

Introduction

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The history of libraries in the medieval and early modern periods is a history of shifting collections of books of varied size and function, which differ in significant ways from modern expectations of a library.

The most obvious difference is physical. From the early middle ages until the sixteenth century, the books owned by religious and academic communities as well as those of individuals did not comprise a single physically discrete collection within a designated room, but were housed in chests and cupboards in various locations. The earliest specially designated book-rooms, datable to the twelfth century, were places of storage; library rooms in which books were arranged for consultation *in situ* were introduced in England only from the fourteenth century, and in many instances contained only a part of an institution's holdings.

The modern conception of a library as an organised and comprehensive repository of written knowledge became fully articulated only during the seventeenth century. Indeed, for much of the period covered by this volume, the concept of a library remained ill-defined. Collections of books were assembled in the first instance to serve particular needs. In the early middle ages, these were almost exclusively ecclesiastical: the requirements of the monastic life, the performance of the liturgy, and the delivery of pastoral care. From the thirteenth century, new kinds of need emerged: those of scholars and of mendicant preachers and teachers, and, and by the fifteenth century, of members of the emergent professions, such as doctors and lawyers.

Learned monks and clergy of the earlier middle ages knew the word *bibliotheca* from the references to the great public libraries of the ancient world in late antique and early Christian texts. Occasionally they used this word in their own writings, especially to refer to the more impressive collections of books formed in their own time, despite the obvious differences in physical arrangement and function from the *bibliothecae* of antiquity. Until the end of the twelfth century, however, the majority of references are simply to 'books'

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rather than to a library. Thereafter, the word *libraria* is found with increasing frequency, first as merely a synonym for *armarium* (which, by this date, had the more general meaning of a collection of books rather than a specific book-chest or cupboard), but, from the late fourteenth century, to refer to a designated room. Nevertheless, until well into the sixteenth century, other collections of books, overlapping in their contents with those in the library room and even extending beyond an institution's walls, might also be considered to form part of the 'library'. Classification marks in late medieval inventories from two cells of Norwich Cathedral Priory (St Leonard's in Norwich and St Nicholas' in Yarmouth) fit within the series used to mark the books of the mother house, 'showing that the library was regarded as a single collection, though some of the books were continuously housed at one of the cells'.¹

Medieval collections of books are characterised by a surprising degree of fluidity. Little-used volumes might be removed from the principal collections and stored elsewhere or disposed of; books might be sent to dependent cells, or, as happened increasingly from the fourteenth century, to the universities for the use of student monks and canons, where they became vulnerable to more permanent alienation.² The dispersal of books from religious houses was thus a phenomenon long before the dissolution of the monasteries in the mid-sixteenth century. The absence of well-defined concepts of ownership regarding books during the earlier middle ages, and, in particular, the apparent lack of any clearly articulated distinction between personal and communal ownership, also contributed to the instability of book collections. During the thirteenth century, however, the particular requirements of the friars as itinerant preachers and teachers prompted the definition of the concept of personal possession but institutional ownership, whereby books were kept and used by individual friars, but reverted to the order at the friar's death.³ This distinction proved useful to the older orders as well. On the death of Cardinal Simon Langham (1376), a former monk and abbot of Westminster, the prior of Westminster lost no time in travelling to Avignon to recover the Cardinal's effects, including his books.⁴

It may be helpful, when tracing the history of libraries, to distinguish between the shifting 'book collections' of the early and central middle ages, and the emergent 'libraries' of the later middle ages and early modern periods which display some of the characteristic features of the modern library: a designated space, a catalogue, and a greater emphasis upon the collection as a

¹ R. Sharpe in CBMLC iv. 289.

² See below, chapters 5–6.

³ See below, 127–8.

⁴ CBMLC iv. 613–14.

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repository of written knowledge. Nevertheless, to apply a restricted use of the term ‘library’ too rigidly risks overlooking earlier and different, albeit less well-defined, conceptions of a library. An early medieval religious community, for whom all the books (including those for the liturgy) served a single end, may have thought of their books collectively as a single entity – a library, despite their physically disparate organisation, and the rarity of the use of the words *bibliotheca* or *libraria*. A distinction between the books intended for study and those used for the liturgy or archival purposes, with the consequent narrowing of the meaning of *libraria* to refer to the former, is apparent in religious institutions only by the fourteenth century.

