THE MEANING OF THE LIBRARY

A Cultural History

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PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS
Princeton and Oxford

Published by Princeton University Press, 41 William Street, Princeton, New Jersey 08540
In the United Kingdom: Princeton University Press, 6 Oxford Street, Woodstock, Oxfordshire OX20 1TW
press.princeton.edu

ISBN 978-0-691-16639-1
Library of Congress Control Number: 2014951291
British Library Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available
This book has been composed in Garamond Premier Pro, Trade Gothic, and Adobe Caslon Pro
Printed on acid-free paper. ∞
Printed in the United States of America
3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4

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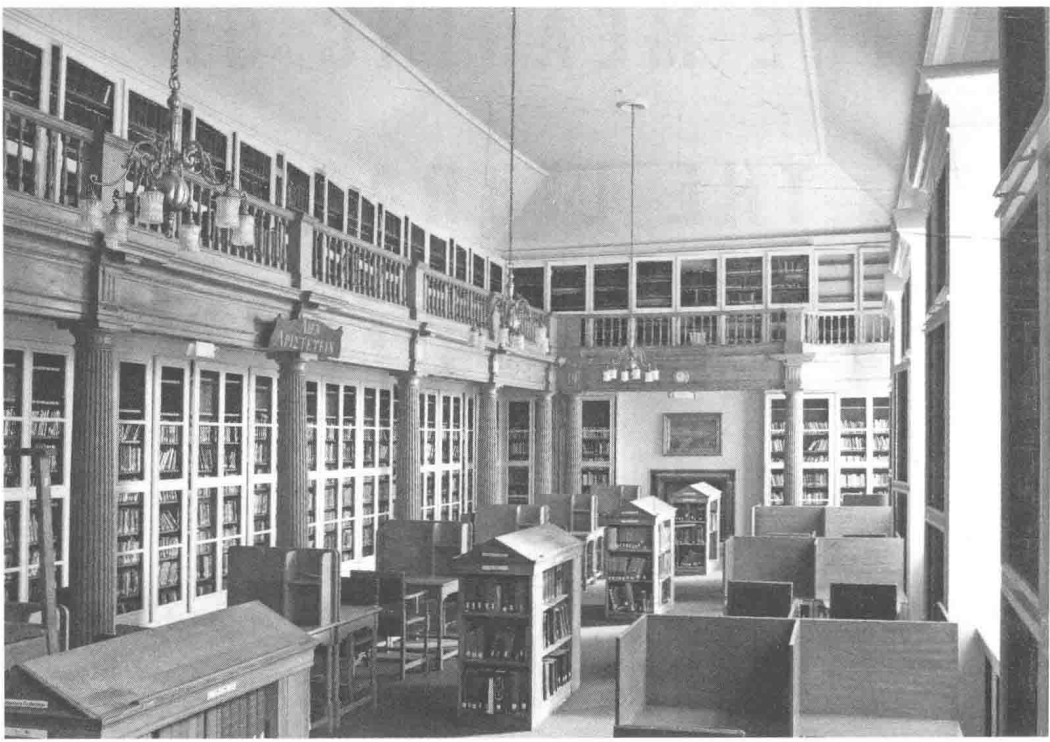

King James Library, University of St. Andrews. Photograph by Peter Adamson.

For Robert, Lewis, and Blyth

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am most grateful to all the people and institutions who have contributed to the production of this volume. In particular I must thank the academics and librarians who made the pilgrimage to St. Andrews to deliver the King James Library Lectures, which were the original inspiration for these essays, and the audiences who so enthusiastically received the talks and confirmed our feeling that lots of people still love libraries and want to know more about them. It is good to see these discussions of "the meaning of the library" now opened up to an even wider public.

Jon Purcell was director of Library Services at St. Andrews in 2009, when the book and lecture series were first suggested, and most generously provided library funds to launch the project. Deputy director Jeremy Upton and John MacColl, who succeeded Jon as director in 2010, continued to make that funding available over several years until the project was complete. They have my sincere thanks—this book would never have happened without them.

The contributors and I gratefully acknowledge Faber and Faber and W. W. Norton & Co. for permission to quote from "Casting and Gathering" by Seamus Heaney, and from "Memorial" by Alice Oswald. We are most grateful, too, to Penguin Random House for permission to quote from Andrew George's translation of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (Penguin, 1999) and to the Agencia Literaria Schavelzon, Barcelona, for permission to quote from Alberto Manguel's *The Library at Night* (Yale University Press, 2008).

