

THE LIBRARY A FRAGILE HISTORY

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BASIC BOOKS
NEW YORK

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Dedicated to the memory of
Felicity Bryan
(1945–2020)

prevailed partly because of their financial muscle, but also because their judgements matched the sensibilities of their subscribers. Mudie saw to it that they never read anything likely to shock them.

This has gone down badly with later generations, as it did with radical authors at the time, but Mudie and Smith between them performed one critical service which must be recognised: they decontaminated English fiction. In 1794, commentators from the traditional reading classes were seriously advocating banning circulating libraries. One hundred years later, when Mudie's son abandoned his defence of the three-decker, fifty years of his one-guinea subscriptions had brought the novel safely home to the respectable shelves of the library. That, for all the longueurs of the difficult second volume, was a remarkable achievement.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

BUILDING EMPIRES

In 1844, a publicist for the British New Zealand Company, a commercial charter spearheading the settlement of New Zealand, was seeking to recruit emigrants. He was at pains to demonstrate that New Zealand was no penal colony or dingy commercial trading station, but a community of cultured men who sought to model the world they now inhabited upon the best of what they had left behind. One of the crucial elements in this societal transplantation was the library:

A well-conducted colonist is of necessity a reading man: debarred from the more frivolous amusements of the mother country, he has no other resource but in books, or the debasing influence of the tavern – the bane and antidote of colonial life. None but they who have resided in a new colony can appreciate the value of a new book; and we are happy to bear testimony, that in no colony is literature more appreciated than in New Zealand: as might be expected from the very superior class of men who have migrated to our favourite colony.¹

The reference to the rampant alcoholism that plagued many a colony, trading post or settlement indicated that, even in New Zealand, all was not necessarily well. What was undeniable, however, was the strong connection that was understood to exist between books and civilisation, which was emphasised by colonial recruiters and borne out by the desires and aspirations of colonial communities. Between the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi between the British crown and the Māori chiefs of the North Island

in 1840 and 1914, New Zealand's settler population expanded from a few thousand to just over 1 million. In the same period, 769 libraries were founded in the colony. In 1878, there was one library for every 1,529 people. Virtually all these foundations followed the model of the subscription library, much preferred in nineteenth-century colonial society, as it encouraged personal collections to be pooled for communal benefit. In the outposts of New Zealand, a couple of hundred books might be one of the few physical links to the motherland, and a crucial resource with which to pass the time, face the inevitable hardships and dream of a prosperous future.

We have seen how European books were carried on the first voyages to the Americas, and how books were found among the most treasured possessions of English Puritans and Spanish Jesuits.² For those that carried them, books were a totem of civilisation as much as tools to plant European culture in their new homes. Acquiring relevant up-to-date books was rarely straightforward, but books would necessarily accumulate in colonial posts as there were few places for them to go when their owners died. Thus a shrewd collector like Joachim von Dessin (1704–61), the overseer of auctions of goods of the deceased in Cape Colony, South Africa, could acquire almost 4,000 books. This collection he donated to a local church in Cape Town upon his death, with instructions to make them available to the public. Books could be borrowed and inspected on site once a week.³ The local pride that inspired a minister to donate his books to the community in Scotland or Germany was equally applicable to the Cape, Australia or Canada.

The English slaving post at Cape Coast (present-day Ghana) had a substantial library for the officers in the castle. The presence of English literature, histories and books of law, serving as a reminder of the polite civility to which these men apparently aspired, forms a strange contrast to the brutality of their everyday business.⁴ At the same time, eighteenth-century Christian missionaries who evangelised in the Cape and the Caribbean tried to build their own libraries which they could use to spread the word of God. Some, like the Protestant Moravian Brethren, made specific efforts to teach enslaved people to read and write, a process that brought them all too often into conflict with plantation

owners.⁵ For the enslavers, literacy was deemed to be a dangerous path towards subversion, and ultimately liberation. Enslaved people, though from a different perspective, also believed in the liberating power of books: in Cape Colony, many of those freed bought books at auction, and gathered together their own libraries as a powerful symbol of their free status.⁶

After the abolition of slavery in the middle of the nineteenth century, tensions over access to books did not dissipate. In South Africa, black activists saw in library provision a key tool for emancipation, but were persistently frustrated by a government which had little sympathy for their cause.⁷ In the Dutch East Indies, on the other hand, the colonial government was an active sponsor of libraries, and created no fewer than 2,500 public libraries between 1918 and 1926, stocked with literature in the vernacular languages specifically designed for the Malay, Javanese and Sundanese populations. These proved exceptionally popular and facilitated real strides in the advance of literacy. To the Dutch colonial government, they were a tool to inculcate support for colonial rule and western values; in this they were only partially successful, given that the indigenous populations, once exposed to western notions of liberty, self-determination and democracy, were determined to apply these principles to themselves.⁸

The nineteenth century, the great age of empire, was a critical era in the global development of the library. Attempts to export European culture overseas accelerated with the expansion of empire and the global migration of European people. The transplanting of European libraries to Canada, India and Australia would not be without difficulties, and the result rarely matched up to the library culture found in London or Paris. At the same time, the glories of empire were lauded in new national libraries, substantial collections erected to celebrate the cultural and literary achievements of each European nation. The size of these libraries, a source of repeated international rivalry, would mark them out as behemoths of their day; they were the first institutional libraries that outmatched even the finest personal collections. Yet this did not deter a new breed of library builder, the robber barons of the rapidly industrialising United States of America, from chasing

their own dreams as princes of sophistication. This was book collecting as reputation laundering, building a cultural legacy to expunge the memory of their rapacious business practices.

Shipwrecked Novels

The period between 1757 and 1818 saw the British East India Company transformed from a merchant corporation with a few coastal trading posts into the dominant power on the Indian subcontinent. As British officers settled into their roles as administrators over this vast territory, they encountered a country with rich literary traditions and a history of great royal libraries. Since the days of Akbar I (1542–1606), the Mughal emperors had always surrounded themselves with orators and poets, and assembled thousands of manuscripts at their imperial libraries, mostly written on palm leaves.⁹ These collections were predominantly made up of works in Arabic, Persian and Urdu; many items were richly illuminated by court painters, often with celebratory portraits of the ruler and his entourage. Works of poetry and literature from the imperial library would generally be read out for the enjoyment of the ruler and his court; Emperor Akbar himself never learned to read or write. The library programme of the Mughals was without doubt exclusive, and the art of printing never enticed these great rulers. Their chief experience with print was to observe the somewhat clumsy but determined efforts of missionaries at the trading post at Goa to produce Catholic books for India's vast population. The typographical complexities of this venture were considerable, given the range of languages and scripts encountered by the missionaries. Some royals, like Maharaja Serfoji II of Tanjore (1777–1832), did collect European printed books out of curiosity: he possessed a library of 30,433 palm leaf manuscripts and 6,426 printed European books, the result of 300 years of collecting by his dynasty.

Another great library, that of the Sultan of Mysore, was seized by the British after his defeat at Seringapatam (1799), and the spoils divided between Oxford, Cambridge and Fort William college in Calcutta (now Kolkata). This was one of many Indian collections to be appropriated by Britain in the age of empire; the remains of

the imperial Mughal library also fell into British hands in 1859, but only after it had been much diminished by a century and a half of plunder and neglect. Sending these books home was a demonstration of triumph, not unlike Swedish plunder of Catholic libraries in the seventeenth century, but also part of a determined effort to build comprehensive collections of Asian works in Oxford, Cambridge and London, to help scholars and administrators engage with the culture of people who lived under British dominion abroad. Not all libraries were seen as appropriate for such anthropological purposes. The great library of the Augustinian friars in Goa, some 10,000 volumes, did not impress Sir James Mackintosh, chief judge at Bombay (now Mumbai): 'I did not know before that the world had produced 10,000 such useless and pernicious books, or that it had been possible to have formed a large library with so curious an exclusion of whatever is instructive or elegant.'¹⁰

Undoubtedly fuelled by anti-Catholic sentiments, this was a rather unfair dismissal of a library assembled in the face of considerable difficulties over the course of several centuries. Yet Mackintosh's outburst was made in the context of a pressing need to provide 'instructive or elegant' books for the increasingly numerous British soldiers, officers, administrators and traders in India.¹¹ Books had long been accumulated at company forts and missions, mostly through the personal collections of company employees, bolstered by the dispatch of Bibles and prayer books from London. Concern over the well-being of British soldiers, and therefore their military effectiveness, required a more systematic approach. British troops in India were the first in the world to be provided with permanent libraries, some two decades before their colleagues in Britain received the same. By the 1820s, every European regiment in India had the benefit of the services of a schoolmaster, a reading master and writing master, two assistant schoolmasters, a librarian and a schoolmistress for children.¹²

These generous provisions, it was frequently emphasised in reports home, were necessary due to the heat, which made recreational activity requiring physical exertion impracticable. The chaplain of Dinapore station remarked in 1832 that

I should say generally that the minds of those soldiers who use the library are better regulated and their conduct more becoming them as men and as Christians than it would have been had they been left to their own resources, and their very limited means of finding useful occupation for the many leisure hours which the European soldier in India has at his own disposal.¹³

When dedicated library buildings were erected at each major station, and librarians instructed how to deal with the voracious white ants that plagued the books, officers and chaplains made clear that the libraries should allow provision for lending books, rather than insist they be consulted in the often crowded library room. The libraries were used more frequently, and the mood of the men improved considerably, if they were granted permission to borrow books and read them in the quiet hours in their own barracks. On the question of content, the military libraries were also a step ahead of their time: they were among the first institutional libraries to fill their shelves with fiction. The novelist Maria Edgeworth argued that British soldiers and sailors should read tales of heroism, adventure and hardship likely to instil virtue (presumably her own titles being considered particularly suitable). Accounts of shipwreck and arduous voyages were also to be recommended, 'beginning with *Robinson Crusoe*, the most interesting of all stories, and one which has sent many a youth to sea.'¹⁴

This was not just the self-interested claim of a bestselling novelist: company officers in India agreed wholeheartedly. The shelves of military libraries were filled with fiction, including Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, the novels of Sir Walter Scott, and Shakespeare. Even the chaplains in India noted that spiritual fare alone was not good for the morale of the men; although religious works were found in every library, they sat largely unread, providing nourishment for the ants.