In the early modern period private collections were, obviously, more readily assembled,⁵ largely because printed books were more cheaply acquired than many manuscripts, and outlets for them, that is, booksellers, started to proliferate,⁶ as did contacts with the continental mainland, the source of the vast majority of scholarly, *belle-lettriste* and, indeed, until the Reformation, liturgical books. The books from the dissolved religious houses were, in the first instance, nearly all absorbed into private libraries.⁷ At the same time, institutional libraries surviving the Reformation, whether the few ecclesiastical ones, or those of the universities and colleges, whose further survival was for some years uncertain, clearly lost heart. Not only was there little or no institutional attempt to acquire books, but existing stocks were neglected to the extent that many such libraries fell largely or entirely into disuse.⁸

Nor should we wonder: the dispersal of the ancient collections, coinciding as it did with the increasing availability of printed books, turned the scholarly world upside-down. In the medieval period, and among early modern collectors of manuscripts for whom the notion of *stemmata* was but poorly grasped, it was evident that the older a manuscript was, the closer it must be to the original source. The harbingers of the New Learning, whose works were mostly first known in Britain and Ireland in printed form, were bent on producing more accurate texts in an unfamiliar medium. How could a book printed on paper compare in value with a manuscript, usually on parchment? We know, now, that paper was used for serious texts, but the perception of the time was that vellum was for eternity, it was the medium for muniments, for

⁵ See below, 292, 297, 351–6, 566.

⁶ Notwithstanding the essential warnings of the compilers about the distortions of the data arising from alternative spellings and cross-references, the point is well illustrated by the online database of the British Book Trade Index (<http://www.bbti.bham.ac.uk>), which allows searches in increasing date order.

⁷ See below, chapter 10. ⁸ See below, 347–8, 569.

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texts for perpetuity. As Johannes Trithemius said in the 1490s: 'For handwriting placed on parchment will be able to endure a thousand years. But how long, forsooth, will printing last, which is dependent on paper? For if in its paper volume it lasts for two hundred years that is a long time.'⁹

Eager scholars had no such reservations: they wanted both the new editions of ancient texts and the latest advances, not only in theology, law and medicine, but also in the subjects of the university curriculum: rhetoric, dialectic, metaphysics, natural philosophy; and the latest advances presented themselves mostly in quarto and in octavo, and even in smaller formats: little books, not the usual occupants of chained libraries and standing desks. Consequently, in the second and third quarters of the sixteenth century, private libraries outstripped those of institutions. Few institutional libraries could compare with those of John Dee in 1583¹⁰ or Andrew Perne in 1589,¹¹ or even, to go back a generation, with such relatively obscure owners as John Bateman, Master of Arts and a founding fellow of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, who died in 1559 possessed of some 500 books.¹² By way of comparison, Cambridge University Library in 1583, after the receipt of substantial donations solicited by Andrew Perne from Matthew Parker, Sir Nathaniel Bacon, Robert Horne (bishop of Winchester), James Pilkington (bishop of Durham) and others, held 464 volumes.¹³ For the reasons above, therefore, we have not treated at length with the impact of printing as such. Its impact was gradual rather than dramatic.

Similarly, we have had little to say about the significance of the British presses for reading habits. Relatively few of their products found their way into libraries even late in our period, and they continued to be vastly outnumbered by imported texts throughout it. The attempts of H. S. Bennett¹⁴ and Louis B. Wright¹⁵ to base their analyses of the reading of Englishmen on the productions of the English presses now appear whimsical.¹⁶

9 J. Trithemius, *De laude scriptorum*, ch. 7, cited by D. McKitterick, *Print, manuscript and the search for order, 1450–1830* (Cambridge, 2003), 20 (and related works cited in his n. 76).

10 J. Roberts and A. G. Watson (eds.), *John Dee's library catalogue* (London, 1990). The editors (p. 22) calculate that in 1583, when the library was at its zenith, it comprised some 3,000 printed books and 500 manuscripts (as against the 1,000 claimed by Dee himself).

11 *BCI*, I, 419–79. At his death Perne's library comprised some 2,900 volumes, mostly printed.

12 *BCI*, I, 234–44. His library is discussed in E. Leedham-Green and D. McKitterick, 'Ownership: private and public libraries', in *CHBB* IV, at 323–4.

13 For an edition and discussion of the 1583 Cambridge University Library catalogue see E. Leedham-Green and D. McKitterick in Carley and Tite, *Books and collectors*, 153–235.

14 *English books and readers, 1475–1640*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, 1952–70).

15 *Middle-class culture in Elizabethan England* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1935).

16 The dominance of Latin is stressed in D. McKitterick, 'Book catalogues: their varieties and uses', in P. Davison (ed.), *The book encompassed: studies in twentieth-century bibliography* (Cambridge, 1992), 161–75, at 162.