We would also like to thank the following for permission to reproduce illustrations: Peter Adamson (frontispiece); the Musée archéologique de Sousse (figure 1.1); Professor Richard Gameson (plates 1, 14 and 22); the Biblioteca Medicea Laurenziana (plate 2); the Archivio dell'Abbazia, Montecassino (plate 3); the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (plate 4); the Bibliothèque nationale de France (plates 5, 8, 9 and 19); the Bibliothèque municipale, Le Havre (plate 6); the Dombibliothek, Cologne (plate 7);

the Universitäts-und Landesbibliothek, Darmstadt (plate 10); the Archives nationales, Paris (plate 11); Freiburg-im-Breisgau University Archives (plates 12 and 13); the Musée Condé, Chantilly and the Réunion des musées nationaux (plate 15); the British Library Board (plates 16, 17, and 21); the John Rylands Library, University of Manchester (plates 18, 23, and 24); the Detroit Institute of Arts and Bridgeman Images (plate 20); the Trustees of the British Museum (plate 25); the University of St. Andrews Library (plate 26); Punch Limited (figure 10.1); HathiTrust (figures 11.1 and 11.2).

Ben Tate, Ellen Foos, and Hannah Paul at Princeton University Press have guided and helped with tact and consideration at all stages—I am most grateful to them and to my wonderfully patient copyeditor, Kathleen Kageff, who has saved me from many pitfalls. My indexer, Blythe Woolston, has done a superb job, for which she has my warmest thanks.

Those at home—Robert, Lewis, and Blyth—know most about the trials and tribulations that have accompanied the book's long gestation. Their support and encouragement throughout have been invaluable.

A.C.

University of St. Andrews Library

March 2015

INTRODUCTION

Alice Crawford

> . . . with bewildering optimism, we continue to assemble whatever scraps of information we can gather in scrolls and books and computer chips, on shelf after library shelf, whether material, virtual or otherwise, pathetically intent on lending the world a semblance of sense and order, while knowing perfectly well that, however much we'd like to believe the contrary, our pursuits are sadly doomed to failure.
>
> Alberto Manguel, *The Library at Night*

Any consideration of the meaning of the library must acknowledge Alberto Manguel's compellingly candid assertion that as a construct it is "doomed to failure."

All the essays in this collection tell the story of how, from earliest times, human beings have with "bewildering optimism" amassed collections of books and created buildings to put them in; how they have striven to assemble, encompass, and contain the materials on which the world's knowledge is recorded in the vain but determined hope that they will somehow, ultimately, be able to gather it all into one coherent, ordered space.

Each essay enacts in its own way the paradox of that dynamic, the confrontation between the drive to build the all-embracing überlibrary and the acceptance that the endeavor will fail. They are essays full of oppositions. Just as the history of libraries charts the perpetual ups and downs of their growth and disintegration—libraries throughout the ages have constantly been built up with gusto, destroyed by malice or neglect, then

rebuilt by a hopeful new generation—so the essays here reflect the continual ebb and flow of that impulse. Tensions complicate and enliven them all. They show how libraries can be both hugely purposeful and dangerously useless; how they can channel both order and chaos and house both print and digital, old and new; how they can both control and liberate the knowledge they contain. Each author in this collection enjoys the tangle of paradox and teases out the snarl of oppositions in an effort to articulate his or her sense of the many meanings with which "the library" as a concept seems to resonate.

The essays were collected between 2009 and 2013, against a backdrop of economic stringency that has seen many public libraries throughout the United Kingdom close. Figures from the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy confirm the closure in 2010–11 of 146 branches, with the number increasing to 201 in 2012.[1] Numbers of librarians have fallen in line with branch closures, decreasing by 8 percent in the year to March 2012, as have visits to libraries across the UK, which in 2012 were down 2.4 percent to 306.6 million compared with the previous year. Campaign groups have blossomed, raising their voices in pressing support of an embattled institution. UK organizations such as Speak Up for Libraries, Voices for the Library, Shout about Libraries, and the Library Campaign are all engaged in a newly necessary crusade to protect libraries, their staff, and their readers.[2]

These essays were written, too, at a time when technological change has created the popular perception that there is no longer any need for libraries or librarians since, with a good search engine and the ever-increasing proficiency of the keyboard-tapping digital native, "everyone's a librarian now." With the loss of their traditional role as intermediaries between information source and user, librarians seek new purposes for their skills, and new arenas of usefulness. The questions "Why libraries?" and "What are they for?" are beginning to be asked with increasing urgency.

