

## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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).<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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 Darn-ton 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

determined juxtapositions of books on shelves, catalogues that structured readers' pathways from one book to another, indexes that directed the navigation of a book's actual content—all exerted a subtle but insistent control of reading behavior. Describing the monstrous metal fumigator in which nineteenth-century library books were habitually placed to be cleansed in fumes of sulphuric acid, Sutherland suggests that the unspoken mission of the Victorian public library was to “disinfect” both books and readers. The dreadful machine becomes a symbol of the library's subterranean but rigorous regulation of its readers.

A trio of essays in a new section entitled “The Library in Imagination” allow the reader to step aside at this stage from the chronological trajectory of the pieces so far, to consider the meanings of the library to writers of both fiction and poetry, and to the makers of film. A transition from “time” to “timelessness” and the realm of ideas permits contemplation of the importance of the library to creative practitioners, without whom libraries could after all have no purpose.

In “The Library in Fiction” Marina Warner again plays with a plurality of oppositions: she enjoys the tropes of dispersal and reassembly, forgetting and memorializing, losing and finding, abstract and concrete, microcosm and macrocosm. She is fascinated by the hero Gilgamesh's promise to engrave “the whole story” of his life's adventures on stone so that it will be preserved for ever, and by the unearthing and piecing together of that story in the “millions of scattered, battered, and chipped clay pages” on which it was found millennia later in the Assyrian Library of Ashurbanipal. She sees fiction as a fashioning of stories (*fngo*, she reminds us, means “I fashion”), an assembly of tales, and libraries as places where these stories are preserved. If fiction aspires to monumentality, the library “becomes an archive, enshrining those fugitive, mobile, airy webs of words that make up stories.” She sees that “without the library to preserve its creations, the imagination is mortal, like its protagonists.” She shares her excitement at the paradox of Shahrazad's library in *The Arabian Nights*, the source of the stories she tells: the fact that Shahrazad's retellings are themselves written down on the Sultan's orders at the very end of the book imposes a “dizzy circularity” on the *Nights*, since these will be copies of tales already inscribed and kept in a library.

Like the scholars of Alexandria, Warner loves the idea that the library might encompass everything, that it might be here that “the whole” truth about human experience will be assembled and understood. *The Arabian Nights* are, for her, a microcosm of that ultimate library:

The thousand and one in the book’s title hints at infinity, and indeed the stories keep multiplying, podding off into different new stories, as well as into multiple versions and translations. The utopian fantasy of the book includes the possibility that someone could act as the keeper of memories on this vast and labyrinthine scale.

Warner is persuasive, too, in her contention that both libraries and books have power. Shahrazad’s telling of tales from her library saves her life, she points out, agreeing with Borges that the library can be “a labyrinth in which readers find themselves while they are getting lost.” Libraries can make real things happen.

In “The Library in Poetry” Robert Crawford is again alert to oppositions in the library’s many meanings. While it can be “a fine, meditative space,” the library can be a site of “conflict and devastation” too; it “can be threatening as well as nurturing.” His survey of poems about libraries shows us poets adoring libraries, and longing for their works to be drawn into them, but also in a strange way fearing them. The library can make a poet feel small, anxious that his work will be assigned a place only on the margins of literature, in the “tatter’d row” of “Wits, Bards, and Idlers” rather than with the august tomes of History, Science, and Philosophy. The book room becomes “a site of struggle,” a place “of both challenge and confirmation.” It can both spur and counter the imagination, provide both an inspiring gateway to knowledge and a sepulchral space in which thought is subdued. It can open up careers for eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women seeking employment, and trap them in roles in which there is little possibility of advancement. Crawford’s essay draws together poems about libraries and librarians from the seventeenth to the twenty-first centuries and celebrates the multiple ambivalences—the “combined enjoyments and drabness”—that adhere to meanings of the library over time.