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Many of the most significant private collections in the early sixteenth century belonged to those who had exerted themselves, at first or second hand, to rescue the holdings of religious houses; but in the second half of the century we see the amassing of very large collections of printed books (Dee, Perne)¹⁷ alongside the collections of men like Sir Robert Cotton, which were concentrated largely on manuscripts. Indeed, with the exception of Cotton, most major collectors of manuscripts from the mid-sixteenth century were also the owners of substantial collections of printed books. Antiquarian and contemporary interests lived side by side just as did works in manuscript and print.¹⁸ When the institutional libraries revived it was, in many cases, the result of their acquisition of large private collections, as in the case of Andrew Perne's bequest to Peterhouse in 1589, or William Sancroft's to Emmanuel,¹⁹ or to a single benefactor, like Sir Thomas Bodley at Oxford, whose library was soon much enhanced by the vast donations of William Laud and John Selden.²⁰

The extent of loss and dispersal – the consequence to a great extent but not exclusively of the dissolution of the monasteries – means that the history of medieval and early modern libraries must necessarily begin with the task of reconstruction. In only a tiny handful of cases does a substantial proportion of any medieval library, whether religious or academic, still remain together, either in the same institution or elsewhere, having been transferred *en bloc*. The partial remains of the vast majority are scattered between different national collections, university or college libraries. A substantial number of these books contain no evidence of their former owners. The same is true of all but a few of the major sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century private collections of manuscripts and printed books.

Efforts to identify and describe the scattered remains began just over a century ago, on both a large scale (such as the manuscript catalogues and editions of medieval booklists and catalogues produced by M. R. James), and, at a more local level (T. W. Williams, for example, compiled evidence for medieval libraries in Somerset).²¹ These endeavours were complemented by J. W. Clark's and B. H. Streeter's impressive surveys of the physical environment within which books were stored and used.²² Whereas there has been no

¹⁷ See J. Roberts, below, chapter 11.

¹⁸ D. McKitterick, *Print, manuscript and the search for order*.

¹⁹ H. Carron, 'William Sancroft (1617–93): a seventeenth-century collector and his library', *Library*, 7th ser., 1 (2000), 290–307.

²⁰ See I. G. Philip and P. Morgan, 'Libraries, books and printing', in *HUO* iv, 659–85.

²¹ *Somerset medieval libraries* (Bristol, 1897).

²² J. W. Clark, *The care of books* (Cambridge, 1901); B. H. Streeter, *The chained library: a survey of four centuries in the evolution of the English library* (New York, 1931).

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systematic attempt to revise and supplement the work of Clark and Streeter, the compilation and description of the manuscript and documentary evidence were given a fresh impetus and new scholarly standards with the collaboration of a group of remarkable scholars from the 1930s onwards: the historian Christopher Cheney, the classicist Sir Roger Mynors and the English scholar and palaeographer N. R. Ker. In 1941 the first edition of *Medieval libraries of Great Britain (MLGB)* was published, under the editorship of Ker, which brought together lists of the surviving manuscripts of medieval institutional libraries that bore evidence of ownership, and provided information about extant pre-Reformation booklists from those institutions. Its second edition (1964) and *Supplement* (1987) nearly doubled the number of entries, by incorporating those manuscripts that have remained *in situ* in cathedrals and colleges. A complementary project was also envisaged – editions of medieval booklists and library catalogues, including new editions of the lists printed by eighteenth-century antiquaries, such as Hearne, and by James and others from the 1890s. This, however, began to be realised (as the *Corpus of British Medieval Library Catalogues*) only from 1990, and is now nearing completion. At the time of writing, we still await the publication of editions of some of the most significant lists: from Durham, Christ Church and St Augustine's, Canterbury, as well as from Oxford. These will contribute substantially to our understanding of the book collections of the later middle ages, and of the religious life and learning of those who used them.

In the early modern period the last fifty years have also seen much work achieved on both institutional and private libraries. In this field the father of us all must be Sears Jayne with his *Library catalogues of the English Renaissance*, first appearing in 1956.²³ He lists catalogues of both institutional and private, printed and manuscript catalogues, and the contents of these libraries have started to be investigated.

Among institutional libraries the 1605 catalogue of the Bodleian has been reproduced in facsimile,²⁴ and the holdings of other repositories have also been made known, ranging from the *Cathedral libraries catalogue (CLC)* to the holdings of Shropshire parochial libraries.²⁵ We hope that the outstanding examples will be found in the bibliography.

23 S. Jayne, *Library catalogues of the English Renaissance* (Berkeley, CA, 1956; reissued with a new preface and notes, Godalming, 1983).

24 *The first printed catalogue of the Bodleian Library, 1605* (Oxford, 1986).