The value of books exported from Britain to India rose dramatically between 1791 and 1810, from £8,725 to £66,180; by the early 1860s this had grown to £313,772.¹⁵ Military libraries were responsible for only a portion of this market, as numerous private initiatives

were launched in the leading cities of the empire: Calcutta (now Kolkata), Madras (now Chennai) and Bombay (now Mumbai). There were five commercial circulating libraries in Calcutta by 1831, mostly serving the white population of some 12,000 people, a third of whom were British.¹⁶ Here, too, fiction reigned supreme. All these books had been supplied from London, though more were dispatched from the home country than ever reached their destination. In 1835, the travel writer Emma Roberts declared that 'At the Cape of Good Hope, the beach is said sometimes to be literally strewn with novels; an occurrence that takes place upon the wreck of a ship freighted from the warehouses of Paternoster Row.'¹⁷

The 1830s also saw the emergence of two great subscription libraries, in Bombay (1830) and Calcutta (1836). Both bore the name of 'public library', and although both charged fees for membership, these were kept deliberately low. The Calcutta library was free for poor students, while the Bombay library resolved that 'it should be open to all ranks, classes and castes without distinction; a decorous demeanour, and a strict adherence to the rules, constituting the only requisites for admission.'¹⁸ These policies suggested that the collections would be available to members of the Indian population as well as the colonial elite. The radicalising impact of literature feared in the Caribbean was here of less concern than the need to promote the growth of a capable westernised class of Indians who could assist the colonial administration. Both libraries rapidly accumulated stock, especially Calcutta's, as it received all the European books from the dismantled Fort William college in 1854. The libraries also attracted many donations from local patrons, British and Indian alike: Indian subscribers represented some 20 per cent of the members in the second half of the nineteenth century.¹⁹ Crucially, Indian members were also on the library committee. While subscription libraries, such as that of the Asiatic Society, were also valued by a more exclusive membership, it was the more inclusive 'public' libraries that would grow substantially during the nineteenth century. The British Raj demonstrated its esteem for the Calcutta library when it became the nucleus of the public imperial library in 1903, the direct forerunner of the modern National Library of India.

The pattern of library growth in India was replicated in the other colonies of the British Empire.²⁰ What stood out was the reliance on private initiative, often backed by government subsidy and support. In Cape Town, a government-funded public library, opened in 1822, was turned into a subscription library seven years later as the funding source, a duty on the wine trade, was withdrawn.²¹ By 1833, it had a stock of 26,000 volumes, at that stage one of the largest libraries in the British colonies. Cape Town could accumulate a substantial library of this sort relatively quickly, as it remained a busy way station for shipping to the East.

In Canada, subscription libraries were actively encouraged by the colonial administration, and liberally funded. Montreal was served by four subscription libraries, the largest of which had a stock of 3,800 volumes.²² By 1858 there were 143 private library associations receiving aid from the government, mostly through funds to buy books from Britain. In Quebec and Montreal, the libraries were seen as means to instil British values in otherwise entirely French regions, whereas in the gold fields of British Columbia, it was hoped that libraries could bring order, culture and respectability to rough frontier posts.²³ In neither instance were these ventures entirely successful. French inhabitants of Montreal and Quebec City banded together to establish their own French libraries, while the miners of British Columbia did not always value the tone with which local authorities sought to publicise libraries as 'surrogate families' for these young working men. Another challenge in British Columbia, also seen in the gold rush era in California, was that thousands of migrants would settle in one locality for a few months or years, but then pack up again, moving on to the next field, leaving libraries in their wake.

The library was a ubiquitous concept in rural Canada by the middle of the nineteenth century, but few libraries had staying power. In small communities, the survival of the local subscription library was often dependent on the energy of a few individuals. Anne Langton, who struggled to operate a library for settlers near Lake Sturgeon, Ontario, reflected in 1842 that 'I think I shall be obliged to accept a pound of butter or a few eggs in payment [for the subscriber's fee], and put the sixpence into the bag myself. I

am afraid that I shall have to be perpetually dunning [chasing] one subscriber or another.'²⁴ In New Zealand, which saw the greatest boom of subscription libraries of all colonies in the British Empire, one third of the libraries founded before 1914 survived less than twenty years. This fragility was exacerbated by the isolation of many small communities. In Maungakarama, in North Auckland, a library was founded in 1878, twenty years after the first settler arrived, with twenty-six subscribers. This number of subscribers declined into single figures, but in 1938 the library was still active, with eighteen members and 2,050 volumes.²⁵ Throughout the period of its activity there were never more than 350 people in the community.

Until 1929, private subscription libraries were financially supported by the New Zealand authorities. Despite their limitations, there was a profound sense that these libraries provided a welcome public service. Library societies actively promoted this reputation, and were successful in attracting funding from government, not least because its civil servants were among the likely pool of subscribers. In the great cities of the empire, the largest subscription libraries would later form the basis of public or national libraries. In Singapore and Australia, ironically, this led to the expunging of the novels and light literature that had made these libraries popular in the first place.²⁶ Nevertheless, it was fiction that finally alerted publishers in Britain to the potential of the market overseas. Knowing that libraries in Australia or India were well out of reach of the tyrannical hold of Mudie's, publishers could afford to drop their prices by a shilling a book and ship out enormous quantities of new novels. Between 1870 and 1884 there was a fourfold increase in British books exported to Australia; shipping times were also reduced to just forty days.²⁷

The opportunities afforded by the colonial market were fully exploited by the publishers Macmillan, founded by two Scottish brothers in 1843. In 1886, Macmillan launched their Colonial Library, a series of titles that were only allowed to be sold in the British market overseas. Within thirty years, the Colonial Library, dressed in a recognisable livery of uniform bindings, comprised 680 titles, of which 632 were fiction.²⁸ Not surprisingly, an

encomium from the *Times of India* which trumpeted their virtues was gleefully circulated by the publishers.

For an expenditure of two or three pounds every upstation can now start a library of sterling worth, with the certainty that a little further outlay, every now and then, will keep it abreast of the times. To messes, clubs, school libraries, and native book-clubs, the 'Colonial Library' should be simply invaluable, and we honestly commend it as the best endeavour we have ever seen to give English readers out here the same advantages that are enjoyed at home by those who live close to one of Mudie's agencies, or one of W. H. Smith's bookstalls.²⁹

The publishers were keen to stress that their colonial readers were valued as much as those in Britain and treated with equal courtesy. This was largely true: Macmillan did not use the Colonial Library as a means to dump old or unsellable stock. They also quickly realised that the novels that sold well in Britain did not always resonate with the colonial public. The first two titles in the Colonial Library – Mary Anne Barker's *Station Life in New Zealand* and *A Year's Housekeeping in South Africa* – sold poorly. These household and travel accounts, although of some interest to the European expatriate community, held little attraction for the much larger Indian population. It also soon became clear that the dominant themes in English realist fiction did not appeal in India, the largest colonial market, as they did not reflect the realities of Indian readers. Instead these readers favoured fiction that emphasised themes like moral virtue, struggle, oppression and liberation; most strikingly the novels of George W. M. Reynolds, many of which centred around social injustice in nineteenth-century London.

Although Reynolds has found little favour with literary critics, Macmillan knew their business, and their target audience. Their success did not go unnoticed. By 1895, there were eight other British publishing houses who had special 'colonial series', all dressed, like Macmillan, in a uniform design, and selling for a shilling less than

at home. Not coincidentally, the period between 1886 and 1901 saw a rapid increase in the number of circulating and subscription libraries in India: from 49 to 137 in the Bengal presidency and from 13 to 70 in the Bombay presidency. Some were founded by and catered specifically for the emerging Indian professional classes.³⁰ These proliferating libraries articulated a growing self-confidence that would play an important role in the independence movements of the twentieth century.

A Library for the Nation

In 1753, the president of the Royal Society, Sir Hans Sloane, offered his life's work to the British nation. In his will, Sloane gave the state the opportunity to purchase his library, 40,000 printed books and over 3,500 manuscripts, for the comparatively low sum of £20,000. The collection also included his unrivalled collection of antiquities, medals and curiosities, and botanical, zoological and mineralogical specimens. This was an opportunity not to be missed. Although London had become one of the greatest cities of the world, it lacked a cultural attraction that could match its global renown. Its libraries, although not insignificant in number, paled in comparison to the Bodleian in Oxford, never mind the famous Bibliothèque du Roi in Paris.

Parliament appointed a forty-one-member committee of trustees to oversee Sloane's collections and organise a public lottery to gather the necessary funds. The lottery was successful, raising over £100,000. This sum allowed for the purchase of a generous endowment, in the form of Bank of England annuities, in addition to a permanent location for the collections, Montagu House, at the heart of Bloomsbury. Despite the necessity of extensive renovation, funds were still left to acquire the Harleian manuscripts, some 8,000 items collected by the earls of Oxford. Two smaller, but no less distinguished collections, already in the possession of the crown, were conveniently added, before the king, George II, decided to present his royal library, comprising at least 9,000 volumes, to the nation.³¹

In 1759, the British Museum opened its doors. Entry was free,

but required a ticket, which had to be requested days in advance. Tour groups soon graced the halls of Montagu House, while a motley band of scholars worked in the reading room, which by all accounts was beset by intolerable damp. They also grumbled, in unison with the fifteen members of staff, about the hustle and bustle of the gawping visitors who marvelled at Sloane's curiosities, ranging from exotic footwear and weaponry to remarkable pieces of coral. The tension between the two glories of the museum, its library and its natural and antique collections, always simmered below the surface. It was the proper habit of a gentleman-collector to gather both books and a cabinet of curiosities in one place, and Sloane's extraordinary collections were testament to his encyclopaedic ambitions.³² To him, the books and specimens informed one another. In practice, the two sides of the museum grew steadily apart, as the demands of the library user differed from that of the museum visitor. Yet the two were also imperative to each other's success: the number of day visitors maintained the popular profile of the collections, while the books bestowed on the institution an air of intellectual distinction. The trustees and staff evidently found themselves more often than not on the side of the books: it was on the library that most effort and funding was expended. Many of Sloane's famous taxonomical specimens, on the other hand, were incinerated in the early nineteenth century, as the stink of putrefaction seeping from the catacombs of Montagu House became increasingly unbearable for readers.³³

Despite these teething problems, the foundation of the British Museum was a remarkable success. It would remain the host of the national library collection until the foundation of the British Library in 1973: and only in 1998 was the collection moved to its own purpose-built building at St Pancras, finally separating the books from the antiquities. It was the first collection of its sort to be conceived as a national resource, and one that was regarded by its readers and visitors as the embodiment of the confidence, prestige and ambition of the British people. Libraries had long been seen as symbols of cultural distinction, but that this concept could be tied directly to the nation state was a particular nineteenth-century development.³⁴

Although the British Museum was admired from abroad, few other countries emulated the principle of a conjoined library and museum. This was partly an issue of legacy and resources: there were few collectors who collected on the scale of Hans Sloane. In contrast, most states could identify an old collection of books that had some claim to belonging to the nation, not least through the remnants of royal libraries. These collections provided a strong basis for national libraries, not necessarily because of their size but through the lustre of their former owners, and often the richness of their manuscript collections.