Happily a more nourishing local context has inspired the collection and supported its development. The essays were originally launched as a series of lectures offered by the University of St. Andrews Library to mark the four hundredth anniversary in 2012 of the founding of its historic King James Library, an event that coincided with celebrations for the six hundredth anniversary of the university as a whole. Internation-

ally renowned figures from the academic and library worlds were invited to talk about what the library as an institution has meant to civilization in different historical periods and to set out visions of what it might mean now and in the future. The series was inaugurated in June 2009 by the librarian of Congress, Dr. James H. Billington, who drew movingly on his many years of experience managing the world's largest book collection to consider the library as a force for freedom in his lecture, "The Modern Library and Global Democracy." Ten further lectures followed in which the idea of the library was variously explored by people who had used, led, worked in, studied, or simply loved libraries.

Advertised as the King James Library Lecture Series, the lectures' association with St. Andrews's King James Library (shown in the frontispiece of this book) has been apt. In use continuously for four hundred years, this is a library that has itself been many things and had many "meanings" over time. Founded in 1612 by James VI and I, it had a protracted and difficult birth. A roofless building till 1618, it remained an empty shell till eventually furnished and stocked with books in 1642. In 1645–46 it was the home of the Scottish Parliament, its lower hall used for meetings when there was an outbreak of plague in Edinburgh. In the early 1670s it was the laboratory of astronomer James Gregory, who perhaps worked there on his invention of the first reflecting telescope. In the eighteenth century it was a place where geological and zoological specimens were luridly displayed ready for the natural history or ethnographic experiments of the university's Enlightenment scholars. Between 1710 and 1837 it was one of the select group of copyright deposit libraries entitled to receive a copy of every British book published, a privilege that was eventually surrendered when the difficulties of claiming large quantities of books from London became too great. For Samuel Johnson, visiting in 1773, it was an "elegant and luminous" book room, and for novelist Margaret Oliphant its blocked-up North Street façade was the inspiration for her ghost story "The Library Window," published in *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1896.[3] In 1940 it was the victim of Second World War bombs, and in the 2010s it has been variously a space for a display of modern art, a catwalk for a fashion shoot, a backdrop for the filming of celebrity interviews, and the surprising venue for rock group the *Lost Todorovs*' "secret gig."

This library has worked out its meaning through many manifestations —as empty shell, and stylish book room; as a parliament hall and a science laboratory; as a museum for the university's "artefacts and curiosities," and as a sought-after venue for cultural events. Now in 2015 it is a valued social space for concerts, exhibitions, poetry readings, fashion shows, and parties but remains, most importantly, a much-loved study room where students set up their laptops for twenty-first-century scholarly endeavor.

All the essays in this collection consider "the library" as a changing and organic entity, something that is constantly adapting and becoming something else. Through the lens of these lectures we see it like a kaleidoscope image, forever nudged into new versions with each turn of the cylinder; a concept endlessly and energetically reinventing itself.

Lots of books have been written about libraries and their histories. *The Cambridge History of Libraries in Britain and Ireland* is the benchmark publication on the subject, but the appearance on our shelves in 2013 of James W. P. Campbell's superbly illustrated *The Library: A World History* attests to current and continuing lively interest.[4] So too do Michael H. Harris's *History of Libraries in the Western World* (1995), Martin Lowell's *Enrichment: A History of the Public Library in the United States in the Twentieth Century* (1998), Matthew Battles's *Library: An Unquiet History* (2003), Lucien X. Polastron's *Books on Fire: The Tumultuous Story of the World's Great Libraries* (2007), and James Murray's *The Library: An Illustrated History* (2009).[5] Volumes of Konstantinos Sp. Staikos's *History of the Library in Western Civilisation* have continued to appear since 2004 while Simon Eliot and Jonathan Rose's *A Companion to the History of the Book* in the *Blackwell Companions to Literature and Culture* series has covered similar or parallel territory since 2007.[6]

This collection of essays, however, will approach the life of libraries in a different way. Although they are arranged to follow the library's development through history, the essays aim to offer simply glimpses of what libraries were like at these times rather than a comprehensive historical overview. They focus on what libraries were used for, why they were needed, why they were meaningful to the various communities from which they emerged, and provide impressions rather than analyses of their value in the changing chronological contexts. "The library,"

we find, "means" many things over time and throughout these essays. It is a collection of books, a center for scholarship, a universal memory, a maze or labyrinth, a repository of hidden or occulted knowledge, a sanctum, an archive for stories, a fortress, a space of transcendence, a focus of wealth and display, a vehicle of spirituality, an emblem of wisdom and learning, a mind or brain, an ordainer of the universe, a mausoleum, a time machine, a temple, a utopia, a gathering place, an antidote to fanaticism, a silent repository of countless unread books, a place for the pursuit of truth. A concept that has inspired many metaphors, the library as an idea has appealed to the human imagination throughout the ages and continues to do so today. The writers of these essays suggest why this is so.