25 Shropshire County Library, *Catalogue of books from parochial libraries in Shropshire* (London, 1971).

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Interest in the holdings of early modern institutional libraries has a relatively long history. A catalogue of the Harsnett Library in Colchester, bequeathed to the borough by Samuel Harsnett, archbishop of York at his death in 1631, was published as long ago as 1888, complete with notes on provenance,²⁶ and we have also seen more or less detailed studies of Cambridge University Library, the Bodleian, and Trinity College, Dublin.

The recording of private libraries has a slightly more recent history, and this concentrated originally on the reconstruction (usually) of the substantial holdings of major collectors, or of persons otherwise well known to fame.²⁷

A more recent development has been the investigation of the 'libraries', not so much of the 'common sort', as of the university-educated and otherwise 'middling sort'. Susan Cavanaugh's 'Study of books privately owned in England, 1300–1450'²⁸ and Leedham-Green's *Books in Cambridge inventories* catalogue the appraised book-holdings of the educated classes, the latter members of the university (including a few 'privileged' persons, like Agnes, husband of Peter and mother of John, Cheke) appearing in inventories proved in the Vice-Chancellor's Court there between 1535/6 and 1760 (the vast majority before 1609). *Private libraries in Renaissance England (PLRE)* has devoted most of its volumes to doing the same for the equivalent Oxford court records, currently covering the years 1514 to 1584.²⁹ The aim of these exercises is to delineate the *mentalité* of the educated classes. This they can do only roughly – statistically the data are to be used only with caution, with due allowance

26 G. Goodwin (ed.), *A catalogue of the Harsnett Library at Colchester* (London, 1888). It is a matter for rejoicing that this library has now been transferred to the local university, where it is undergoing detailed study under the eagle eye of James Raven.

27 E.g. (in order of publication) S. Jayne and F. R. Johnson (eds.), *The Lumley Library: the catalogue of 1609* (London, 1956); A. G. Watson (ed.), *The library of Sir Simonds D'Ewes* [d. 1650] (London, 1966); T. A. Birrell (ed.), *The library of John Morris* (1658) (London, [1976]); D. J. McKitterick, *The library of Sir Thomas Knyvett of Ashwellthorpe, c. 1539–1618* (Cambridge, 1978); J. Roberts and A. G. Watson (eds.), *John Dee's library catalogue* [based on the 1583 catalogue] (London, 1990); D. G. Selwyn (ed.), *The library of Thomas Cranmer* [dispersed 1553] (Oxford, 1996); N. K. Kiessling (ed.), *The library of Robert Burton* [d. 1640] (Oxford, 1998).

28 University of Pennsylvania, PhD dissertation (1980).

29 The first volume is of a different character, comprising *PLRE* 1, the library of bishop Richard Cox (d. 1581) (from an inventory); *PLRE* 2, that of Sir Edward Stanhope (d. 1608), as recorded in his donation to Trinity College, Cambridge; *PLRE* 3, that of Sir Roger Townshend, c. 1625, probably recording books moving from one property to another; and *PLRE* 4, that of Sir Edward Dering (d. 1644), derived from an incomplete catalogue (c. 1634–45), his 'Booke of Expences', 1617 and 1619–28, and his pocket-book (BL, MS Add. 47787).

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made for the recurrence of a single volume in more than one inventory, the idiosyncrasies of the appraisers, mismatches with booksellers' inventories and other incalculable factors. That said, there is beginning to emerge, not so much a picture of that mythical entity the typical library, as a tool whereby an atypical one may be identified.

The present volume is the first full-scale survey of the history of libraries in the islands of Britain and Ireland. Indeed, until 1958 the only surveys of the history of English libraries in the medieval and early modern periods were those in general histories of libraries, and most importantly, for the medieval period, the contribution of Karl Christ to the *Handbuch der Bibliothekswissenschaft*.³⁰ These, however, were impressively supplemented by a collection of studies, originally given as lectures, published in 1958 as *The English library before 1700*, which thereafter remained the standard introduction to the subject.³¹ The extent to which the present volume is able to build upon it is due in no small part to the work of Ker, his colleagues and their early modern counterparts, to the newly available volumes of the CBMLC, BCI and PLRE, and also to A. B. Emden's monumental *Biographical Registers* of Oxford and Cambridge (BRUO and BRUC), in which he included references to books associable with individuals who had studied at these universities.