Laura Marcus's discussion, "The Library in Film," explores the opposition between order and confusion in the library and analyses the contrast between the apparent rationality of the library as a system and its actual spaces—often its underground stacks—in which unquantifiable mysteries lurk. She shows us Alain Resnais's documentary film of the Bibliothèque nationale, *Toute la mémoire du monde*, in which the library is "the repository of knowledge at once secret and universal," a place in which each reader sits "working on his slice of universal memory [to] lay the fragments of a single secret end to end—the secret of human happiness." For this film, as for the Alexandrian scholars, the library is the place where we strive to collate and preserve all knowledge, shaping it into a coherent, curated whole. Other films (*The Name of the Rose*, *Ghostbusters*, *All the President's Men*) explore the metaphor of "the library as labyrinth," and others again (*Shadow of a Doubt*, *Chinatown*) offer libraries as places where mysteries are decoded. Scenes where characters search through newspapers or legal documents condense the process of research and investigation and come to stand for the film's wider hermeneutics. Students in *The Paper Chase* for example, adventuring in the dark stacks of the college library at night, discover wisdom of the past hidden in the shelves—here lecture notes taken by the intimidating Professor Kingsfield. The library's contents—the books themselves—are valorized in other films: Truffaut's *Fahrenheit 451* ends memorably with people walking in woodland, speaking the books they have learned by heart before their paper pages were destroyed by dystopian overlords. Marcus shows film loving the library's spaces and ideas, its auras of both order and mystery and the interactions between the two. Examining the library in film, she points to the complex relationship between literature and cinema, between book and film, and indicates meanings for the library as a memory place, treasure-house and keeper of ideas.

At the start of a closing section, "The Library Now and in the Future," Stephen Enniss moves us into a busy, twentieth-century book world in which librarians' horizons open up and in which they respond to the exciting challenge of building their archive collections from a global pool. His title, "Casting and Gathering" immediately establishes the tensions he wishes to explore—those involved in libraries' efforts to develop the

modern literary archive. It summons Seamus Heaney's poem for Ted Hughes, in which two fishermen stand on opposite sides of a riverbank, one casting, sending "a green silk tapered cast / . . . whispering through the air," the other gathering line-lengths in off his reel with a "sharp ratcheting" sound "like a speeded-up corncrake." For Enniss the castings and gatherings are those of British writers dispersing their manuscripts for sale on the global market, and of United States libraries drawing them expensively into their archives. The library now means a place where the whole opus of a writer can be preserved, where the whole story of his creativity, from handwritten page to published book, can be told.

Enniss enjoys the tension, too, between theory and reality, between the massive, Alexandrian, library-driven impetus to amass writers' archives in their entirety, and the real-life scenarios that see those documents scattered widely and inconveniently.

One hoping to consult the papers of W. B. Yeats, for example, will need to visit the National Library of Ireland, the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas, the New York Public Library, Emory, Boston College, and literally scores of other libraries and archives across the UK, Ireland, and America.

The ultimate conundrum presented by the digital world intrigues him also. While the digitization of paper documents does indeed ensure continued life for them in a new medium, *born digital* documents on the other hand might ultimately defeat the library's efforts to preserve them. Thinking of the torrent of digital ephemera now associated with the modern writer's work—e-mail archives, computer-generated drafts of texts, personal webpages, a multiplicity of storage devices—Enniss asks,

What institution will have the capacity to invest in the costly and painstaking work required to retain and preserve this highly unstable digital resource? Perhaps more to the point, will future researchers care that drawers of obsolete diskettes of this or that writer have been passed down to us? What new uses will be made of these electronic files if they have managed to survive?

In “Meanings of the Library Today” John P. Wilkin is confident that the library in the twenty-first century is in a much less ambiguous space. His essay riffs on the theme *Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose*, plays with ideas of constancy and change within the library as an enduring institution, and shows how digital technologies can now make libraries the prime movers of large-scale curation and publishing projects and position them at the heart of intellectual life. Curating, producing and facilitating the use of the cultural record in all its myriad forms, digital and ancient libraries share the same mission; both have “a commitment to sustaining culture despite, and perhaps because of, changes occurring all around.” Formerly executive director of the vast HathiTrust Digital Library, Wilkin is well placed to point to the benefits of mass-book-digitization projects such as Google Books and the Internet Archive, and to argue that, in the digital age, libraries will need to find more effective ways of managing print. Attention to four focal “pillars” of activity—curation; engagement with research and learning; publishing; and the management of spaces for users and collections—will ensure the library’s relevance in the digital age. We must investigate networked curation, collaborative projects for maintaining print stock; we must become more enthusiastic and energetic *publishers* of content rather than simply minders of it; we must think large scale and collectively and concentrate on the ultimate goal of disseminating scholarly ideas rather than simply cataloguing and shelving the books in which they are expressed.

