

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-00936-2 - Free Town Libraries, their Formation, Management, and History: In Britain, France, Germany, and America

Edward Edwards

Excerpt

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BOOK THE FIRST.

FREE TOWN LIBRARIES, AT HOME.

CHAPTER I.

FREE LIBRARIES IN GREAT BRITAIN AND IRELAND, AND THE LEGISLATION CONCERNING THEM. WITH AN INTRODUCTORY GLANCE AT EARLIER TOWN AND PARISH LIBRARIES.

Early efforts to extend the advantages of Libraries—Glance at the relative dates of the earlier Town Libraries of France, Germany, and Britain—The Library founded by Whittington and Carpenter at the Guildhall of London, and its destruction by the Lord Protector Somerset—Other dealings of English Reformers with old Libraries—Thomas Cromwell's Injunction of Sept. 1537—Thomas Bray, and the Parish Libraries of the Eighteenth Century—History of the Public Libraries' Acts of 1850-1866.

FROM the days of English feudal barons and of English cloistered monks, we have instances,—here and there,—of a strong love of books and of the pleasing toils of collectorship, combined with a generous desire to diffuse that love far and wide, and to extend a collector's pleasures, at least in some measure, to persons whose path in life debarred them from all share in his willing toils. It would not be difficult to cite certain conspicuous instances, even in the so-called 'Dark Ages,' of a liberal zeal of this sort, which looked beneath as well as around. A few such are to be found among the barons; many such among the monks.

BOOK I.
Chapter I.
1418—1866.

INTRODUCTORY RETROSPECT.

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In the '*Scriptorium*' the monk of noble blood, and the monk of peasant blood, toiled side by side; and it was not always the man of lowly origin who was first to think of contrivances by which something of the stores of knowledge laid up in books might be made to spread even into the cottage of the labourer. But in those days such far-looking and onward-looking cares were, necessarily, exceptional. They were so amongst those to whom literature was already becoming a profession; as well as amongst those to whom it was, and could be, nothing more than a relaxation.

If from castle and convent we turn aside to glance at what was going on amidst the burghers of the growing towns,—keeping still within the mediæval times,—we meet but very sparsely with examples of the establishment of libraries, having any wider aim than a merely professional one. Both in the fifteenth and in the fourteenth centuries we have many instances in which parish-priests founded libraries expressly for the use of their successors in the cure of souls; and sometimes with the help of the ancillary benefactions of nobles and also of burghers. Even the thirteenth century affords one or two such examples. But instances of the foundation of libraries, for the use of the townsmen generally, are very rare in any country until we come down to the days of the Reformation. Henry NEIDHART'S public collection at Ulm (about 1435), Conrad KUHNHÖFER'S public collection at Nuremberg (1445), Lewis VON MARBURG'S public collection at Frankfort (1484), are notable among those of the exceptions to this rule which occur in Germany, but the earliest of them is, of the fifteenth century. The Town Library of Aix is a still more notable exception in France. It is of the same century, indeed, but earlier by many years than any of the

EARLY TOWN
LIBRARIES
OF GER-
MANY.

See under
these names
severally, in
Pt. iv of this
volume.

AND OF
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EARLY FOUNDERS OF LIBRARIES IN ENGLAND. 3

German Town Libraries ; having been established in 1418, and that not by the beneficence of any individual townsman but by the corporate action of the Town Council itself. Italy possessed noble libraries at an earlier date than either Germany or France, but they are usually *State Libraries*—whether regal or republican—rather than Town Libraries ; or else they are (1) University Libraries, founded more especially for the use of the Professors ; or (2) Cathedral Libraries, used only by the members of the Chapter, and, permissively, by others of the Clergy. Among the rare exceptions—as far, at least, as regards the founder's intention, though not, it seems, as regards the practical fact—the choice collection of books formed by GUARNERIO, pastor of the little town of St. Daniel in the Friuli ought perhaps to be reckoned. His MS. library, in its entirety, was so noble an one that BESSARION (himself a prince amongst the *renaissance* collectors) calls it “the finest in Italy, if not in the world ;” and this in the days of THOMAS of Sarzana (Pope NICHOLAS V), of FREDERICK, Duke of Urbino, and of MATTHIAS CORVINUS, King of Hungary. It appears to have been the liberal founder's purpose to make this treasure a library for his townsmen at large, although in practice (and by gross neglect) it remained for several generations only a buried treasure in the Church of St. Michael.