The book's first section, "The Library through Time" begins with Edith Hall's "Adventures in Ancient Greek and Roman Libraries," in which her consideration of the relationship between libraries and cultural creativity leads her to examine the library at Alexandria's iconic bid for completeness in its collections. Embarking on the Herculean task of preserving Greek literary output in its entirety, this library's scholars were the first to attempt, perhaps with Manguel's "bewildering optimism," to obtain copies of every known work of their time. Saluting them in this mammoth undertaking, Hall argues that their achievement was not just a vast collection of works but the introduction of a whole new concept for the library as an institution. They paved the way, she suggests, for the library to be seen not merely as a place where individual records are left by individual writers, but as something far more transcendent and ambitious. It can now be viewed as "an instrument designed to preserve intact the memory of humankind." The scholars' attempts to collect everything ever written in the history of the world "changed our mental landscape forever," lifting libraries to a symbolic level on which they represented "a cosmopolitan and tolerant ideal."

Importantly, however, Hall does not recognize this striven-for wholeness as an unadulterated "good thing." By conceiving the idea of completeness, she points out, the Alexandrians necessarily conceived the idea of its opposite also. If the library could contain the whole memory of mankind, the possibility had to be confronted that that memory could be lost: encased within man-made walls, the entire memory of the human race could be "vulnerable to complete erasure." The underlying

paradox of the library as an idea emerges early. Strong in its pursuit of the whole record of civilization, it is nevertheless unavoidably susceptible to disintegration and decay. Hall's essay opens on the image of a library in tatters—the scholar Euripides (in a scene from Aristophanes' *Acharnians*) sitting among the shredded pages of his own discarded plays—a tragicomic visualization of the essential mismatch between the library's ideal and its reality.

Bravely, too, Hall suggests that the influence of the library in ancient civilizations may not always have been benign. The library is, she reminds us, "a tool that can both liberate and oppress." She notes its frequent association with imperialism and control and considers the possibility that "the emergence of great libraries of literature [may have] had a hand in killing off innovation and experiment in Greek poetry" by allowing poets to immerse themselves too comfortably in the poetry of the past, stifling the imaginative drive to produce something new.

Richard Gameson articulates a similar ambivalence in his attentive consideration of the depictions of libraries by medieval and early Renaissance artists in "The Image of the Medieval Library." Among the many images he considers that carefully portray libraries as emblems of wisdom and learning or vehicles of spirituality for fostering goodness and holiness, there lurks memorably the foolish bibliophile in the woodcut for Sebastian Brant's *Das Narrenschiff* (1494). As the fool sits vacantly amid the many volumes in reckless disorder around him, we see that his folly consists of amassing the "useless books" of the picture's caption—useless because they are unread. In medieval, as in ancient, times there was no consensus that the library meant something unassailably good.

In his "The Renaissance Library and the Challenge of Print" Andrew Pettegree suggests one reason why some sixteenth-century books might have been unread. Libraries in the Renaissance were beginning to decline, their role as places where great men gathered to display their wealth and books undermined by the affordable new printed items deluging the market at this time. With an estimated 180 million print volumes suddenly available for anyone to buy, books and libraries began to lose their attraction as status symbols for rich private collectors, who turned their attention instead to purchasing paintings, tapestries, and other objets d'art. Glutted with books yet with a sparsity of libraries,

the sixteenth-century book world was a strangely paradoxical place. We enjoy Pettegree's opening account of the disintegration of Italian nobleman Gian Vincenzo Pinelli's fine library—of books lost through theft, appropriated by pirates, cast overboard into the sea, their rescued pages used as draft excluders or to mend boats—and recognize it as a colorful synecdoche for what was happening to the great Renaissance collections throughout Europe as a whole. In contrast to the powerful "energy to amass" that drove the great library at Alexandria into existence, the dynamic was now downward, toward fragmentation and dispersal. The library's meaning became obfuscated, its role unclear.

The downward trend was not terminal, however. Pettegree traces the library's retreat from this nadir to its reemergence in the seventeenth century "as a physical space with a new role, as a center of scholarship." He shows how the Renaissance book *trade* rather than its book *collectors* supplied the coherence contemporary libraries were failing to deliver, establishing a "pan-European integrated market" for Latin books, which ensured that these were produced in a small number of places well situated for distributing them along Europe's main trade arteries. He looks forward, too, to how the digital scholarship of the twenty-first century will make possible the reintegration of items from the dispersed Renaissance collections, recapturing those that have been tracked down to six thousand or so libraries and archives worldwide and drawing them together into secure databanks such as the Universal Short Title Catalogue.

