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Introduction: the changing world of libraries – from cloister to hearth

GILES MANDELBROTE AND K. A. MANLEY

In 1846 *Punch* expressed concern at one of the many inconveniences of modern metropolitan life – traffic congestion in public thoroughfares. Rather than introduce a congestion charge, Mr Punch proposed a novel (in more ways than one) expediency: the construction of a large omnibus, two or three storeys high, in which commuters could pass the time spent in traffic jams usefully. There would be compartments for letter-writing, hair-cutting, shaving (during dead stops, of course), and:

> There will be a refreshment-room in connection with the boot, and a circulating library near the top, so that a passenger on entering may subscribe either for the whole or a portion of his journey.[1]

The variety of library facilities available to the man (and woman) on the Clapham omnibus of the mid-nineteenth century was becoming bewilderingly diffuse. Libraries existed to cater for all tastes and communities, from common circulating libraries to London clubs, from parish lending library to cathedral library, from local literary society to university. All classes read, whether for amusement or instruction, and at all possible opportunities. *Punch*'s plan for an omnibus library was really very sensible.

One hundred and twenty years earlier, in 1728, Revd Robert Wodrow (himself a former librarian of Glasgow University) had vigorously deplored the social implications of the foundation of Britain's first circulating library by the elder Allan Ramsay:

> profannes is come to a great hight, all the villanous profane and obscene books and playes printed at London by Curle and others, are gote doun from London by Allan Ramsey [*sic*], and lent out, for an easy price, to young boyes, servant weemen of the better sort, and gentlemen, and vice and obscenity dreadfully propagated.[2]

1 *Punch* 11 (1846), 73.
2 R. Wodrow, *Analecta*, Maitland Club 60 (Edinburgh, 1843), vol. 3, 515–16.

This portrayal of library-based depravity contrasts with a more therapeutic initiative of half a century earlier. In 1684 Dr Thomas Tenison, vicar of St Martin-in-the-Fields, Westminster, set up a public library explicitly to tempt young curates and chaplains out of the taverns and coffee-houses where he had found them wasting their time and substance.[3] (A similar motivation, though not directed at young clergymen, was found again in the public library movement of the later nineteenth century.) Libraries have, indeed, been seen more often as beneficial than as a malign influence, but Wodrow's outburst reminds us that their history is not one of unsullied sweetness and light, nor of steady progress towards a utopian goal.

Thus the world of libraries changed dramatically during the two centuries covered by this volume, with the focus moving from ecclesiastical and academic cloister to public arena (such as the British Museum) as well as cottage hearth. By 1850 any person could borrow any kind of literature and read it in his (or indeed her) own domestic space, or use an institutional library and socialise with like-minded people. The scholar enjoyed far better facilities than ever before. In 1849 Benjamin Disraeli, in a memoir attached to a new edition of Isaac D'Israeli's *Curiosities of literature*, recalled how in the 1820s his father had been denied access to the State Paper Office for research. No longer, proclaimed the book's reviewer in *The Times*:

> The difficulties interposed in the way of Mr Disraeli when he commenced his operations, nearly 60 years ago, are inconceivable to the student of to-day, to whom the libraries of the world fly open, and who, so far from imploring admittance to the shrine of knowledge, is now earnestly invited to enter and freely to choose of the wealth before him . . . The reading-room of the British Museum, in which diggers and miners now congregate with a zeal and numerical strength rivalled only by the better rewarded groups assembling about Californian rocks and rivers, was, 60 years since, the peaceful and unknown retreat of some half-dozen pious souls, unwilling that the memorable deeds and fruitful lives of generations dead and gone should pass away from the earth unregistered and unbeloved.[4]

The present volume charts the story of how libraries developed between two revolutionary periods, by way of two centuries of profound change – from the Civil War to the time of the Chartist riots, by way of the religious controversies of the 1680s and the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and, a century later, the French Revolution and its philosophies. All these events had a social

3 J. Evelyn, *Diary*, ed. E. S. de Beer (Oxford, 1955), vol. 4, 367.
4 *The Times*, 9 January 1849.

impact which directly affected libraries and the people who used them – for example, the damage caused to cathedral and college libraries in the Civil War, the rise of a readership for the radical and revolutionary writings of the 1790s (which inspired George III to demand registration of the printing press), and the formation of a reading public who wanted access to the latest publications about the events of the day as well as the provision of books for leisure, but who could not necessarily afford (or did not desire) to buy books themselves.

