

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01054-2 - *Memoirs of Libraries: Including a Handbook of Library Economy*, Volume 1

Edward Edwards

Excerpt

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PART THE FIRST.

HISTORY OF LIBRARIES.

BOOK I.

THE LIBRARIES OF THE ANCIENTS.

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“We are not, without circumspection, to receive some books even of authentic and renowned Fathers; . . . and, seeing the lapses of these worthy pens, [ought] to cast a wary eye on those . . . treatises daily published amongst us. . . . Thus, I say, must these authors be read, and thus must we be read ourselves. For, discoursing of matters dubious and of many controvertible truths, we cannot, without arrogancy, . . . implore any further assent than the probability of our reasons may induce.”—

Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*,

B. I, c. viii. §. 11–14.

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MEMOIRS OF LIBRARIES.

CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTORY.

“Books contain a potency of life in them to be as active as that soul was whose progeny they are. . . .

“I know they are as lively and as vigorously productive as those fabulous dragon's teeth, and being sown up and down may chance to spring up armed men.”

MILTON, *Areopagitica*, §. 3.

THE sight of a Library must often have brought to mind the noble words of Milton respecting the vitality of books; and may sometimes have suggested the further and correlative thought that any great Collection of books must have had, so to speak, its individual life,—full of significance and rich in interest,—if only there were at hand the insight and the skill so to tell the story as to elicit, not to bury, its true meaning.

But it would need rare powers and diversified acquirements—amongst them a talent for the combination of extreme brevity with the utmost clearness—to perform such a task in a way that should bring an untired reader face to face with the founders and patrons, the organizers and the students, who, generation after generation, busied themselves in building up one of the great Libraries of the world, or in diffusing the knowledge there amassed. A biographer of this sort would have to tell

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of the hopes and fears, the obstacles and encouragements, which by turns chilled or stimulated the exertions of these workers for posterity; not a few of whom must occasionally have braced their relaxing energies with the conviction that the result of their labours would be living and working, when they themselves had long slept with the dead. To very few of any generation can it be given to write immortal books. Such books will live, be the care taken about Libraries great or small. But, though the immortality of books cannot (since the invention of printing) depend on the pains taken to form Libraries, yet the best fruits of that immortality may in this way be widely diffused; and written words be sown broadcast throughout the world, to become (in a different sense from that of the old Cædmean fable) the “dragon’s teeth” which everywhere shall spring up “armed men,” fighting for truth and right, and assured of ultimate victory. And in that diffusion very humble men may play a great part.

The future historian of Libraries will have incidents to relate, some of which are quite as strange as any that occur in the life-battles of statesmen, or in the wanderings of travellers. Chance has not infrequently helped to furnish these storehouses of the intellect almost as efficiently as world-wide research. Fire and flood, crusades and sieges, foreign invasion and domestic revolution, would all figure in the tale,—sometimes as the cause of irreparable losses, at others as bringing to light long-buried treasures. Nor would it be the least interesting portion of the narrator’s task to record some of the many ambitious literary projects known to have been

first conceived within those book-lined walls; in certain cases to be by their aid carried out into renowned achievement, and in other cases to be crushed by the mass and weight of materials too vast for the hands that had tried to grasp them.

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Fortunately both for writer and reader, the work now submitted to the public has a more restricted scope and humbler aims. It will, indeed, be part of my endeavour to commemorate—however inadequately—some founders and some librarians whose names are less known, even to persons habitually taking interest in such matters, than they deserve to be. But as respects the “HISTORY OF LIBRARIES,” in the full extent and significance of that phrase, I cannot hope to do much more than bring together materials which have hitherto been widely scattered, and arrange them, to the best of my ability, in serviceable order.

In this way, the present book, whilst aiding, as I hope it will, even in its narrative portions, certain measures for the extension and increased efficiency of British Libraries, belonging to the public,—measures which seem to me to possess practical and immediate importance,—may also help to pioneer the way for a better book hereafter from a worthier pen.

The rise and progress of collections of books, and more especially of public collections, is not merely a matter of minute and antiquarian research. Not that such matters are at all to be decried. Opinions may be divided as to the best methods of writing history,

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Practical bearings of the history of Libraries.

and that opinion may not have least weight which looks with something of distrust at histories that are avowedly didactic or philosophical. But, be this as it may, few will doubt that, other things being equal, the history of a nation is likely to be best worth reading when it shall have been written with a keen sense of the ceaseless labours, the humble duties, and the interminable conflicts, which in their aggregate make up a nation's present life. And as with the larger concerns of a country, so will it be with the simpler affairs of institutions for national culture: the narrative that shall worthily tell of the growth of great Libraries will be none the less truly historical for the care that may be taken to link with the story its true bearings on the present management, the assured permanence, and the liberal extension, of those mind-armouries with which it has to deal. It is, after all, in their character as powerful agents—directly or indirectly—of public education that Libraries are chiefly worth writing about.

Practical bearings of the comparative statistics of Libraries.