AND OF
ITALY.
GUARNERIO
AND BESSA-
RION.

England, at this period—as at periods long subsequent—had very little to boast of, in respect to Libraries of any kind. There had been some good beginnings. Eminent among the beginners were Richard D'AUNGERVILLE, Bishop of Durham* (1333-1345) and HUMPHREY PLANTAGENET, Duke of Gloucester (1414-1446),† but the seed

EARLY
FOUNDERS
OF LIBRA-
RIES IN
ENGLAND.

* See *Memoirs of Libraries*, Vol. I, pp. 377—384.

† *Ibid.*, p. 588, and MACRAY, *Annals of the Bodleian Library*, Introd.

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had been sown in a field destined soon to be overrun by conflicting armies, engaged in civil and almost interminable wars.

Nearly contemporaneous with the benefactions of Humphrey PLANTAGENET to the University of Oxford, was a smaller but pregnant gift of books made by John CARPENTER, a famous Town Clerk of London; and, in several ways, a public benefactor to his fellow-citizens. And here we have the first distinct expression of the wish of an Englishman that the books from which he had derived mental culture and enjoyment in his lifetime should be made to promote the education of the "common people" after his death. But this was, for the most part, to be done indirectly and, as it were, at second-hand. "I direct," says CARPENTER, in his last Will, "that if any good or rare books should be found among the residue of my goods, which, by the discretion of Masters William LICHFIELD and Reginald PECOCK,* may seem necessary for the *Common Library* at Guildhall, for the profit of the students there, and [of] those discoursing to the *Common People*, I will and bequeath that those books be [there] placed by my Executors."

THE TOWN
LIBRARY AT
GUILDHALL
(1421—60).

MS. (trans-
cript). Guild-
hall Library.

The reader perceives that two pre-existing facts are, or seem to be, implied by these remarkable words. It is plain that there was already a 'Common' or 'Town Library.' It is probable that, in connection with this Library, addresses or lectures were wont to be delivered "to the Common People." If this last-named fact, or probable fact, be really so, Sir Thomas GRESHAM's noble but unfortunate institution of the next century was not so much a novel experiment as it was the revival of an ancient foun-

* Afterwards Bishop of Chichester, and author of the famous pre-reformation work *The Repressor of the Clergy*.

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THE ANCIENT LIBRARY AT GUILDHALL, LONDON. 5

dation. The virtual ruin of GRESHAM'S College is one of the many stains which rest upon the fame of the London Corporation,—as far as concerns not alone its relations with learning, but also the fidelity of its trusteeship to departed benefactors. The reproach belongs, more especially, to the City Corporators of the last century. It is possible that they were only treading—too accurately—in the steps of their fifteenth century predecessors.

Be that as it may, the 'Common Library' at Guildhall, to which John CARPENTER was a benefactor, has a curious history. Its history begins with a name which was once on the tongues of all Londoners, and it ends with a name which was once a household word—either for love or for hate—to nearly all Englishmen. Both names are well-remembered still. Each of them is, in its degree, typical of a social revolution. Richard WHITTINGTON, Lord Mayor of London, rose from a very lowly origin to an influence on the State affairs of England, by dint of a far-extended foreign trade. Edward SEYMOUR, Duke of Somerset, fell from a more than vice-regal throne to a scaffold, by dint of that o'er-vaulting ambition which, in his case, marred a great cause as well as an eminent man. SOMERSET, in 1550, destroyed the library which WHITTINGTON, in 1420, had founded. There is great obscurity over the minor circumstances both of the foundation and of the destruction; but none at all over the main facts.*

Sir Richard WHITTINGTON had committed the oversight—possibly the trusteeship—of his Public Library to Franciscan Monks. There is an obvious probability that this arrangement contributed to its ruin. The Lord Protector SOMERSET'S ideas of reformation were not unlike those

DESTRUCTION OF THE
PUBLIC LIBRARY AT
GUILDHALL
BY THE PROTECTOR
SOMERSET.