The collection ends with Librarian of Congress James H. Billington’s wise consideration, in his essay “The Modern Library and Global Democracy,” of why we continue to go to libraries, why we like them, and what they are basically for. They are, he says, “places for the pursuit of truth.” They are where we need to go to allow “the ripening of acquired knowledge into practical wisdom,” where we connect with the sum of understanding accumulated by human minds and, in an information-glutted world, discover more than mere data. Libraries facilitate a widening out of thought. They are, he says, “antidotes to fanaticism. They are temples of pluralism, where books that contradict one another sit peacefully side by side on the shelves just as intellectual antagonists work peacefully next to each other in reading rooms.” Libraries are for everyone, inclusive in both their membership and holdings.

Exhilaratingly, Billington closes with a clarion call for reading itself.

Books are our guardians of memory, tutors in language, pathways to reason, and our golden gate to the royal road of imagination. . . . They are oases of coherence where things are put together rather than just taken apart.

His conclusion on coherence is heartening and reassuring. The library's endeavor toward wholeness may indeed be, as Manguel so limpidly puts it, "doomed to failure," but we continue doggedly to go to libraries, to read their books and enjoy their spaces, to build new ones, physical and digital, and to campaign angrily against the closure of others. We remain delighted by Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* concept of "all libraries everywhere" being connected, and stubbornly enjoy the idea of his infinite "L-space" (library space) which is the place where our reading of books takes us.<sup>7</sup> We empathize with others who have known themselves nurtured by libraries ("I have always been happy in libraries," says Alan Bennett; "libraries are about freedom. Freedom to read, freedom of ideas, freedom of communication," writes Neil Gaiman; "A great library is anything and everything," affirms Penelope Lively).<sup>8</sup>

We know there is a paradox about what libraries are and what they are trying to do, but we defy the contradiction and carry right on.

We go to libraries perhaps because we love telling ourselves stories and are drawn to the places where these stories are held. What we find in libraries helps us to shape things and make life seem coherent. "However great the confusion of our times and of the information in our minds, things can still come together in a book," says James H. Billington. Shaped and ordered by their shelves and catalogues, libraries, like the books they contain, offer the order we crave and into which we retreat for comfort, confirmation, and the reassurance that somewhere there is meaning to it all. We like their silence signs, their solid shelves, their serried rows of reading matter, their comfortable seats—their coffee shops if they have them. In St. Andrews we love the panelled oak walls and high, shuttered shelves of our historic King James Library and enjoy seeing new generations of students finding fresh pleasure in it each year.

These essays look at many libraries and offer many meanings for them over many times. Perhaps after all, however, the simplest definition may be best. “Whatever else you do in life,” says the Librarian of Congress, “do not fail to experience the simple pleasure of being alone with a good book on a rainy day.”

“A place to read” may be meaning enough for any library.

## NOTES

1. Press release from the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy December 10, 2012. Online at <http://www.cipfa.org/about-cipfa/press-office/latest-press-releases/national-survey-shows-that-library-cuts-have-begun-to-bite>. (Reported in Alison Flood, “UK Lost More Than 200 Libraries in 2012.” *Theguardian.com*, December 10, 2012. Online at <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/dec/10/uk-lost-200-libraries-2012>.) Epigraph: Alberto Manguel, *The Library at Night* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 3.

2. Speak Up for Libraries <http://www.speakupforlibraries.org/whoweare.asp>; Voices for the Library <http://voicesforthelibrary.org.uk/>; Library Campaign <http://www.librarycampaign.com/>; Shout about School Libraries <http://www.schoollibraries.org/>.

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