It was, however, through the acquisition of distinguished personal libraries that national libraries increased their collection. This was the case in the Netherlands and Belgium, where small royal collections were expanded by tens of thousands of volumes from private collectors, who either donated freely or sold cheaply to the crown. Royal support for a national library also helped: in Britain, King George III bought a collection of 30,000 newspapers and pamphlets from the English Civil War era for the British Museum (these were described laconically under a single entry in the first published catalogue of the library), while his son, George IV, later presented his father's library, 65,000 volumes and 20,000 pamphlets, to the museum in the 1820s. More humble, but no less welcome, was a steady trickle of donations from patriotic citizens. Between 1759 and 1798, the British Museum received over 1,000 gifts of books, often one or two valuable items, sometimes small collections.³⁵

Another source of books, exploited especially ruthlessly by Catholic states, was the appropriation of the contents of monastic and church libraries. The French Bibliothèque du Roi, although already one of the largest libraries in Europe, expanded by half a million books during the French Revolution to at least 800,000 volumes, albeit rebaptised as the Bibliothèque Nationale.³⁶ A similar story unfolded in Portugal, and in the comparatively younger state of Greece. Established in 1828, the year of Greece's independence, the Greek national library opened with 1,844 volumes, generously deposited by friends of the revolution. This tiny collection was soon enhanced by a decree stating that all

valuable manuscripts and books to be found in the libraries of the country's Orthodox monasteries, churches and other libraries on Greek territory were to be deposited in the new national collection.³⁷ In the 1860s, Risorgimento Italy, a remarkably disunited new country, settled on no fewer than seven national libraries; the stock of which was bolstered by, and in one case entirely based on, books from recently suppressed convents.³⁸

If one could not plunder one's own libraries, one might as well appropriate the book stock of another nation. In 1794, when Russia played its part in the third partition of Poland-Lithuania, its armies returned from Warsaw with the famous Zaluski library. Assembled painstakingly by two Polish brothers and opened to the public in 1747, the Zaluski library was one of the greatest libraries of Europe, with some 300,000 volumes. It had come into the formal possession of the last king of Poland, Stanisław II Augustus (1732-98); as Russia dismantled the Polish state, the library was considered an appropriate basis for the new Imperial Public Library of St Petersburg.³⁹ Despite the fact that poor transportation arrangements resulted in the loss of at least 40,000 volumes between Warsaw and St Petersburg, Russia had, in one fell swoop, acquired the second-largest library in Europe.

The rapacity of the Russian Empire was fuelled by a sense of cultural inferiority with western Europe, one that could only be repaired through aggressive collecting.⁴⁰ Yet rivalry permeated all national libraries because these libraries were supposed to embody the intellectual ambitions of the nation itself. This competition expressed itself not through the contents of the libraries, but predominantly through their size. For the first time in history, institutional libraries had become decisively larger than the best private collections.⁴¹ The librarian of the British Museum, Antonio Panizzi (1797-1879), declared before the House of Commons in 1835 that the size of the British Museum paled in comparison with the great libraries of France and Germany. 'Paris must be surpassed' became the rallying cry that saw Parliament vote additional funding for acquisitions.⁴² Ironically, the fact that Panizzi was Italian by birth also ruffled feathers: how could the principal librarian of the British Museum be a foreigner?

It was Panizzi, however, who best articulated the role that a national library should play. It was not enough to have a collection of books that belonged to the nation in name: it should reflect the cultural values of that nation, and most of all, collect and preserve its literature. A national library should aspire to be a universal collection of a nation's books: those printed in the country, written by all authors of that nationality, written in the language of that nation, or dealing with its language and culture. Crucially, these were principles that resonated with the nationalist movements of the nineteenth century. Even those states which did not acquire independence established their own national libraries along these lines. In nineteenth-century Transylvania, under the rule of the Austrian Habsburg Empire, the three disparate linguistic communities of Germans, Hungarians and Romanians each developed their own 'national' library.⁴³

In the British Museum, Antonio Panizzi also articulated the vision that the British Library, as the greatest library of the greatest empire in the world, should possess the best collections of foreign-language works of any library. Panizzi hoped that 'the library of the British nation will not be suffered to sink into a collection of common volumes. The very name given to the institution implies a collection of rare and curious objects.'⁴⁴ A national library should be universal in ambition as a repository, but selective when acquiring antiquarian volumes, because it was here that the reputation of a library was made.⁴⁵ Despite the widely shared vogue for manuscripts and early printed books, national libraries were among the first institutional libraries to value works in the vernacular tongue over scholarly languages such as Latin and Greek. Although the catalogues of the collections continued to be published with Latin title-pages and prefaces, the national library would actively pursue the accumulation of works in the vernacular; it would also, by necessity, accession newspapers and periodicals. The Russian imperial library, its foundation collection purloined from abroad, faced particular challenges in this respect. When, in 1808, the librarian Aleksei Olenin undertook a survey to investigate the contents of the library, he discovered that among its 238,632 printed volumes and 12,000 manuscripts, there were only eight books in Russian or

Church Slavonic, the liturgical language of the Russian Orthodox Church.⁴⁶

Tied to the collecting policies of the national libraries was the notion of generous accessibility. Libraries of state in most countries had long been available to the friends of the king's librarian, or notables of the court. When Elector Frederick William of Brandenburg-Prussia made his court library available to the public in 1661, it was housed in the top room of his castle: not an approachable destination for an average citizen of Brandenburg.⁴⁷ At the British Museum, the demands of formal registration as reader posed similar challenges to those unused to polite society. Yet when the museum's collections expanded in the early nineteenth century, with illustrious trophies such as the Rosetta Stone, the Elgin marbles and many other Greek, Roman, Egyptian and Assyrian antiquities, the popularity of the institution increased so much that hundreds of thousands of visitors passed through its building each year. Despite grumbling about 'persons of low education' and their 'idle curiosity', there emerged the notion that the national library could help 'improve the vulgar class', in the words of one member of parliament.⁴⁸

The origins of national libraries ensured that fulfilling any of these ambitions was a constant struggle. Personal libraries from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, never mind monastic libraries, rarely met the aspirations of those such as Panizzi. Relatively few libraries were like the *Bibliothèque Nationale* in Paris and the British Museum in being encyclopaedic in their collections, and even they had notable gaps. Only steady acquisitions and the enforcement of legal deposit rights could remedy the situation. National governments proved relatively reluctant, however, to grant a regular acquisitions budget. Until the end of the nineteenth century, most national libraries did without; the best they could hope for were grants for specific purchases. In London, Parliament was comparatively generous with its funding, voting an annual grant of £10,000 for book purchases in 1845.⁴⁹ In countries with lesser means, such as Argentina, funds remained elusive. Although a national library was established in 1810, when the country declared independence, it languished in neglect for most

of the nineteenth century.⁵⁰ Legal deposit rights, although granted by many governments to their national libraries, in practice proved difficult to enforce. Since the earliest days of printing, authorities had tried to force publishers to relinquish copies of their books to institutional collections, rarely with success. The practice was much resented by the book trade, and when confronted by persistent noncompliance, the authorities usually gave way. In Britain, Panizzi, despairing of the failure of the scheme, asked that the legal authority to pursue publishers be transferred directly to him. When this was done, and he embarked on a crusade against recalcitrant publishers, the tide slowly turned.

Success breeds its own challenges. As national libraries attracted donations and secured copyright deposits, the quantity of books entering its stacks grew unmanageable. How could one put in order the mass of books swamping these collections? The royal library in Copenhagen acquired over 100,000 volumes between 1820 and 1848; the British Museum library grew from 125,000 volumes in 1823 to 374,000 in 1848. Three years later, another 100,000 volumes had been added to its collections.⁵¹ Chaos could only be avoided through rapid construction. Between 1823 and 1857 the British Museum resembled a building site, as Montagu House was torn down in stages and replaced by a grandiose neoclassical palace, the main structure of which is still admired by visitors today. The crowning glory of the building was the circular reading room and stacks, built in a dome modelled on the Pantheon, that occupied the previously empty quadrangle of the museum. Iron bookstacks surrounding the reading room were designed to house some 1.5 million volumes.⁵² In the summer of 1857, when the circular reading room opened, 62,000 people toured it during evening hours to marvel at the gracious palace erected to house the nation's books.

Great construction projects, in the nineteenth century as today, attract funding more easily than book cataloguing. While the new reading room of the British Museum could accommodate 300 readers, these readers had to jostle for the single copy of the reading-room catalogue that allowed them to request books. There was no published catalogue of all the book collections of

the British Museum. Panizzi advocated strongly for an alphabetical catalogue to replace the more traditional method of classifying books by subject, as the mass of books was too overwhelming to classify consistently and adequately by genre. While he eventually prevailed, he would not live to see the project completed. The alphabetical catalogue was first proposed in 1834, when it was thought that the project would take five or six years to complete. By 1880, a year after Panizzi's death, it was still unfinished, with 160,000 entries requiring revision. Printing nevertheless went forward, and in 1905, there was a complete catalogue, of 397 parts and 44 supplements with some 4.5 million entries and cross-references.⁵³ For some readers, this came far too late, not least those who had abandoned the library to establish their own subscription library, the London Library, where they could be assured of more satisfactory provision.

The cataloguing delays experienced in London were by no means unique. Many libraries prioritised specialist sub-catalogues, covering incunabula and manuscripts, over cataloguing the mass of books in the entire collection. This was the preferred approach of Aleksei Olenin in St Petersburg, until the Russian minister of education ordered him to produce an alphabetical catalogue.⁵⁴ For ten years, the staff of the library laboured away, until the minister was replaced and the whole venture was quietly dropped.