* Comp. the additions, by Stevens, to Dugdale's *Monasticon*, vol. vi, p. 1520; and Strype's edition of Stowe's *Survey*, vol. i, p. 43, and p. 130.

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which have obtained among some very modern reformers (now, it may perhaps be thought, miscalled 'liberals') in relation, more particularly, to Church affairs. He, and they, set about removing the neglects and abuses, which, in some measure or other, the efflux of time is quite sure to bring with it in the best of institutions, by destroying the institution altogether. SOMERSET effected both the disestablishment and the disendowment of the Guildhall Library, in a speedy fashion, such as no modern 'liberal' could surpass. He sent to the Guildhall four waggons, to carry off its books; just as he had, only a little while before, sent forty waggons to carry off the stones and timber of the time-honoured Church of St. Mary-le-Strand, in order to promote the Reformation,—and to employ the stones and timber in building Somerset House.

As far as relates to the immediate interests of learning, it may be said, with entire accuracy, that SOMERSET'S dealings with the Guildhall Library are but a fair sample of what was done in respect to Libraries throughout the length and breadth of England, by his co-workers, and also by his followers, during no short period of time. The German Reformers did far otherwise. In Germany, many good Libraries—such as have been active civilising agents for more than three centuries, and are so still—date their origin expressly from the Reformation movement. Concerning the substantial benefits and blessings which, by many channels, have accrued to both countries from that great uprising comparatively few Englishmen stand, in these days, in any doubt. But that is no reason for blinking the truth about its drawbacks. The most prominent among the secular leaders of the English Reformation, as well as a few among clerical leaders, were far more notable

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for greed than for godliness. Many times, and in many places, they pulled down more of good than they destroyed of evil. The trail they left, over a large breadth of the land, was the trail of the spoiler. Literature owes very little to the best among the Tudor sovereigns, or the Tudor statesmen. It owes very much to institutions and to men that, to the best of Tudor power and influence, were trodden down by all of them. For both the neglect of literature and the enmity to the Church of England—glorious as being alike, for many centuries, the great patron and the main well-spring of our learning—which marked the policy of HENRY marked also that of ELIZABETH. The suppression of the Monasteries offered a splendid opportunity for the establishment, at small cost, and with a noble ground-work, of free Public Libraries in every English county. Not one such was established, in any one county or town, by any Tudor prince or statesman. Nor can the omission be ascribed to the lack of admonition or entreaty. The measure was urged again and again, as one pregnant with good for the times to come. It was advocated by Church dignitaries, and by laic antiquaries. It was urged upon HENRY, upon EDWARD, and upon ELIZABETH; and always urged in vain.*

At one moment, indeed, a small germ seemed to have been set, out of which, under due nursing, Parish Libraries would have grown. When, at length, the deep-rooted opposition of Henry VIII to the dissemination of the Bible in English seemed (for the moment) to have been torn up, by the vigorous and successive tugs of CRANMER and of Thomas CROMWELL, an enactment was made which might have had great social results. In September, 1537, an injunction (not a Statute, as has been said, but having

EARLY AT-
TEMPT AT
PARISH LI-
BRARIES.

* See *Memoirs of Libraries*, Vol. I, p. 756.

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force of law), was made for the providing of Bibles in every parish church—to be freely accessible to all parishioners—throughout England; and other injunctions followed for the like provision of certain other books. *And the charges were to be borne by a Parish book-rate.* But the fluctuations of the Tudor policy destroyed the germ, whilst yet undeveloped. Nothing had come of it—when a few years had passed over—but a few tattered Bibles, held together by rusty chains. The people had flocked to read, and to hear readings, in such numbers that the books (even of sixteenth century paper) were rapidly outworn.

When, after the lapse of well-nigh two centuries, legislative attention was again turned towards Libraries—for a passing moment or two—the results were little better. This occurred in 1709. And the first influential mover in the matter was Dr. Thomas BRAY, a Shropshire man, and the founder of the excellent ‘Society for the Propagation of the Gospel.’

THOS. BRAY
AND HIS
MOVEMENT
FOR CHURCH
LIBRARIES.