In Scotland, the violent religious conflict of the 1690s had its effects on libraries (where library promoters such as James Kirkwood and Andrew Cranston were forced to flee to England), as did the florescence of the Scottish Enlightenment over the next hundred years and the Disruption in the Church of Scotland in the 1840s. And in Ireland sectarian and political divisions were felt, as so often, across the whole spectrum of library provision, even extending to the execution for high treason of the librarian of the Linen Hall Library, Thomas Russell, in 1803.[5]

The eighteenth century saw many advances in library services, with a widening of access, a growth in collections and the development of new models of library provision – not to mention some spectacular examples of library architecture. By the early nineteenth century, two key themes are first the increasing establishment of libraries 'for the people' (for example penny circulating libraries, Sunday school and parish libraries, mechanics' institutes) as well as libraries for the privileged (for example proprietary subscription libraries, in which members bought shares, and gentlemen's clubs), and secondly the consolidation of national reference collections for scholars, such as the Bodleian Library (only half a century old at the beginning of this volume) and the library of the British Museum, founded at about our mid-point. And British libraries spread abroad, principally to serve settlers in the colonies but also for the benefit of British merchants, soldiers and sailors (and convicts).

The period of this volume also saw a marked shift in the history of personal libraries, in terms of the extension of personal book ownership at many levels of society, the growth of formally organised sales of libraries, with printed catalogues, and the fashionable development of book-collecting. Other significant private collections were to become components of the British Museum and other academic libraries. Many smaller collections were being built up for future transformation into publicly available assets, while burgeoning country houses contained libraries increasingly intended for social rather than purely intellectual purposes.

5 J. Killen, *A history of the Linen Hall Library 1788–1988* (Belfast, 1990), 45–6.

A division has been made within the volume at the year 1750. In many respects this is an artificial break, chosen partly because the development of particular kinds of libraries over two centuries, e.g. in universities, cannot easily be related in a single chapter. But the 1750s was a significant decade, witnessing the first appearance of proprietary subscription libraries (a significant milestone in the spread of general libraries outside London) and most notably the coincidental foundation of the British Museum in 1753. Although the latter's influence was not to be visible for several decades, this event was an important step in inaugurating a national library service. It would, though, be an exaggeration to suggest that the founders of the British Museum were specifically planning a national library, since the provision of books was an integral part of the larger objective of housing a collection of diverse curiosities. Many of its earliest librarians and keepers were scientists; in a parallel development, this period saw the foundation of many scientific and medical libraries within learned colleges and societies.

Although the crucial privilege of legal deposit – without which no truly national library could prosper – was deemed to have passed to the Museum with the arrival of the Royal Library in 1757, this was not codified in law until 1842. Only then did the British Museum begin to regard itself as having an imperial role befitting the country's status as a colonial power. This led to a long period of impressive growth in the library until its policies changed as Britain's place in the world changed, and by the end of the twentieth century its successor, the British Library, settled down to a more limited role which had become relatively much closer to that of other European national libraries.

The real pioneers of a national library were the individuals responsible for the original collections in the decades before the foundation of the British Museum – Cotton, Harley and Sloane. By the mid-nineteenth century the prime force in the library's progress was Antonio Panizzi, and his energetic involvement in library matters is an object lesson in another theme of this volume – that the history of libraries is not primarily about institutions, but about the individuals behind them. Four walls and a few bookshelves do not make a library, only a repository; a library has to be exploited to serve any kind of purpose, but its accessibility and usefulness depend entirely on the people responsible for its existence and maintenance – and particularly the often unsung compilers of catalogues! Similarly all kinds of libraries – such as parish and school libraries, and even the Inns of Court libraries – often owed their growth to individual benefactors, men like Humphrey Chetham, Narcissus Marsh, Daniel Williams or the Marquess of Dorchester.

Introduction: the changing world of libraries

'Public' libraries, as we know them today, did not exist before 1850. Like the influence of the British Museum, the effects of the Public Libraries Act of 1850 (where this volume leaves off) only became obvious to later generations. The present volume traces the rise of different kinds of libraries which were to culminate in that overwhelming pressure for Parliament to legislate to enable everyone to have free access to a municipal library. All played their part in creating a need for 'popular' local libraries as well as influencing the demand for 'free' education which was not realised through legislation until two decades after the first Public Libraries Act.

This volume is not a dictionary, not a gazetteer and not an encyclopedia. It does not aspire to provide a history of every library which ever existed during two hundred years; many libraries, particularly circulating libraries, began with a flourish but are never heard of again. Rather, the aim is to produce a 'social' history of a vital movement in British cultural history, in particular how libraries – essentially 'private' when the volume opens – moved inevitably and inexorably into the truly public domain.