It may not come as a surprise that uncatalogued collections are a fine target for book thieves, an unwelcome but unavoidable presence in the freely accessible national collections. None were as bold, however, as the Bavarian theologian Alois Pichler (1833–74), who was employed as extraordinary librarian at the imperial library in St Petersburg.⁵⁵ Between August 1869 and March 1871, Pichler removed some 4,500 books and manuscripts from the library. His method, as suspicious as it was efficient, was to hide them in his bulky overcoat, which he never removed. When caught, and placed on trial, he admitted that a scholar in Munich had shown him how to construct a cloth sack to attach to the inside of his coat. Pichler was convicted and sentenced to exile in Siberia. Prison sentences and hard labour were similarly imposed on many less celebrated book thieves in London: because they

stole from a national library, their crimes were considered against the nation itself.

The symbolic association between the nation and its library has ensured that the concept of a national library continues to be of some relevance. Yet its strong association with the nation, its people, culture and language, not to mention its prominent location in its capital city, also marks it out as a prime target. The national library of Peru, founded thirty days after independence in 1821, was entirely destroyed by the Chilean army in the War of the Pacific in 1879.⁵⁶ In more recent years, the national library of Bosnia was deliberately firebombed by Serbian troops in 1992 during the Bosnian War, while the national library of Iraq was partially burned and looted during the early days of the invasion of 2003. A country under threat has more to fear than Dr Pichler and his coat pockets.

Book Tycoons

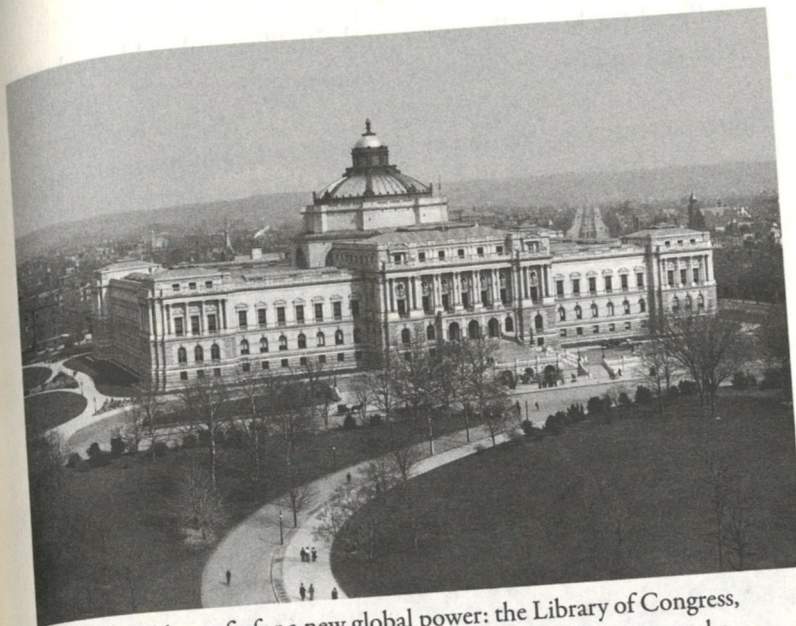
The development of the great national libraries was regarded with admiration and envy from the other side of the Atlantic. Nevertheless, it took most of the nineteenth century for the United States of America to develop its own. Partisan politics, driven by the rift concerning the relative power of the federal government and over the issue of the abolition of slavery, curtailed efforts to establish a library that, in name and contents, could serve all Americans. Supporters of a national library did see a hopeful future for the Library of Congress. When it moved to Washington DC in 1800, Congress acquired a library of some 3,000 volumes, mostly works on jurisprudence and politics, to serve congressmen in their work. This library was torched by British troops in 1814, while its replacement, which included Thomas Jefferson's personal collection, was partially destroyed in 1851 by fire. These setbacks were exacerbated by the insistence that the library, because it served Congress, must remain bipartisan, and therefore could not build up a comprehensive selection of books and periodicals, including the great number devoted to the debate on slavery.⁵⁷

The American Civil War (1861–5) put an end to much of the

squabbling over the role of the library, and the decades afterwards saw the Library of Congress assume the role as the national library of the United States.⁵⁸ A series of extremely capable librarians, generous funding and an enforced legal deposit saw the library grow at a frightening pace, spilling out of the rooms of the Capitol building. In 1897, a monumental library structure located behind the Capitol, filling an entire block, was ready to house the collections. Its design was inspired by the British Museum building and its panoptic reading room; the interior of the dome featured a mural entitled 'The Evolution of Civilization', which presented America as the final incarnation of scientific and cultural progress.

The rapidity with which the United States could build the most expensive library building in the world, and its confident presentation of American destiny, was characteristic of the Gilded Age, the final decades of the nineteenth century. This was an era of unbridled growth, and the seemingly unlimited expansion of American wealth. As the country was transformed, through rail, steel, oil and immigration, new metropolises rose up. There was unease, however, that economic success lacked a cultural complement, one that paid tribute to the achievements of American determination and ingenuity.

This was a task ideally suited to those builders, investors and speculators who amassed fortunes during the Gilded Age. American industrialists and financial magnates wanted their homeland to equal if not surpass Europe in sophistication. Although the robber barons, as they were derided in the press, were frequently attacked for their greed, their patronage was of immense value in announcing America as a cultural leader of the world. Universities, museums, galleries and libraries were among the favoured beneficiaries of the American magnates. The first decades of the twentieth century saw a host of great research libraries rise in Chicago (the Newberry), New York (the Morgan), San Marino, California (the Huntington) and Washington DC (the Folger). A striking factor is that these libraries, with the exception of the Newberry, were composed of the personal libraries of the founders themselves.⁵⁹ None were as sizeable as the libraries of state, nor as universal in content; instead they resembled the fine libraries of



18. A library fit for a new global power: the Library of Congress, pictured here in 1902. Inside, a mural heralded America as the latest brilliant civilisation to be brought forth by the world.

Renaissance princes, filled with items of great value, lavish colour, and most of all, rarity. Informed by the antiquarian fashions for manuscripts, incunabula, first editions and other rare books, the great American collectors competed against one another for the most outstanding collections. Access to their libraries was similarly exclusive. Although lauded by the political elite for providing America with unrivalled public collections, the libraries were available only to a socially restricted class of gentlemen scholars. The oil executive Henry Folger (1857–1930), when discussing provisions for the reading room in his library in Washington DC, wanted only five reading tables. When architects suggested an increase to eight, he responded that

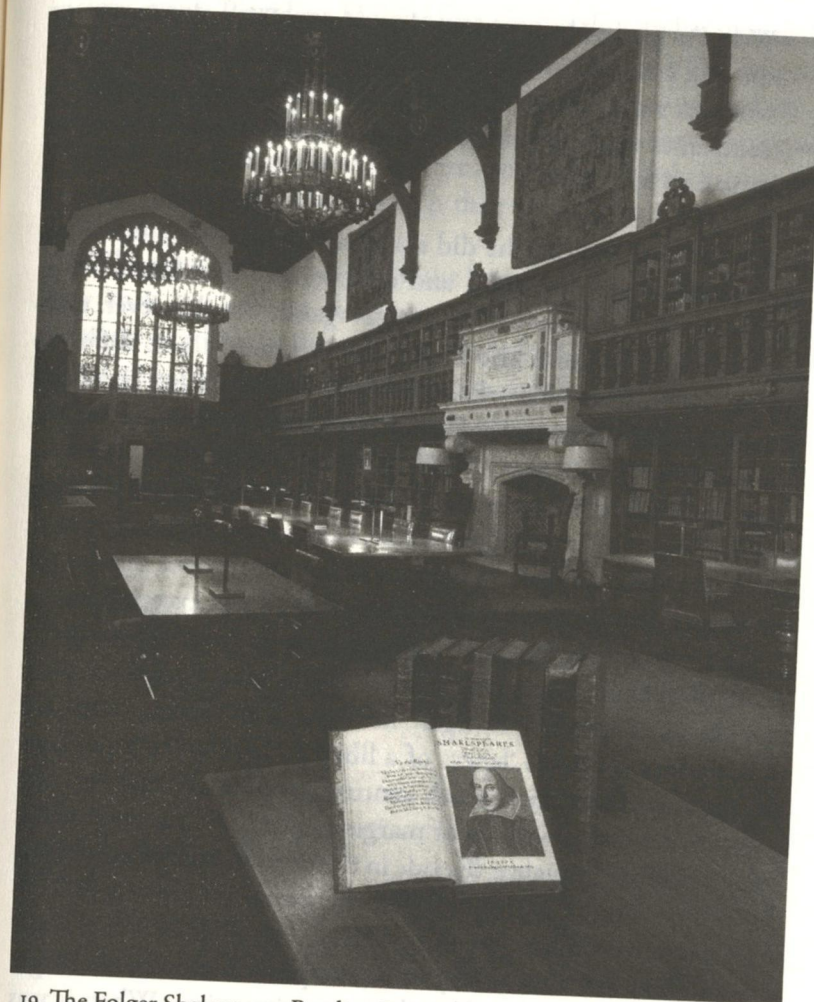
It will not be a reading-room in the way reading-rooms are used generally, nor even as a room for study, because our library is too special in its character, and the contents are so costly and limited in scope – Our collection should not be

offered freely to all comers, and the library should not be looked upon as a reading-room nor a comfortable rest-room.⁶⁰

Folger's great rival, the rail tycoon Henry E. Huntington (1850–1927), had his research library built on his 600-acre estate in San Marino, California, a stone's throw from his mansion; also a location which was not intended to draw large crowds.⁶¹ Huntington and Folger were particularly reticent about opening up their collections, because they were true bibliophiles. They read and studied their books, and they loved them to the extent that they could not bear to see them dispersed. Housing them in a public building, with a generous endowment for the future, was the only solution.

There were nevertheless differences between the two collectors. Huntington collected widely and quickly. He amassed some 150,000 volumes, thanks in no part to buying, in their entirety, 200 personal libraries. Henry Folger and his wife Emily, on the other hand, had one particular passion: William Shakespeare's writings, as printed through the ages, and books commenting on his world and his legacy.⁶² The couple collected with single-minded purpose. They remained childless; Folger was reported to refer to his books as 'the boys'. Although extremely rich, Folger gave rarely to charity, and did not act as patron of hospitals, colleges, theatres or other civic ventures. While the executive meetings of Standard Oil would rarely be interrupted, if they were it was because Henry Folger was on the hunt for another Shakespeare copy that had surfaced in an English castle. He corresponded with some 600 booksellers and spent evenings with Emily poring over catalogues and newspaper clippings, looking for a bargain, or news that a famous collection might come up for auction.

