THE CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF LIBRARIES IN BRITAIN AND IRELAND
General Editor: Peter Hoare

VOLUME 1: TO 1640. Edited by Elisabeth Leedham-Green and Teresa Webber. 688pp

VOLUME 2:1640-1850. Edited by Giles Mandelbrote and K. A. Manley. 575pp

VOLUME 3: 1850 – 2000. Edited by Alistair Black and Peter Hoare. 737pp
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'The Cambridge History of Libraries in Britain and Ireland' is a monumental achievement. It declares itself to be "the first detailed scholarly history of libraries in Britain and Ireland", covering libraries of all types (institutional and private), and their user communities. The three volumes are supplemented by extensive bibliographies and indexes.

The publication comes at a particularly appropriate time in history as libraries and the provision of information are facing a transformational era comparable to the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century.

David Lewis writes in his 2007 article 'A Model for Academic Libraries 2005 to 2025' ('https://idea.iupui.edu/dspace/bitstream/1805/665/1/A+Model+Academic+Libraries+2005+to+2025.doc)

"It is easy to understand why at the end of the age of print, academic libraries, and indeed all libraries, are dazed and confused. The technology upon which we have built our missions over the past half millennium is being usurped. Print, as developed in the 15th century and the 19th century industrialization of print, made libraries what they are today. Or, to be more precise, what they were in 1993 when the Web era began… What is required is for academic libraries to find and articulate their roles in the current and future information ecology. If we cannot or will not do this, our campuses will invest in other priorities and the library will slowly, but surely, atrophy and become a little used museum of the book"

Library histories such as 'The Cambridge History' are not simply for libraries and librarians. Kenneth E. Carpenter, then Assistant Director for Research Resources in the Harvard University Library, said in his 1995 Library of Congress lecture, 'Readers and Libraries': "The function of the library historian is not to celebrate libraries, either as arsenals of democracy, the people's university, or the heart of the university. Lamentation for a form of library that is passing is also not the aim of a history of libraries. Understanding their function within the book world and within the larger society must be our goal."

General Editor Peter Hoare and his editorial colleagues superbly meet that challenge. If we are not quite sure where libraries are going in the twenty first century, at least we now have a solid historical base from which to make prospective judgements.

Hoare reflects "libraries pervade the culture of all literate societies. Their history illuminates that culture and many of its facets – the spread of literacy, the growth of scholarship, changes in educational practices – as well as reflecting changing social and political philosophies and practices. As a result, they have often developed in ways which could not have been foreseen by their founders".

How did it all begin? Professor Robin Alston writes on his website http://www.r-alston.co.uk/contents.htm : "When the Cambridge University Press responded warmly to my suggestion that there ought to be a Cambridge History of Libraries in Britain and Ireland, I laboured for two years to make the (Library History) Database a really useful tool for library historians for the period up to 1850. There will a multi-volume history of libraries in Britain and Ireland, under the general editorship of Peter Hoare, who I invited to become Editor many years ago"

Alston goes on to lament "Users of LHD may be puzzled to note that this contribution to library history has not been mentioned by any contributor in Volumes I and II, which deal with the period to 1850 "

Whatever the academic debate on conception, readers should be grateful to Alston for establishing the bibliographic base camp and Hoare and his fellow climbers for ensuring we reached this library summit .Hoare, was University Librarian at the University of Nottingham 1978-93, and succeeded W.A. Munford as the third chair of the UK Library History group in 1977.

Hoare notes in an article written for 'CILIP Update' (Jan –Feb 2007) that his " approach has been to use scholarly experts (in a variety of fields, to avoid too much of an inward-looking survey – so we have architects and antiquaries, bibliographers and book-trade historians, clerics and classicists, scientists and social historians - as well as librarians, of course. We have tried above all to remember that libraries exist only in context: They exist to be used, and in that use they can best be judged."