At the beginning of the period, ordinary persons read, and read voraciously, the products of the press, whether pamphlets, broadsheets or newsletters. But they did not borrow books, except amongst themselves. Libraries were the preserve of the élite and were seen as institutions for the preservation and consultation of books. At the Bodleian, both King Charles I and Oliver Cromwell were refused permission to borrow volumes. The librarian, Thomas Barlow, explained the rule:

> The Library is a magazine which the pious founder hath fix'd in a publick place for a publick use; and though his charity to private persons is such that he will hinder none (who is justly qualify'd and worthy) to come to it, yet his charity to the publick is such that he would not have it ambulatory, to goe to any private person. And sure 'tis more rational that Mahomet should go to the mountaine, than that the mountaine should come to Mahomet.[6]

Bodley's ideal of the institutional library as a reference library for serious study is one of the main strands of this volume because it was a model for others. But there were other patterns too. Two hundred years later, libraries of one type or another were in every town and village, and the need for home-lending libraries had become an equally important and vibrant strand in library history. An imposing library building might make a strong impression, but libraries are more than specimens of architecture; their strength and importance does not just lie within their physical environment. Many subscription libraries were

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6 W. D. Macray, *Annals of the Bodleian Library*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1890), 99–100, 109–10, 117.

contained within shops or town halls or merely members' homes; circulating libraries, often operating from bookshops, offered a diverse range of other attractions, such as patent medicines (to give just one example). What was important was the literary treasure contained on their shelves and the community which made this accessible. This volume attempts to explain the spread of such treasure-houses of knowledge.

PART ONE

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THE EXPANSION
OF BOOK COLLECTIONS
1640–1750

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Ancients and moderns: cross-currents in early modern intellectual life

JOSEPH M. LEVINE

When Jonathan Swift decided to take stock of the intellectual culture of his time, he did so by taking sides in the great quarrel between the ancients and the moderns that had been gradually coming to a head for more than a century. It was natural for him to adopt the cause of his patron, Sir William Temple, and see what could be done to defend the allegiance to antiquity that Temple had argued in a brief but provocative essay that started the argument in 1690. What Temple had done there was to assert that every great cultural achievement lay in the past and that the best hope of the moderns was simply to acknowledge and imitate them. This was an old argument but it was especially provocative after a tumultuous century of modern accomplishment and Temple was answered at once, particularly by William Wotton and the defenders of the new science in the Royal Society. Thus began the battle of the books which Swift described and resumed in his own little work – and which he set appropriately enough in a library.[1]

To make sense of that noisy quarrel, one must look past its more frivolous moments to discover its foundation in a clash of cultural ideals, deeply rooted in European history. In particular, there were reflected in it two different attitudes that had come into conflict almost from the beginning of ancient times and which were often to be resumed in later generations. On the one hand, there was a philosophical / theological ideal that taught that the highest end of culture was to understand the unchanging principles of the natural and supernatural worlds. On the other hand, there was a more mundane notion that all that was necessary was to discover and teach only what was immediately

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1 Swift's little work, *The battle of the books*, was added as an appendix to *A tale of a tub* (London, 1704), in which he had already satirised the learning of the moderns; the text has been edited with a full apparatus by A. C. Guthkelch and D. Nichol Smith, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1958). Temple's essay appeared first in his *Miscellanea*, part 2 (London, 1690), and was answered by Wotton in his *Reflections upon ancient and modern learning* (London, 1694): J. M. Levine, *The battle of the books: history and literature in the Augustan age* (Ithaca, NY, 1991).

useful in human affairs. The first was a contemplative ideal that exalted reason; the second an active one that required eloquence. Both proponents organised schools to transmit these rival notions of *paideia*; both set out their competing views in compendious treatises that described and defended their practice; and both exemplified their teaching in works of philosophy and science in the one instance, and in the rhetorical arts – oratory, literature and history – in the other.[2] Plato, above all, had represented this argument in many of his dialogues, in which he exalted the culture of dialectic and set Socrates deliberately against the sophists and their rhetoric; while the sophists, led by Isocrates, retorted with their own educational schemes and schools, which were elaborated later for the Romans by Cicero and Quintilian among others.[3] In this way, classical culture was transmitted to later times, not as one consistent whole, but rather in two parts and in rivalry.