Folger was in debt for much of his life, continually taking loans, secured by his stocks in oil, to finance his book buying. The Folgers did not own a home until 1928, two years before Henry's death; instead they occupied relatively modest rented lodgings in Brooklyn. They held few fancy dinners, owned no extravagant cars, or indulged in any other luxuries appropriate to an oil magnate – and this did attract some attention. Although books were an accepted form of luxurious expenditure, they were only so if combined



19. The Folger Shakespeare Reading Room, with a copy of one of its eighty-two First Folios on show. The room is decked out in Elizabethan glory, a stark contrast to the neoclassical art deco of the library's exterior.

with other indulgences. J. D. Rockefeller once asked Folger if, as he had read in the paper, Folger had really spent \$100,000 (close to his annual salary) on a volume of Shakespeare. Folger responded that it had been much less; which was necessary reassurance, as Rockefeller explained:

Well, I'm glad to hear you say that, Henry. We – that is, my son and I and the board of directors – were disturbed. We wouldn't want to think that the president of one of our major companies would be the kind of man foolish enough to pay \$100,000 for a book.⁶³

Folger had not lied, but he did regularly spend over \$10,000 on an exceptional or rare copy, and occasionally over \$40,000 or even \$50,000. The result of this extravagance was, however, truly unmatched in its field. The Folgers accumulated 1,400 different copies of the collected works of Shakespeare, including 200 from the seventeenth century. Eighty-two of these were copies of the famous First Folio (1623), some of them previously owned by kings, queens and illustrious individuals such as Samuel Johnson and William Pitt. Ironically, the First Folio is not a very rare book: over 200 copies are still in existence today. Yet the fact that Folger was able to acquire more than a third of those was exceptional.

The key to Folger's success was to diverge from the accepted standard of fashionable collectors to own 'clean' books, unblemished by any mark. J. P. Morgan, the New York banker, despaired of imperfect copies as 'lepers of a library'. This led to a deplorable but widespread nineteenth-century practice of 'washing' rare books to remove any trace of marginalia or previous ownership. Folger, swimming against the tide in this as in so much else, bought these 'dirty books' gratefully.⁶⁴ Furthermore, Folger was exceedingly secretive. When, in 1901, the scholar Sidney Lee sought to undertake the first survey of Shakespeare First Folios, Folger did not respond to any of his three questionnaires. When it was published, Folger did use the Lee survey to his own advantage: he now knew where he could buy more. He sent letters to thirty-five owners of First Folios in England, asking them to name their price. All rebuffed him, but Folger persisted, successfully in many cases. When the books entered the Folger collection, they were kept hidden from the world. Folger never allowed any scholar access to his library, most of which was kept in vaults. This made the inauguration of the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington DC in 1932, two years after Henry Folger's death, an unmissable

society event; President Hoover was among those who attended. Yet here too subterfuge had played an important role. The Folgers had desired a prime location for their library. They settled on a block of residential housing, a street across from the Library of Congress. They then spent the next nine years secretly buying up fourteen adjoining houses, which they then demolished to erect their monument to Shakespeare.

When the library was ready, the books were transported from New York in a convoy of armoured trucks. Those passers-by on the street would have thought that the vehicles, manned by guards armed with rifles, machine guns and tear-gas canisters, contained gold or diamonds. Inside there was indeed a fortune: a legacy of collecting, pursued doggedly, with no concerns for expense. Of that the stuff of libraries is made.

first place. Libraries have now made their peace with romance. Online articles offer library staff advice on how to promote romance titles, usually prominently displayed in their own sections of shelves or bespoke stands.⁵⁸ Go into any branch library and you will see the familiar paperback livery of Mills & Boon or Harlequin, borrowed by the handful by a devoted, and now somewhat older clientele, to be exchanged for another bundle the following week.⁵⁹

Romance has never attracted much admiration or attention from literary critics, yet in one respect it represents a remarkable triumph for female agency, pursued with the dogged devotion of the novels' own plucky heroines, in the face of critical and official disdain. The romance would eventually emerge triumphant as libraries realised they need the readers of romances as much as the readers need the libraries. Millions of regular readers now rely increasingly on libraries for a rapid turnover of titles. And libraries, fearful of constant retrenchment, are grateful for any clients who continue to come through their doors.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

LIBRARIES, BOOKS AND POLITICS

All libraries are the product of a process of judicious selection. This we take for granted as a natural part of library building, a constant throughout the history of collecting. On the other hand, external constraints defining what books are acceptable and what books should be censored are generally deplored. In the astute observation of the historian Robert Darnton, the difficulty of the issue of censorship is 'that it looks so simple: it pits the children of light against the children of darkness'.¹ So it bears emphasis that throughout the twentieth century, issues of selection, discrimination and exclusion continued to preoccupy the library world, from the first lists of recommended content issued to libraries by their national library associations at the beginning of the century, to the Patriot Act in 2001. 'This Act required libraries in the United States to provide the department of Homeland Security with access to readers' borrowing cards on request.'² Over the course of the twentieth century the library community sometimes resisted official interference, while at other times the views of librarians have coincided with the prevailing orthodoxy. Whatever the case, librarians have never doubted their vocation to shape the contents of their collections, and with that to mould public taste.

Censorship was most acute in totalitarian states, but we see many instances also in western democracies and in the emerging library cultures of the developing world. The problems of discrimination, choice and official interference were as acute in the second half of the twentieth century as at any point in history. Living in the shadow of nuclear annihilation, libraries could provide either a respite from everyday worries, or a storehouse of ideological reinforcement for the verities of East or West. These were difficult

times for those charged with building, curating and preserving library collections; not least in demonstrating their continued relevance to societies where citizens sat glued to their television screens as the world teetered on the brink of nuclear catastrophe. The proper role of books in banishing anxiety or promoting patriotism were issues of particular contemporary urgency, but they had their roots in the unresolved tensions between private desires and public duty, laid bare by the ideological confrontations of the twentieth century. To many, censorship was not a dirty word, but the defence of essential values relentlessly threatened by sedition, bad literature and the weak curation of public library collections.

Big Bill

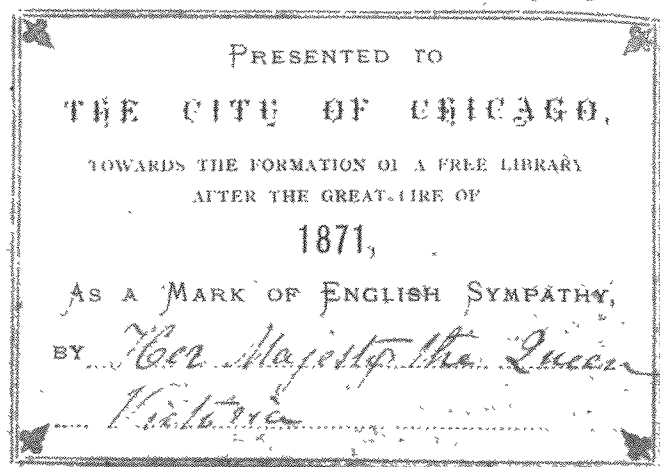
On the night of Sunday 8 October 1871, a fire began in Chicago that would change the face of the city. At this point Chicago was fast emerging as one of the wonders of the new industrial world, a nodal point of the transcontinental transport network and the food distribution centre of a hungry continent. A tough city, and magnet for immigrants from all over Europe, the wealth of the Chicago elite was nevertheless expended to supply the customary accoutrements of metropolitan sophistication: churches and civil buildings, the Chicago Academy of Sciences, the Chicago Historical Society (home to a collection of more than 165,000 books) and the Illinois Library Association. The fire, which raged unchecked through all of Monday, swept all of this away, along with 17,450 homes, rendering 95,000 people homeless. Almost incidental to this enormous human suffering were the losses to the libraries: contemporary estimates, incorporating fifty fine private libraries, suggested losses of up to 3 million volumes, and this may be conservative. The lost stock of the Chicago booksellers was valued at \$1 million. The premises of the publishers of nine daily newspapers and over a hundred periodicals were also laid waste.³

The extinction of Chicago, through this single savage act of fate, touched off an enormous wave of sympathy on both sides of the Atlantic. English efforts focused on the creation of a new free public library for Chicago, something which to this point had been

lacking. The campaign, chaired by Thomas Hughes, a member of parliament and the author of *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, gathered 8,000 books, with donations from Prime Minister Gladstone, his great adversary Benjamin Disraeli and Queen Victoria. Disraeli's presence in the list of sponsors is particularly noteworthy, since as a popular author he had suffered grievously from the American disregard for British copyright law. All the English donations were accompanied by a neat book label making reference to this humane act of solidarity, all the more remarkable since England was simultaneously contributing to the reconstruction of the Strasbourg library after German bombardment. The books proved a great success with Chicago's library-goers, and especially collectors of book plates, since of the original 8,000 books only 300 now survive; unless as the first historian of the library tactfully suggests, they were all 'worn out in general use'.⁴

If these proud Victorians patriarchs thought they had earned the lasting gratitude of the citizens of Chicago, they had reckoned without Big Bill Thompson. A vehement critic of prohibition and proud friend of the gangster Al Capone, Big Bill blazed an eccentric trail through Chicago politics as the city's mayor. Forced out of office once, in 1927 Big Bill planned his comeback with a novel rallying cry. Should the King of England visit Chicago, he pledged, Big Bill would punch him on the nose. The inoffensive George V had no plans to visit the United States, so the threat was somewhat moot, but the pledge struck a sufficient chord with Chicago's electorate and Big Bill returned triumphant to City Hall.⁵

King George's nose remained intact, but Mayor Thompson's one-sided feud was not over. He now announced that the city library must be purged of pro-British literature. Since the mayor was simultaneously engaged on hounding out of office the supervisor of schools, this task was delegated to one of his appointees, Urbine 'Sport' Herrmann. The director of the public library, Carl Roden, offered only tepid resistance. Noting that identifying all books expressing anti-American sentiment would be a huge task, he offered instead to remove them from general circulation to the safety of the library's closed reserve. In the event, the books were saved by Herrmann's indolence. Having checked out four books



29. The generosity of the English nation after the Great Fire of Chicago of 1871 was memorialised in these elegant bookplates. Many were appropriated by collectors before Big Bill Thompson turned his fire on the remainder.

flagged up by the Patriots League, he found the task of locating the offensive passages beyond his capacities, and tamely returned them the following day.