Thomas BRAY was a man who united with great versatility of practical faculty, a steady power of work, and considerable force of character. In early life, he had had experience of the cure of souls in several parts of England, and sometimes amidst many difficulties. He had seen much of his fellow-labourers in the vineyard. He had often noticed that amongst the many trials of the poorer clergy—of those of them, at least, who put their hearts into their work—not the smallest was the difficulty of obtaining books; and he thought much about the means by which that sore aggravation of poverty might be removed. When his own zealous labours had won for him the offer of valuable preferment, under circumstances which made the patrons anxious that their offer should not be refused, he

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made his acceptance conditional on his being, first of all, assisted in his efforts to establish 'Parochial Libraries' for the especial use of his struggling brethren. And he obtained the help he sought.

Unwisely, as I venture to think, Dr. BRAY framed his scheme with too exclusive a reference to the clergy. His express object would have been,—in the long run,—far more extensively attained, had he given, under due limits, a direct interest in the Libraries about to be founded to *all* the inhabitants of the several parishes in which they were to be placed. Instead of this, whilst calling them 'Parochial,' he made them merely 'Clerical.'

This worthy man lived long enough to found, or to enlarge, sixty-one Church Libraries in England and Wales, besides several in the Colonies; and to provide means for the carrying on of his work, after his own death. His '*Associates*' are still a corporation in full activity, but their efforts are turned to the maintenance of colonial schools, rather than of Libraries.

In the year 1709, Dr. Bray's exertions, aided by those of Sir Peter King (afterwards Lord High Chancellor), procured the passing of an Act of Parliament entitled '*An Act for the better Preservation of Parochial Libraries in that part of Great Britain called England.*'

By this statute it is enacted that every Incumbent of a parish in which a 'Parochial Library' shall have been theretofore formed, or of a parish in which any such Library shall thereafter be formed, shall give security, according to a prescribed form, for the due preservation of the collection, and for its transmittal to his successor; and that he shall make, or cause to be made, an accurate catalogue of its contents. The Act also gives powers for the recovery of books belonging to any such Library, in cases

THE 'PAROCHIAL LIBRARIES ACT'
(7 Q. Anne, c. 14). 1709.

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wherein they may have been removed or withheld. But it provides no means of increase. It makes no provision, whatever, for parochial use or accessibility.

A few more Libraries were placed in Church Vestries and in Parsonages, generally by, or with the aid of, the '*Associates of Dr. Bray*,' in the period immediately following his own death (Feb. 1730). Such Libraries came, of course, within the purview of the Act of Anne. But, in regard to most of them, its provisions for security and cataloguing soon became, and, in many places, have ever continued to be, a dead letter. Not a few of these Libraries, however, still exist. I have visited some of them. Where there has chanced to be a *succession* of thoughtful and conscientious incumbents, they have been well cared for, even if little used. But everything, in these cases, depends on the disposition and energy, or want of energy, of the parish priest. Last year (1867) I noticed with regret that in the instance of a rural parish in Hampshire* its valuable Library (one of those founded by BRAY) was turned out of doors,—without inventory and without super-

NEGLECTED
STATE OF
MANY
CHURCH
LIBRARIES
FOUNDED BY
DR. BRAY.

* Whitechurch, near Andover. In this instance, the lay-impropriator, not the Rector of the Parish, had had the main control of the rebuilding. What is afterwards mentioned as occurring in its progress was done expressly against directions contained in the specification of the architect, and (of course) without any faculty from the Bishop of Winchester. In like manner, gravestones had been wantonly broken; and great heaps of rubbish lay in piles over tombs, although a large space of vacant and parochial ground lay very near at hand. I may here add, for the antiquary, that the workmen found, built up or buried within a wall of the nave of the church a carved sepulchral monument of pre-Norman times. It was four feet eleven inches in length—all over—eight and a half inches in breadth, and ten in thickness. Within a niche (16 inches by 14) was a monumental figure. The inscription read thus: “+ *Hic corpus Eric . . . Burgave requiescit in pace sepultum.*” The material was free-stone. The monument bore conspicuous weather stains. It was obvious that, in the more ancient church which had preceded that recently pulled down, this monument had been exposed to sun and wind.