For early modern England it was only after the Renaissance and the Reformation that this ancient antithesis was fully resumed. The middle ages had known some ancient philosophy, especially Aristotle, and used it to advantage in the universities for the philosophical / theological culture of scholasticism. The period had also known something of classical rhetoric, although it had confined its interest largely to peripheral matters. During the 'twelfth-century renaissance' there had been some modest resumption of the age-old rivalry between the logical and rhetorical arts; but it was only with the revival of civic life and learning, first in Italy, then in the rest of Europe, that the two cultures of antiquity were fully restored.[4]

As far as philosophy is concerned, despite the immediate hostility of the Reformation, medieval scholasticism did not die, and the Aristotelian corpus was resumed in the universities for its use to a reformed theology – although it was now an Aristotle freshly studied in Greek and extended to include

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2 See, above all, W. Jaeger, *Paideia: the ideals of Greek culture*, trans. G. Highet, 3 vols. (Oxford, 1945), and H. I. Marrou, *A history of education in antiquity*, trans. G. Lamb (Madison, WI, 1982).

3 A. Dacier, *The works of Plato abridg'd* (London, 1701), vol. 1, 145–50.

4 J. Paetow (ed.), *The battle of the seven arts: a French poem by Henri d'Andeli* (Berkeley, CA, 1914). That there was a medieval humanism is now well agreed, but in the words of one its advocates, 'There was no time for artistic representation or literary elegance': R. W. Southern, *Medieval humanism and other studies* (New York, 1970), 48. Charles Homer Haskins's view that 'ancient rhetoric was chiefly concerned with oratory, medieval rhetoric with letter-writing' may have to be extended (to preaching, for example), but still embodies a basic distinction. Cicero's rule-book, the *De inventione* and the spurious *Ad herennium*, were thus preferred to his *De oratore*, which was hardly known: Haskins, *Renaissance of the twelfth century* (Cambridge, 1937), 128, and various works by J. J. Murphy, including *Rhetoric in the middle ages* (Berkeley, CA, 1974).

his commentators.[5] At the same time, the rest of ancient philosophy (largely
forgotten in the middle ages) was also recovered. Above all, Plato was retrieved
and a fresh neo-platonism invented and revivified. In England this culminated
in the seventeenth century in a formidable group of theologians at Cambridge
University led by Henry More and Ralph Cudworth, who included among
their pupils the young William Temple.[6] Eventually, even the ancient sceptics
and those dangerous materialists, Lucretius and the Epicurians, also began to
circulate. It was Thomas Stanley's *History of philosophy* (1655–62) that was the
first to tell this whole tale in England – and incidentally help to invent a new
genre.[7]

But while the philosophers were renewing and extending their ancient
rivalries with one another, for the most part they still continued to nourish their
ancient contempt for sophistry, resisting as far as they could any reinstatement
of the humanities in the universities and insisting on the primacy of logic
over rhetoric. So the Chancellor Sir Thomas More at the very beginning of
the period had had to intervene in a battle between 'Greeks' and 'Trojans' at
Oxford, and try to enforce an uneasy truce between the two sides that was to
linger perilously for many years.[8] And the age-old controversy between the
life of contemplation and the *vita activa* that had been set out memorably in
Cicero's *De officiis* and resumed by the Italians – where it could be read in
English in Castiglione's popular *Courtier* – was still being argued in England
late in the seventeenth century, as in the polite exchange between John Evelyn
and George Mackenzie.[9] Meanwhile the 'new' philosophers were no more
hospitable to poetry and oratory and the faculty of imagination than the old.

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5 C. B. Schmitt, *John Case and Aristotelianism in Renaissance England* (Kingston, Ont., 1983);
W. T. Costello, *The scholastic curriculum at seventeenth-century Cambridge* (Cambridge, MA,
1958).

6 The best overview remains: E. Cassirer, *The Platonic renaissance in England*, trans. J. P.
Pettegrove (Edinburgh, 1953). The most impressive work of the platonists was R. Cud-
worth, *The true intellectual system of the universe* (London, 1678).

7 For the historiography of philosophy at this period, see C. B. Schmitt and others (eds.),
The Cambridge history of Renaissance philosophy (Cambridge, 1988).

8 The two sides were the traditional scholastic theologians and the new humanist exponents
of the Greek language and letters. The latter, More points out, involves the study of the
ancient poets, orators and historians and was invaluable among other things for teaching
prudence in human affairs. See volume 15 of the Yale edition of the *Complete works of St.
Thomas More*, ed. D. Kinney (New Haven, CT, 1986), 139.

9 The exchange occurred in 1665–6 and is reproduced in B. Vickers (ed.), *Public and private
life in the seventeenth century: the Mackenzie–Evelyn debate* (New York, 1986); J. M. Levine,
Between the ancients and the moderns: baroque culture in Restoration England (New Haven,
CT, 1999), 8–10. For the *Courtier* in English, there was an early and popular translation by
Thomas Hoby (London, 1561), and another by Robert Samber in 1724.