This and subsequent attempts to purge the Chicago library collection emphasised the need for a more robust statement of the library's commitment to free speech.⁶ The result was a terse document, drafted by the American Library Association, rather sententiously titled the Library Bill of Rights, affirming first and foremost the librarian's inalienable right to choose what books should enter the collection. Published in 1939, as storm clouds gathered over Europe, and revised frequently since, it offered a fragile defence for the idea that libraries should be the sanctuary for literature representing all strands of opinion. Not all librarians were destined to be the heroic defenders of this principle. Carl Roden, who had frankly acknowledged in 1927 that he would surrender disapproved books if ordered to do so, was the following year elected chair of the ALA. His colleague, Frederick Rex of the

Chicago municipal reference library, went one better, personally purging the collection of all material of a pro-British character. Now, he announced proudly, 'I have an America-First Library'.⁷

After 1945, the speedy dissipation of the euphoria of victory, and the onset of Cold War anxieties, created a toxic environment for librarians. In 1950, Ruth Brown, the long-serving librarian of Bartlesville, Oklahoma, was dismissed, ostensibly for harbouring subversive material in her collection, in reality because she made no secret of her sympathy for the local African-American community.⁸ The ALA made little attempt to save her; apparently the matter fell between the jurisdiction of two of its committees, the Intellectual Freedom Committee and the Board on Personnel Administration. Most of the ALA's energies were at this point directed to fending off the implications of President Truman's introduction of a loyalty oath for those in public service. With evidence that senior officials had been involved in trading nuclear secrets to Russia, news that the Soviets had the atom bomb and the outbreak of the Korean War, most citizens saw no problem in asking public figures to give assurance of their loyalty to American values.⁹ When the Los Angeles county librarian was slow to sign the pledge, one library commissioner wondered aloud whether 'our librarian ... is free of those liberal thoughts that we don't like in the head of our library'.¹⁰

The loyalty pledge split the ALA, with some influential figures supporting it. In truth, while some librarians were bold ambassadors for plurality, most reflected the wider values of the communities they served, and in the age of Joe McCarthy, paranoia over Communist infiltration was rampant. In a 1958 survey, two thirds of librarians acknowledged an instance when controversy about a book or author resulted in a decision not to buy. This rather bears out the jaundiced conclusion that librarians insisted on 'stereotypes of democratic freedom of expression and diversity of opinion' but counted 'with close attention the political costs of exercising those rights in their own institutions'. It was left to that unlikely liberal President Eisenhower to calm the waters, advising the graduating class at Dartmouth not to join the book burners. 'Do not be afraid to go into your library and read

every book, so long as any document does not offend our own ideas of decency.¹¹

Where the boundaries of decency lay, was of course a matter of debate, one that in the United States would be decided (or not) by the nine august gentlemen of the Supreme Court. Forced to uphold or quash bans on printed material that would certainly not have been welcome in their own homes, they decided that Congress could only ban material 'utterly without redeeming social importance', or in other words, 'whether to the average person, applying contemporary community standards, the dominant theme of the material taken as a whole appeals to the prurient interest'. Such judicial equivocation counted for nothing against citizen activism, still strong in the Kennedy years. In 1961, both *Catcher in the Rye* and Steinbeck's classic *Of Mice and Men* came under sustained attack by parent groups; 1984 and *Brave New World* were removed from high school reading lists in Florida on the strength of one anonymous phone call.¹²

While the Supreme Court hummed and hawed, in Britain the issue of censorship on the grounds of indecency was effectively settled in six days of comedy at the High Court in London.¹³ When in 1960, Penguin Books announced their intention to publish D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, they had the very good fortune to be charged under the Obscene Publications Act. D. H. Lawrence had obtained considerable celebrity in the 1920s for his dark depiction of working-class life, though his reputation had declined steadily since, thanks in no small measure to Stella Gibbons' cheerful parody of dark, brooding bucolic characters in *Cold Comfort Farm*.¹⁴ *Lady Chatterley's Lover* had never been published in Britain in an unexpurgated version, and the diminishing band of those who wished to read its graphic tale of the bored wife of a war-wounded landowner's affair with her husband's gamekeeper had to source an edition published in Paris or Florence. Now the cream of literary London lined up to testify to its towering literary merit; to no one's surprise, there were few willing to take to the witness stand to testify that they had been debauched and depraved by reading the book. When prosecution counsel invited the jury to consider whether this was a book they would

wish their wives and servants to read, the game was up: the defence of the book was now a defence of modern Britain. Penguin was acquitted and within a month had an edition of 200,000 copies on the street. This was the most widely publicised book publication until the Harry Potter series, and the edition sold out in two days. The trial is widely credited with having helped usher in the era of permissiveness sometimes badged the Swinging Sixties. Even so, it would be another eleven years before E. M. Forster's *Maurice*, a semi-autobiographical tale of homosexual love, first written in 1913-14, found its way into print.

The issue of segregation in the American South posed the greatest challenge to the American Library Association, and one it conspicuously failed to meet. The southern states had always lagged behind the rest of America in the provision of public libraries, and the vast majority would not admit black patrons. Those who presented themselves at their counters would be brusquely shown the door.¹⁵ In many jurisdictions the already discredited principle of 'separate but equal' was further dishonoured by the provision of a single, badly equipped building in the black quarter, often paid for by philanthropic donation. Desegregation came slowly to the libraries of the American South.¹⁶ It is a story which reflected no great credit on anyone in authority during the period, not least the American Library Association, which consistently put professional solidarity (not to say an easy life) over any attempt to enforce social justice for African-American readers.

In the ALA, segregation was largely a silent subject. In 1959, it was decided 'not to take any action on the question'. The chair of the Intellectual Freedom Committee reported with exasperation, 'I am personally much concerned over the efforts of a few people to make an issue where there is none.' In March 1960 the society declared that it could not 'intrude on local jurisdiction'. An editorial in the society's *Bulletin* later that year stated that the ALA 'exists to further the development of libraries, not to regulate the manner in which they are operated'.¹⁷

In fairness, all of these statements were contested, with an increasing sense of outrage, by rank and file members of the ALA. But it would be a long hard struggle to obtain acceptance, even

when the libraries of the south reluctantly opened their doors to black patrons. What that eventual transformation meant to young black men and women can be summed up in the story of Eric Motley, a precocious child brought up in Madison Park, a close-knit community founded by formerly enslaved people outside Montgomery, Alabama. In 1985, when Eric was twelve, his father began driving him up to the city each Saturday to spend the day in the library. One day he found himself sitting next to a fragile-looking old man in a wheelchair. This was George Wallace, former governor, former presidential candidate, and the symbol in the 1960s of southern white opposition to desegregation. A few years earlier, Eric would not have been able to enter the library.¹⁸

Gulags of the Mind

In May 1961, at the height of the Cold War, an excited group of American librarians were given an extensive tour of the Russian library system. No expense was spared, and they were duly impressed.

The number and size of bookstores in the USSR, and the number of customers – not window shoppers – per square inch are as impressive as the number of libraries and their patrons. Ninety million books are reported to be sold annually in Moscow alone, through 170 major bookstores and 340 bookstands.¹⁹

Visiting carefully selected public libraries, the American visitors noted the long opening hours, the presence of volunteer assistants in every department, and the high rate of occupancy in reading rooms. True, the correspondent was disappointed by the absence of recent American literature on the shelves, and the physical surroundings were spartan by American standards. But clearly, the delegation had been impressed by the carefully choreographed display. 'Yes, Ivan reads' was the excited first report penned on the flight back from Moscow.

It is doubtful whether many Soviet citizens would have shared

this particular pair of rose-tinted spectacles. All western visitors acknowledged that this was a nation of readers: every Russian they encountered on buses, in the metro, or taking the air in the park, seemed to have their heads deep in a book or newspaper. And the crowds at the bookstores were genuine. Yet at the same time, many Soviet citizens complained that there was nothing to read.²⁰ Authors tolerated by the state provided dull, cautious fare. This could stand for those not only in the USSR, but in its unwilling satellites, in Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Communist East Germany (the DDR).

Nonetheless, they read. The key to this paradox lies in the fact that, even in highly controlled societies, reading is an individual activity. Reading offered escape from the pressures of the everyday, not least of crowded home living space. It also offered a means of establishing some sort of intellectual autonomy, in a life where every step of personal development was carefully monitored. The ideological theorists of Communism were well aware that reading was a double-edged sword and put in place mechanisms to mitigate its dangers. For many readers, this regime of inspection and control was one of the most stultifying aspects of life under Communism.

Libraries were always at the centre of the Soviet project. As dawn broke after the storming of the Winter Palace in 1917, Lenin impressed on the newly appointed Commissar for Education that libraries would be a key weapon in the fight for hearts and minds.

Try to pay attention to libraries in the first instance. We must borrow from progressive bourgeois countries all those methods they have developed for making library books widely available. We must make books accessible to the masses as soon as possible. We must try to make our books available all over Russia, in as large a quantity as possible.²¹

Despite the devastation of the old Czarist libraries in the civil war that followed, Lenin's objectives were largely realised, accompanied by a huge increase in literacy across the Russian population. In 1917, just 19.7 per cent of the overall population and 8.6 per cent of the female population could read. Yet by 1940, Soviet Russia

was reckoned to have a quarter of a million libraries, with over 450 million books. It was an astonishing transformation, achieved in just over twenty years.²² Then came the German invasion. The devastation created by the German advance and bitter retreat took a terrible toll on the Russian population and its cultural institutions. Thousands of libraries were burned, shelled or pillaged, often as a deliberate act of spite as the German armies withdrew. Russian libraries lost well over 100 million volumes: the libraries of Belorussia were utterly destroyed.

The rebuilding of Soviet library stock after the war was both painful and angry. Millions of books were removed from Germany as reparations, including treasures from the first age of print. A large proportion remained hidden away for decades, uncatalogued and unused. Only after 1989 was there some tentative rapprochement between Russian library staff and the former owners: the catalogue of the Berlin state library now lists 700,000 of its former possessions under the locations of their new Russian homes.