"[B]ooks were meant to travel," writes Pettegree as he describes the distribution practices of the sixteenth-century book trade. Robert Darnton continues the trope of the travelling book in his "From Printing Shop to Bookshelves: How Books Began the Journey to Enlightenment Libraries," in which he follows eighteenth-century bookseller Jean-François Favarger on his adventure-filled sales trip across the mountains from Neuchâtel to Marseille then northward on to La Rochelle. His foray into this later book world is salutary in its depiction of how lives were risked to deliver books to buyers. Favarger sets out on horseback in July 1778 and spends five months riding through southern and central France inspecting every bookshop en route. In Marseille he spends 10 sols on refurbishing his pistols since the next stage of the road is infested with bandits, in La Rochelle 26 livres for new breeches, his old

ones having been ruined by friction in the saddle. At Poitiers he spends 8 louis d'or on a new horse as the old one keeps collapsing in the mud. Since the publisher he works for does considerable business in illegal and pirated books, he spends time negotiating with smugglers on both sides of the Swiss-French border. He arranges for "porters" (*porte-balles*) to carry sixty-pound backpacks of illegal books along tortuous mountain trails from Switzerland to France and to receive 25 sols for a successful crossing. He is familiar with the "marrying" of illegal books with legal ones, the larding of the leaves of prohibited works inside the leaves of inoffensive ones (*Fanny Hill*, for example, married to the Bible) to ensure their safe passage before the eyes of the inspecting customs officers. The essay closes with a glimpse of some of the eighteenth-century libraries for which these books may have been destined, and of the further struggles in which their librarians engaged to ensure that this sometimes daring material actually reached the shelves.

In "'The Advantages of Literature': The Subscription Library in Georgian Britain," David Allan describes in more detail the libraries for which books like Favarger's were so eagerly bought. The fiercely respectable Georgian subscription library represented "the library" in its proud new role as a forger of urban culture, membership providing a useful marker of social position, respectability, and enlightened credentials. The "advantages of literature," state the *Rules for the Regulation of the Carlisle Library* in 1819, are obvious to all: these include the "advancement in morals, manners, and taste" that attend the habit of reading and reflection, and as a result the Carlisle Library can be placed high on the list of the "judicious and salutary improvements which . . . have been carried into effect in Carlisle, much to the comfort and convenience of its inhabitants." Setting themselves scrupulously apart from the scurrilous circulating libraries, with their supposed bias toward low-grade narrative fiction, these associational libraries existed to accrue a wider set of cultural benefits.

Yet like Edith Hall in her consideration of civilization's earliest libraries, Allan sees these Georgian libraries, too, as possibly ambiguous spaces. He notes two conflicting impulses at work: on the one hand there is the freedom subscription library members had to control the books their money bought; on the other there is the all-too-rigid order imposed on

the book stocks by notions of taste and propriety. Various types of literature were off-limits on the grounds that they might pose a threat to social order—books associated with party politics, for example, and of course narrative fiction that might sensationalize or whitewash unacceptable behavior, and that might be dangerously attractive to vulnerable readers such as women and children. With their uncompromising commitment to "the advantages of literature," the book-selection subcommittees of the Georgian subscription libraries held both their book collections and readers in an ultimately damaging stranglehold.

John Sutherland's discussion "Literature and the Library in the Nineteenth Century" presents a further knot of paradoxes. He shows how Victorian books proliferated and were consumed by an exponentially expanding community of readers. Themselves industrialized by new mechanized processes of papermaking, printing, and bookbinding, books were "a cheap luxury," and suddenly plentifully available to a demographic that had benefited from two reforming acts of Parliament. The 1850 Public Libraries Act had instigated a shift from costly circulation libraries to free ones, and the 1870 Education Act built further on this to drive up levels of literacy among ordinary people. Here was a society in which easily produced books abounded and could, via libraries, be passed without difficulty from hand to hand and from one social stratum to another.

Working in contrast to this exuberant opening up of the book world to the Victorian reader was, as Sutherland explains however, the nineteenth-century library's drive to control. The famous Mudie's Select Library, for example, dictated the three-volume format in which books had to be produced. Sutherland describes as "Mudieitis" the trap in which both book buyers and publishers were caught. Insisting on a template that allowed three library readers to borrow one title at the same time, Mudie provided a guaranteed market for publishers but locked them into a production arrangement from which they were unable to deviate for half a century.

Again, too, Sutherland says, readers could be seen as the victims of a kind of benign mind control imposed by nineteenth-century librarians' choice of stock and arrangement of it on the shelves. Careful in their selection of texts, public librarians functioned as teachers of taste, moral improvement, and social behavior. Classification schemes that