Hoare and his nearly100 contributors did not set out to produce "an exhaustive history of individual libraries … rather, a general history charting the various trends and patterns of development". Hoare ponders :"so what are the right dates to divide up a continuous history covering 1500 years? Does the invention of printing around 1450 mark a greater division than the foundation of the British Museum in 1752, or the Public Libraries Act of 1851? …Even the fundamental question, what is a library? Is there one definition that can apply both to the Middle Ages and to the Information Age?"

The earlier periods of library history are arguably easier, in one sense, to cover as historical perspectives have been established but, on the other hand, historical evidence is more elusive. The essays in Volume 3, particularly as they close in to the year 2000,

understandably often tend more towards chronological overviews than analytical perspectives.

Volume 1, edited by Elisabeth Leedham-Green and Teresa Webber, begins in the fifth century, and documents "developments through the medieval period, especially monastic expansion and the foundation of the universities, and the major changes in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries due to the invention of printing and the Reformation". The 25 essays, by leading historians and bibliographers of the period , reflect the shift from a largely ecclesiastically focussed book world to one with a much wider spectrum.

The Editors note "the history of libraries in the medieval and early modern periods is the history of shifting collections of books of varied size and function, which differ in significant ways from modern expectations of a library". The most obvious difference in this context of a modern library was physical, as exemplified in the article on the medieval library by Richard Gameson. The evolution of libraries as an identified area was introduced in England only in the fourteenth century, and then often only as part of a larger whole.

The Editors stress that medieval collection of books were "characterised by a surprising degree of fluidity". Little used volumes were often removed or disposed of, a trend increasingly evidenced by many libraries in the twenty-first century where the disposal and dispersal of books from public and university libraries has increased, particularly where there are digital alternatives. Libraries always have sense of continuity, even if the technologies around them change!

In the second half of the sixteenth century, private libraries, such as those built up by John Dee and Andrew Perne, as Julian Roberts illustrates in his chapter, often outstripped those of institutions. Private buyers benefited through the acquisition of material from the dissolution of the monasteries and the dispersal of libraries as evidenced above.

While the development of institutional libraries was slow, without doubt the establishment of the Bodleian Library in 1602, as too briefly noted in Kristian Jensen's chapter on universities and colleges, was clearly a seminal development . Others,however, such as David McKitterick in his excellent chapter on the organisation of knowledge, reaffirm the Bodleian's groundbreaking activities in bibliothecal practices.

Volume 1, edited by Elisabeth Leedham-Green and Teresa Webber, is arguably the most authoritative of the three impressive volumes because of its evidential historical focus. Volume 2, edited by Giles Mandelbrote and Keith Manley, covers, in 31 essays, the period 1640-1850, from the Civil War through to the new developments in circulating and subscription libraries and the 1850 Public Libraries Act.

It is subtitled 'From Cloister to Hearth', with the focus of libraries moving from the ecclesiastical and academic arenas to learned societies and "public library "environs, including the establishment of the British Museum Library in 1753 and the

developments leading to the expansion of the public library system, highlighted in Volume 3 .

Mandelbrote and Manley state, "the eighteenth century saw many advances in library services, with a widening of access, a growth in collections and the development of new models of library provision – not to mention some spectacular examples of library architecture", which John Newman and M.H. Port document in their chapters. The main role of university libraries and, thus their buildings, until the beginning of the nineteenth century was, however, largely custodial, as Peter Freshwater notes in his chapter on 'Books and Universities',

By the early nineteenth century, two key themes were emerging "libraries for the people" such as penny-circulating libraries, school and parish libraries and Mechanics Institute, and "libraries for the more privileged", such as subscription libraries, as documented by James Raven, and gentlemen's clubs. At the same time, the nineteenth century saw a significant rise in private libraries as book collecting became more fashionable and affordable for the rich. Bibliomania erupted in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as Arnold Hunt illustrates in his fascinating chapter on 'Private Libraries in the Age of Bibliomania'

British influences clearly affected many library developments overseas. The impact on Australian practice was profound. Emeritus Professor Wallace Kirsop flies the necessarily small Australian flag in Volume 2 with his chapter on ' Libraries for an Imperial Power', focussing on the developments in libraries and reading in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Volume 3, edited by Alistair Black and Peter Hoare, takes the story, in 50 essays, from 1850 to 2000, documenting the dramatic growth of public, academic and specialist libraries in the modern world -"Libraries become an industry rather than a localised phenomenon, and librarianship has developed from a scholarly craft to a scientific profession" .