None of these trophy books, almost exclusively in German or Latin, were at all relevant to the needs of modern Soviet citizens: the public library network had to be completely rebuilt. In little more than a decade, miracles had been achieved. By 1961, and the visit of the American librarians, Russia could boast forty-one university libraries with 50 million volumes serving 300,000 students and staff. This was the capstone of a cascading system which by 1973 numbered 360,000 libraries, including 128,000 public libraries, 58,000 scientific and technical libraries and 170,000 school libraries.²³ Those serving the needs of the population included soldiers' libraries, trade union and factory libraries, and motorised libraries for the rural population. There were libraries in prisons and even in the Gulags, though in truth these pitiful collections only served to emphasise the privations of the bookish political prisoners condemned to live there.²⁴

Even for those who did not fall foul of the system, reading was fraught with difficulties, particularly for those who wished to go beyond the ideological agenda imposed by the state. Modelling Soviet libraries on those he admired in the west, Lenin had insisted on open-access shelving, but in 1933 this was withdrawn. Books

were only accessible through a card catalogue, and by application to a librarian. This provided many opportunities to mould reader behaviour. The obligatory readers' cards grew to more substantial documents, with extensive personal information, including on occasions the contents of personal home libraries. Young readers successfully nudged from an early infatuation with adventure stories to more improving literature had this approvingly noted on their cards. Especially in the larger libraries, only a portion of the stock would be represented in the catalogue in the reading room, to the frustration of researchers who would from time to time be told that a now disfavoured author had in fact never existed.²⁵

Librarians were placed in an invidious situation, serving as the public face of book censorship, obliged on fear of dismissal to report requests for disapproved material. Access to library records was a powerful tool of state security, which is why US Homeland Security insisted on this power in the 2001 Patriot Act. Some Russian librarians colluded with their readers, bravely entering false titles on readers' cards, but most complied. The result was a gradual erosion of professional self-respect.²⁶ In the 1980s, Russian readers gradually turned away from the public libraries. This, as we have seen, was not a phenomenon particular to the Communist bloc, but even after 1989 readers were slow to return. With few resources available to renovate stock, or even restore dangerously dilapidated buildings, readers turned instead to informal subscription libraries offering the texts that had previously been denied them.

The difficulties of managing reading in a controlled society were only multiplied in the 'fraternal' European states allocated to Soviet control at the end of the Second World War. Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary were all highly sophisticated central European societies with long histories of literacy, book production and library building. The shattered remnant of north-eastern Germany, shorn of much of the old Prussian state, was rechristened the German Democratic Republic, and only gradually recovered from the devastation of war and Soviet reparations. Shaping these nations to the new imperatives of Marxist ideology was a testing task, and for both readers and book producers, often traumatic.

During the war, Poland had lost most of its book stock, and the library community initially welcomed the new regime's commitment to rebuilding the public library network. This was, in many respects, a remarkable success. Between 1946 and 1949, the number of public libraries increased from 426 to almost 4,000, with a total book stock of 6.5 million volumes.²⁷ But it soon became clear that the management of these collections would be very different. Part of this stock came from the appropriation of private and corporate collections.²⁸ The first list of banned books to be removed from the libraries was circulated as early as October 1945. Pre-war librarians who chafed under this new regime were gradually expelled.

Among the titles condemned were 'sensational and mystery books or sentimental romances'. If western librarians would not necessarily have demurred, they would not have condemned them for the reason that 'such works were full of bourgeois ideals, snobbery and the cult of lazy good-for-nothings'. Communist societies were nothing if not thorough. In 1948, an association of satirists vowed to eschew any sign of 'bourgeois discontent'. Instead, they promised to offer satire ridiculing 'manifestations of the capitalist mentality and surviving traces of aristocratic behaviour'.²⁹

In Czechoslovakia after the Communist takeover, 27.5 million books were removed from public libraries, and about 85 per cent of publisher's stock was destroyed when private ownership of publishing firms was abolished. This provided a huge opportunity to local authors, not least because a high proportion of the Czech intelligentsia had supported the Communist takeover. Though the number of available titles declined, print runs were sometimes six times greater than the pre-Communist norm.³⁰ Ultimately, more authors would renounce the official sphere of publishing in Czechoslovakia than in Hungary or East Germany, many in the wake of the brutal destruction of the tentative liberalisation of 1968 known as the Prague Spring. The subsequent repression reached into all areas of intellectual life: twenty-five literary magazines were closed, half of all journalists and 80 per cent of publishing house editors were dismissed. Many took solace in the exchange of poetry and prose in typescript. Duplicated with the help of carbon copies and poorly paid female secretaries, this became the celebrated

samizdat underground, although it is true that many bad books were published as *samizdat* that would have been winnowed out by the normal workings of the commercial market. Significantly, the surge in demand for books prohibited under Communism evaporated very quickly as the market normalised after 1989.

For better or worse, the official market supplied the book needs of the vast proportion of Czechs, Hungarians and Poles. In Prague, long queues would form outside bookshops on a Thursday morning, when new books were released. Readers followed the publishers' lists closely, necessarily so, since bookshops sold their books over the counter, often in pre-wrapped packages. This ban on browsing created a new opportunity for second-hand bookshops, which flourished. Most distinctive of these years was the crucial importance of private libraries in sustaining intellectual life. Many Czech and Hungarian households assembled collections of several hundred books, and these private libraries could not easily be purged when authors fell out of favour. Milan Kundera's *The Joke* sold 119,000 copies in the years following its publication in 1967, but then was banned on his expulsion from the Communist party in 1970. Copies were removed from public libraries, but this still left 100,000 copies in private hands. Private libraries, with their mix of escapist fiction and books banned since 1968, sustained Czech literary culture through the drab years of 'normalisation'. Public libraries necessarily toed the party line, but readers took their revenge, by leaving books by Russian authors untouched on the shelves.³¹

The collapse of Communism in 1989 inspired a greedy demand for anything western. This caused enormous turbulence in the publishing industry and rendered public libraries largely irrelevant. Although Czechs honoured their intellectuals – the writer Václav Havel served fourteen years successively as president of Czechoslovakia and then the Czech Republic – with rare exceptions they eschewed earnest works of literature in favour of cookery, crime and tales of the American West, a sobering lesson for the veterans of the *samizdat* underground. Czechs also devoured mountains of guidebooks, dictionaries and self-help manuals. Television, freed of the stultifying voice of socialist worthiness, also left less

room for reading. Doom-laden newspaper headlines predicted 'A Farewell to Books' or mourned 'A National Shame'.³² This rather missed the point. Czech publishing took a battering because it had rejected international investment. In Hungary and to a lesser extent Poland, foreign capital helped the publishing industry to ride out the storm. Today, these nations, along with the liberated Baltic republics, have more libraries per head of population than any of the nations of western Europe.³³

In Communist East Germany, the fall of the Berlin Wall exposed a stark difference between the very different status of public libraries in the East and West. In 1989, the DDR supported 13,535 public libraries for a population of 16 million. West Germany had only 4,988 public libraries, albeit with larger collections, for a population four times as large. Conversely, West Germany spent three times as much on its academic libraries, especially sixty university libraries, as on public libraries. In East Germany academic libraries received less funding than the public library network.³⁴ Many reasons may be advanced for this disparity, not least the fact that the citizens of West Germany had far more disposable income to buy their own books, and many more to choose from. In East Germany, the lack of hard currency, as well as the disinclination to supply texts not consistent with socialist ideology, also inhibited the growth of academic collections. The result was that after unification, 80–90 per cent of DDR university collections were declared functionally obsolete.

Public libraries also could not escape a painful purge. The city library of Frankfurt an der Oder de-accessioned a third of its collection. In Wittenberg, the contents of the town library were simply piled on barrows on the street for passers-by to take away.³⁵ Publishers in the DDR were left with a mountain of unsaleable stock: much was pulped, or simply tipped into landfill. In this ignominious grave, editions of Shakespeare, Zola and Tolstoy nestled with the collected speeches of the deposed leader Erich Honecker. It was as if, in the words of one observer, 'by simply throwing things away, the employees of bookstores and publishing houses were trying to dispose of the DDR's past'.³⁶ This, too, is one way libraries die.

New Frontiers

While the liberated peoples of eastern Europe were consigning the contents of their libraries to the municipal tip, in many parts of the world a public library network was emerging for the first time. We may appreciate the irony that the public library became a global phenomenon at precisely the moment that the West was predicting its extinction. In the event, neither the hopes of the developing world nor the baleful predictions of the West would be fully realised. In the West, the library would cling to life through the storms of media change, while despite the best intentions of home governments, philanthropists and non-governmental organisations, the public library movement is yet to realise its full potential in the developing world.

In India, as elsewhere in the former British colonies, libraries were initially intended to serve the needs of the European governing elite. With the passage of time, these facilities were shared with the growing class of educated Indians, so long as they adhered to the values of the colonial rulers. In time, these Indian readers established their own circulating libraries, though these were still largely populated with the same imported English books favoured by expatriates. Attempts to create an Indian literature in local languages were carefully monitored for evidence of sedition.³⁷ Given the need to train a new administrative class, the primary task was the provision of libraries for the universities established in Mumbai, Kolkata and Chennai. By 1947, the year of independence, there were nineteen universities and 636 colleges in India, with a total enrolment of 106,000.³⁸ The provision of libraries for the general public lagged behind, notwithstanding an extraordinary initiative of the Maharaja of Baroda, who established a whole network of public libraries in his state. This was overseen by William Alanson Borden, librarian of the Young Men's Institute in New Haven, and from 1910 the agent of the Maharaja's grand design. By the time Borden left the state, Baroda had a central library of 40,000 volumes, and libraries had been established in thirty-six of the thirty-eight towns and 216 of the principal villages. This network depended entirely on the Maharaja's beneficence; after his death in 1936 it could not be sustained.

That the most impressive development of public libraries depended entirely on the patronage of what in eighteenth-century Europe would have been called an enlightened despot, boded ill for the future of library provision with the coming of independence. The problems facing the new nations of India and Pakistan were mountainous: poverty, the legacy of colonialism, lack of basic health provision, national security and the conflict between the two nations were all more pressing political priorities. It was hard to give libraries priority, since in a nation of chronically low literacy, this was bound to be of limited utility to the broad mass of the population. In 1931, as revealed by the national census, only 15.6 per cent of men and 2.9 per cent of women could read. Male literacy reached 56 per cent in 1981, but female literacy still lagged badly behind. Even in 2011, and after a significant upward revision of the raw data, three out of ten women still could not read.