Like its French counterpart, the *Histoire des bibliothèques françaises* (Hbf) this volume also reflects the interest in the social, cultural and economic contexts that have shaped the way in which texts have been represented in writing, as well as their circulation and reception, which is commonly referred to as 'The History of the Book'. Close attention to the physical characteristics of books and to their use reveals a richer and more complex picture of how books were conceived and used, collectively as well as singly. A history of libraries that spans the period from the sixth to the mid-seventeenth century can only briefly examine the wider context of book production and reading within which developments in book collections and libraries took place. In the course of our period, for example, the reading classes expanded well beyond the clerisy and the professions: the best-known example is Shakespeare, a grammar-school boy, whose breadth of reading has prompted several to insist that he must have attended a university, notwithstanding the fact that the reading pabulum of university men, so far as we can trace it, consisted of

³⁰ F. Milkau (ed.), *Handbuch der Bibliothekswissenschaft*, 2nd edn, ed. G. Leyh, 4 vols. in 5 (Wiesbaden, 1952–65), III. ch. 5; an English version is K. Christ, *The handbook of medieval library history*, rev. A. Kern, tr. and ed. T. M. Otto (Metuchen, NJ, 1984).

³¹ In the same year, R. Irwin's *The origins of the English library* also appeared (London, 1958), which was subsequently revised as *The English library: sources and history* (London, 1964).

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material quite alien to the Italian novellas and other sources which have been identified as his sources.³² His reading is metropolitan, not academic.

Other gaps must also be acknowledged: the casualties of unavoidable constraints of space, time and the current state of published research. Most serious is the absence of a late medieval counterpart to Pádraig Ó Néill's contribution on the book collections of Celtic Britain and Ireland, and of the fate of manuscript collections in Wales and Ireland in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This volume of the *Cambridge history of libraries* should therefore be regarded as complementary to the corresponding volumes of the *Cambridge history of the book in Britain* and the projected histories of the book in Scotland and in Ireland, and to the volume of studies on Welsh books and libraries, *A nation and its books*.³³

Information about the book collections of the 'middling sort' outside the universities remains sparse. Something can be deduced from booksellers' records, for example those of John Foster of York in 1616,³⁴ and, for other localities, from such sources as Peter Clark's 'The ownership of books in England, 1540–1640: the example of some Kentish townfolk',³⁵ and Claire Cross's *York clergy wills 1520–1600*.³⁶ It has to be remembered, however, that books bequeathed were not always books previously owned – a man might leave a bible to each of his four children, almost certainly not the books themselves, but rather the money to buy them – any more than books in private libraries were necessarily books read by the owner, still less the only books they might have read. Shared access to books among the clergy is discussed by Arnold Hunt,³⁷ and we have inklings of similar practices among the heterodox, like the Familists.³⁸ It is likely that there were other groups drawn together by common beliefs or occupations who also held books in common.

The private libraries of women are also notably lacking: apart from the manuscript libraries of princely ladies, evidence for women's libraries in the sixteenth century is scarce. We await a full account of the library of Mildred

32 S. Gillespie, *Shakespeare's books: a dictionary of Shakespeare sources* (London and New Brunswick, 2001).

33 P. H. Jones and E. Rees (eds.), *A nation and its books: a history of the book in Wales* (Aberystwyth, 1998).

34 J. Barnard and M. Bell, *The early seventeenth-century York book trade and John Foster's inventory of 1616* (Leeds, 1994).

35 In L. Stone (ed.), *Schooling and society* (Baltimore, 1976), 95–111.

36 (York, 1989). 37 See below, 403 ff., esp. 409.

38 See C. W. Marsh on William Safford's books in his *The Family of Love in English society, 1550–1630* (Cambridge, 1994), esp. 215, and 92 for communal reading.

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Cecil, Lady Burghley,³⁹ and the few non-noble ladies' libraries that are known to us, like those of Frances Wolfreton (1607–77)⁴⁰ and Elizabeth Puckering (1607–76/7),⁴¹ fall towards or beyond the end of our period.

In this volume, we have also tried to trace the evolution of the perception of libraries, and the emergence of the role of librarians culminating in the appearance of the first manuals.⁴² Volume II will take these themes further.

- 39 A useful summary is given by C. Bowden, 'The library of Mildred Cooke Cecil, Lady Burghley', *Library*, 7th ser., 6 (2005) 3–29; a fuller account by Pamela Selwyn is in preparation.
- 40 P. Morgan, 'Frances Wolfreton and "hor bouks": a seventeenth-century woman book-collector', *Library*, 6th ser., 11 (1989), 197–219; she was collecting from 1631.
- 41 D. McKitterick, 'Women and their books in seventeenth-century England: the case of Elizabeth Puckering', *Library*, 7th ser., 1 (2000), 359–80. This article contains a very valuable survey of work to date on women's readership and book-ownership.
- 42 See especially chapters 8, 24 and 25, below.