* (London, 1969), 115–27.