In these circumstances it made perfect sense that the establishment of schools and the training of teachers should be the major resource priority. In 1952, as in nineteenth-century France, it was optimistically suggested that school libraries, defined as collections of fifty books or more, should also be made available to the local population. For the most part, a full public library service was confined to the larger cities. The flagship system in Delhi, in 1997 consisted of a central library and seventy-three branches. Collectively these libraries held 1.4 million volumes, curated by 451 staff. Yet only 64,000 had enrolled as library members, a figure that included 22,000 children.³⁹ The history of library provision in India is largely written as a sequence of enabling legislation, enacted by the Indian states: the necessary resources to make this a reality were not always forthcoming. A survey published in 2008 concludes with the still hopeful call for more resources: 'a massive investment in public libraries is needed to make them true information resource centres for the layman'.⁴⁰

The post-war drive to establish libraries in the developing world received considerable impetus from the new world institutions promoting peace, principally UNESCO, the cultural arm of the United Nations. UNESCO's public libraries manifesto, issued in 1949, was largely written by the French public intellectual

André Maurois. The library, he maintained, was an instrument of peace that should be free from propaganda and prejudice; with this, Maurois deftly sidestepped plentiful evidence to the contrary within the last ten years. The public library, he went on, was a product of democratic aspiration and would itself help spread (western) democracy around the globe. For ten years, such a programme would be pursued with an almost evangelical fervour, redolent of the missionary efforts of the colonial era, in this new manifestation promoting not Christianity but the secular value of 'modernity'.

Like much of what we associate with UNESCO, these documents let their eyes dwell on sunlit uplands with little regard for the grimmer realities facing a major programme of library building. Most countries outside Europe were not democracies, and faced more imminent problems, of poverty, low levels of literacy and the integration of competing racial and ethnic groups struggling for supremacy, along with corruption in government agencies. The flaws in the UNESCO approach were well demonstrated by the establishment of three model libraries, first and most successfully in India (1950, Delhi), then Colombia (1954, in Medellín, later home to the notorious drug cartel founded by Pablo Escobar) and Nigeria (1957). These were intended as beacons of the best practice of European libraries, without much sensitivity to local circumstances in the countries in which they were placed. In the Nigerian library, most of the users were locally based Europeans: literacy rates in the indigenous population were below 10 per cent. Siting the library in Enugu, in south eastern Nigeria, was also controversial, since this was home to the Igbo, resented for their prosperity and influence in the newly independent Nigerian state. In 1967, Enugu became the capital of the short-lived Republic of Biafra, bombed and starved into submission in an ugly war while the rest of the world averted its eyes. In the harsh world of realpolitik, the need for Nigerian oil trumped the civilising influence of libraries.⁴¹

Even beyond Biafra, the legacy of library provision in the post-colonial Cold War era was a tangled web of vaunting ambition, naivety and tragic disappointment. There was no doubt that in some circumstances, libraries provided the weapons of intellectual

empowerment for nationalist movements. The Indian librarian S. R. Ranganathan explicitly saw the library in these terms. But elsewhere, as for instance in Vietnam and Cambodia, libraries were all too easily part of the collateral damage of great power conflict.⁴² In Africa, library provision often became one more field of competition for influence among the post-colonial powers.⁴³ The statistics of book production point out the sobering data of global imbalance. In 1970, the developed world, with just 29 per cent of the world's population, still produced 87 per cent of the copies, and 93 per cent of book titles.

Libraries are Great, Mate!

It was an open question whether books would catch up with the world before progress caught up with books. Australia was one of the first to face up to these issues. As in India or Canada, libraries were initially a marker of transposed European values. The coastal metropolitan cities were soon served by an impressive array of libraries, while the scattered communities of the vast interior offered a more challenging environment. Despite a sustained effort to offer universal provision, by the 1970s there was a clear sense that libraries were losing their way. Prime Minister Gough Whitlam asked a commission of enquiry, headed by the respected librarian Allan Horton, to come up with solutions, which he did in the endearingly titled report, *'Libraries are great mate!' But they could be greater.*

Horton recommended that central government should bear more of the burden, but in return, libraries should become real community hubs, with a range of responsibilities, recreational, informational and advisory. Citizens should look to libraries, as before, as a source of recreational material for reading, listening and viewing. But they should also be a point of reference for information and advice, which included pointing the way towards the correct group or organisation to solve any problem. Libraries should also stock materials supporting life-long education and vocational continuing education.⁴⁴ If this sounds eerily familiar, it is because Horton had identified, back in 1976, exactly the crisis of

purpose that we associate with the digital age. His case to the Australian taxpayer was not so very different to that put by the citizens of Lambeth we met at the beginning of this book, pleading for the future of the Durning library in Kennington. The Australian library could survive, but only as a community hub.

There is no doubt that library strategists have a daunting task. They need to serve the current generation of users, while at the same time anticipating future need in an ever-changing media environment in which consumer habits constantly evolve. That was evident in 1976 with the first generation of audio and film libraries; it would become more challenging with the arrival of the video cassette, the CD-ROM and digital technologies. Libraries need to move with the times, but too confident a step in the wrong direction can lead to calamity. A famous, notorious example was the decision of leading libraries to first film, then jettison, their collections of historic newspapers. The advantage was obvious, as newspapers take up enormous space and tend to degrade; but the chosen rescue technology, microfiche, proved equally transitional. Within a few decades the microfiches were functionally unusable, and the newspapers long gone. Eventually the microfiche readers were themselves removed from the reading rooms, tomorrow's technology now redundant.⁴⁵

Most of all, in the rush to anticipate and adapt, librarians can all too easily ignore the evident, solid value of existing technologies, that is books. Despite their somewhat herbivorous reputation, many librarians are ambitious for their community, evangelical about education, and, at the top end of the profession, keen to leave a permanent legacy. Those who reach the top of the tree are also often agile politicians, comfortable in the company of elected officials, and aware of their susceptibility to grand plans. The opportunity to present a new concept of information technology, ideally with a shiny new building attached, often proves irresistible. Nowhere has this been more disastrously demonstrated than with the new library of San Francisco, a remarkable story of hubris, misjudgement and maladministration, all to build an architectural monument to the new digital age.

San Francisco had long contemplated replacing its ageing

central library, but when the city librarian suggested an upgrade to the dilapidated Old Main, a fine period building though showing its age, the board of trustees decided instead to build a striking new structure. The San Francisco library had already gone through hard times, destroyed entirely in the earthquake of 1906, while the earthquake of 1989 dumped 500,000 books from the shelves, leading to months of expensive restoration work. Building of the replacement began in 1993, and three years later the high-tech New Main opened its doors.⁴⁶

There is little doubt that the new library provides an awesome visitor experience. Twice the size of the old library, built around a honeycombed central atrium leading to a towering central roof window, the library brings to mind a rocket installation packed with cutting-edge technology. There are all the computer terminals, meeting spaces and breakout rooms one could ever want. The problem was that the design made totally inadequate provision for the library's collection of 3 million books. With the Old Main needing to be emptied so that it could be repurposed as a museum, the collection was unceremoniously removed to temporary warehousing, while an unspecified proportion of the books were simply dumped in landfill: some estimate 200,000 books, others half a million.

This operation was on too large a scale to be concealed, not least from horrified library staff. The problem was compounded by the abandonment of the old card catalogue, so no one could say which books had been discarded, or how they had been chosen. The panicked administrators now invited protestors to rescue what they could from the skips; revealing that many of the books destined for destruction were the only copies held in the San Francisco library system. The city librarian, a true believer in the post-book information age, was obliged to resign. When interviewed some years later by the author Nicholas Basbanes, neither he nor other senior colleagues could give a clear view of how many books had been destroyed: 'I don't know, okay? Because I didn't count the books, and there are no records of what was discarded.'⁴⁷

Where to start? It is axiomatic in good library practice that a de-accessioning programme should never be undertaken during a

major building project. Certainly, you need to know what books are being discarded, and why, and secure genuine support from the community. Secrecy, bad faith, chaos and panic characterised the San Francisco fiasco, driven forward by senior management who no longer believed that books were central to the purpose of the library. If this is the price of progress, then what are the benefits?

To answer this question, we need to turn to France, a good news story towards the end of this roller-coaster journey through 2,000 years of creation, disaster and destruction, malice and commitment, and the occasional piece of illiterate foolishness. For most of the era since the birth of the public library, French libraries had been a byword for dereliction and neglect. France indeed had been in the first wave of public library formation, when the confiscations of the Revolution had been turned over to local magistrates. This inheritance had been more of a curse than a blessing: by 1860, the French Bibliothèques Municipales made little pretence of any aspiration to serve the public. This all changed in an astonishing wave of creativity, beginning in 1975, when the French state intervened to promote, and largely fund, a total renovation of the dilapidated public libraries.

The result was a new generation of Médiathèques, often beautifully designed new buildings in the heart of the city, ably repurposed for community need, and anticipating the needs of the developing future. The siting of the new-built libraries demonstrates the amount of civic pride invested in the project: the Médiathèque at La Rochelle looks out towards the harbour, that of Nîmes over the city's Roman remains. Other communities have opted for a sensitive renovation of a classic building; in Aix-en-Provence, for example, a converted match factory. The historic collection, the *patrimoine*, is not forgotten. Each library has a well-equipped rare book room, often in close proximity to the children's library, the music library and the general collection. Here the many ages of the book, and the several generations of the library community, coexist in harmony. Most of all, these libraries are busy, a true and vital reflection of their communities. In 2019, France supported some 16,500 libraries, an increase of 400 over the figure recorded two years earlier. Collectively they supply 280 million loans to an

active user community: 76 per cent of French citizens continue to believe that libraries are a useful part of the social fabric. In an age when libraries throughout Europe plan anxiously for a future of ever-diminishing resources, library use in France has increased by 23 per cent in the last fifteen years.⁴⁸

POSTSCRIPT

READING WITHOUT BOOKS

So we circle back to Alexandria, and the spectacular building that encapsulates so many of the contradictory impulses of the twenty-first-century library movement: honouring the historical heritage, impatient to embrace the future. In the twenty years since its foundation, the new Alexandria library has settled into its role as a major cultural institution, host to conferences, seminars, concerts, theatrical performances and the Alexandria International Book Fair. Its fifteen permanent exhibitions and striking architecture draw a steady stream of visitors, 1.5 million a year before its temporary closure in the 2020 coronavirus pandemic. Its book collections remain stable at about 2 million copies, well below the 8 million capacity, as the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, like other libraries, shifts its focus towards serving a worldwide community of readers through digital access to its collections.

Most of all, the Bibliotheca Alexandrina serves as a symbol: of a worldwide commitment to the value of education as a means of empowerment, and the place of information at its heart. It also acts as a powerful manifestation of the place of the global south in the future history and development of the library. In the last twenty years this movement has received powerful impetus from the engagement of one of the world's best-known digital pioneers, Bill Gates. Since 1997, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has poured billions of dollars into libraries, first with a programme to offer free Wi-Fi in all American public libraries, a programme then extended to over fifty countries. The Global Libraries Foundation fixed on public libraries as natural community hubs, often the only places where those with a yearning for education could find an accommodating space, together with a trained and sympathetic