Nor are even the relative numbers and comparative magnitude of the Libraries of different countries, topics of merely curious but barren inquiry. Englishmen have at all times been inquisitive as to the culture, the organization, the public establishments, of their neighbours. When our Roman Catholic disabilities were under discussion it was deemed a reasonable thing to collect, by the agency of the British ministers abroad, the laws which affected similar dissidents in other states. When our tariff needed reform, it was thought useful to gather foreign tariffs. In like manner, information about fo-

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reign Libraries may be again, as it has been heretofore, worth collecting, and worth applying to home use. Assuredly some instruction may always thus be gained, and to seek it will be neither unprofitable nor unpatriotic. If, in some things, Englishmen may, at almost all periods since they were a people, have warrant to claim, with a pride untainted by arrogance, their hard-won privilege of “teaching the nations how to live,”—most certainly they may acknowledge, without either humiliation or reluctance, that in many others they have still much to learn.

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So far, then, as concerns the writer’s aim, these volumes may be looked upon as a contribution towards a more widely-spread acquaintance with Libraries, when regarded especially—though not exclusively—as public property maintained for public uses. My highest ambition for the book will be satisfied if it be found to give some real furtherance to the efforts which on many sides are now being made to add to the number of our accessible collections, and to increase the usefulness of those we have already. The existing provision and the present utility of such institutions amongst us are now pretty generally regarded as far from being proportionate to the wealth or the advantages, the literary renown or the national rank, of Britain. And the admission has rightly brought with it energetic endeavour to remove the reproach.

The economical part of these volumes is intended for the beginner in the art of organizing a Library, not for the proficient in that art. Of it, as of the rest of the

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book, I would say, in the words of the nameless epitomizer of old Jason of Cyrene:—"If I have done well, and as is fitting the story, it is that which I desired; but if slenderly and meanly, it is that which I could attain unto."¹

Libraries of the
Ancients.

The charm which clings to classic antiquity is so potent with all students, whether they belong to the imaginative or to the plodding sections of the fraternity, that it may well be deemed a matter of course that a treatise on Libraries should at least begin with those of the Greeks and Romans, if not with those of the Egyptians,—slender as may be the trustworthy information concerning either, and remote as must needs be the relation between such collections and those of modern times. In the opinion of some inquirers, indeed, to begin even with the ancient Egyptians is to begin too recently. The worthy old Carmelite Louis Jacob, for example, after telling us that "*all antiquity*" was fertile in learned men, of whose writings traditions have been handed down, goes on to quote a passage from another good monk,—belonging like himself to the seventeenth century,—and then adds, with inimitable naiveté:—"This passage from Father Rocca manifestly *proves* that there were Libraries before the deluge."²

As being himself the founder and the liberal endower of a public Library,—the Angelican at Rome,—Father Rocca has in these pages an incontrovertible claim to respect. But as this claim is scarcely elastic enough to

¹ 2 Macc. xv. 38.

² *Traité des plus belles Bibliothèques* (1644), p. 5.

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cover testimony concerning Ante-Noachian doings, we must here venture to “pass on to the deluge,” and even a little beyond it.

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There is a paragraph in Diodorus Siculus—adopted by him from that work of Hecataeus of which only fragments are now extant—which has done yeoman’s service in lucubrations as to the origin of Libraries, although it is both brief and vague. With this fragment of testimony our historical summary may not unreasonably begin. But a preliminary remark on the character and the chronology of the authorities which have to be chiefly relied on, in any account of the “Libraries of the Ancients,” may serve to throw a little light on our onward path.

A paragraph or two in the Letters of Cicero carry us into the midst of his beloved books, and indicate both the pains and the pleasure he took in the care of them. But if these and a few very fragmentary passages of other classic writers be excepted, the main accounts that have come down to us of ancient collections are (first), the accounts of writers who lived long subsequently to the occurrences which they narrate; and are (secondly), for the most part, the accounts either of compilers on miscellaneous and encyclopædical subjects, or of geographers and historians, intent on a wider theme, and who speak of Libraries only in a very incidental fashion.

Doubtful
authority of
many of the pas-
sages in ancient
authors which
bear on this
subject.

Athenæus and Aulus Gellius, for example, are, each of them, open to both objections. In point of time they belong, the one to the second, the other (probably) to

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the third, century. But both are more copious in assertions as to the Libraries of Pisistratus and of Aristotle, of Athens before the Persian invasion, and of Alexandria under the Ptolemies, than as to those collections which they personally knew and had visited. The *Deipnosophistæ* is a rich mine of most curious and most amusing lore on all kinds of topics,—from philosophy to gastronomy,—but Athenæus’s discursiveness is far more obvious than his care for truth. And as to the *Noctes Atticæ*, it is enough to remember that the author avowedly compiled his book as a miscellany for the amusement of his children, and that, by his own confession, he put down indifferently whatever he deemed “worthy of record, or pleasing to the imagination.” It would be easy to illustrate this cautionary statement by other instances quite as much to the purpose, and quite as frequently occurring in the shape of authorities for very loose assertions respecting ancient Libraries. But to do so here can scarcely be needful. Most of the witnesses, in a word, who are usually called to speak to this matter are neither eye-witnesses to the facts they vouch for, nor inquirers who have specially directed their judicial attention to the subject after comparison of the extant testimony. What they say needs, therefore, to be carefully winnowed.

Distrusting my own sufficient ability to elicit from evidence often discrepant, and oftener obscure and doubtful, its whole value, and no more than its value, I have thought that to quote textually the most important passages of these authors will be worth the space it may occupy. Any errors of mine on this part of the sub-