The modern library effectively takes form in this period but with it comes a problem for the editors.The sheer range and size of libraries and their operations to be covered is a major problem in terms of trying to sift through so much evidence and activities and provide an analytical perspective.

A main feature of the period covered in Volume 3 is the growing involvement of "the state", represented by governments and local councils. The spread of public libraries transformed access to books, leisure reading and information. Subscription libraries such as that run by Boots Booklover's Library, as pointed out by Simon Eliot, finally closed in 1966, being unable to compete with television and publiclibraries .

Erica Wagner, however, in 'The Times' (December 2) praises the remaining subscription libraries, such as The London Library, founded in 1841, which is covered by Alan Bell's

" pendant" in Volume 3. Wagner contrasts their low subscription costs to those of gyms! We are prepared to pay more for the body than for the mind in most cases!

The nine essay section 'Enlightening the Masses: the Public Library as Concept and Reality' illustrates the variety of roles of the public library. Many metropolitan public libraries were surrogate university libraries and educational centres for the working and middle classes up to the second half of the twentieth century.

Whither public libraries now? The role of the public library at the present time in the UK is one which is attracting significant debate. A December 2006 public libraries round table, organised by the Smith Institute in London (http://www.newstatesman.com/pdf/publiclibraries.htm), focussed on future directions for public libraries within a model for 21st-century learning, information and culture. Views were understandably mixed as to future directions.

Helen Rumbelow writing in 'The Times' (26 October 2006) stirred controversy with an article on the public library , stating

 "Judge from the scene I witnessed at the Idea Store — and the statistics back this up — books are decreasingly the draw. This flagship centre (they don't call it a library for fear of putting people off) has escalators delivering people from the street straight into the brightly coloured halls. I stopped by the toy-filled play area, went up in the groovy lift to peruse the massage and dance classes, and had a cup of tea with a fantastic view of London through jewel-hued glass. The place looks great and it is thriving, except for those poor neglected shelves… If the Government decides to compete with £1-an-hour internet cafés, fine. If it wants to provide shelter on a rainy day, somewhere for those at a loose end to sit and read the newspapers, good. The book stock could then be centralised and if you wanted one you could order over the counter or online, to be picked up or delivered to your home in 24 hours, just like at the best independent bookshops. "Don't think of it as the end of libraries, just the start of millions of personal ones. The library is dead, long live the library."

In a February 2007 interview in Melbourne, British author Terry Pratchett told me, in contrast to Rumbelow, that he regretted the current trend for public libraries to become places "to distribute movies and posters" as a result of "vague social aspirations". He believes that the trend to fewer and fewer books in libraries is undesirable. "Libraries provide what is not available anywhere else" - namely, "a quiet place or a sanctuary" which are "hard to find in modern society" This would be another example of historical library déjà vu as libraries return to a form of monastic quiet!

The British Library, under Lynne Brindley, has dynamically, if at times controversially, pointed the way for a "National Library "to refocus in a digital era. John Hopson's chapter on the British Library, which effectively concludes with Brindley's accession in 2000, reflects the problems in juxtaposing analysis and chronological developments.

A specific focus, such as the chapter on the National Library of Ireland, makes some sections in Volume 3 easier to address than wider briefs, such as those required in the five essays on higher education and libraries, or the four essays on "Automation Pasts, Electronic Futures: the Digital Revolution'.

Libraries for higher education in the UK, while never having the funds of their American university counterparts, often led in areas such as computer innovation and bibliographic databases, aided by governmental pump priming. Major figures such as Fred Ratcliffe, Bernard Naylor and the late Ian Mowat succinctly cover the major trends up to the end of the twentieth century for Higher Education libraries.

As research and its published data grew more specialised, so disciplines such as medicine, law, or business, accumulated library specialisations, which are reflected in specific chapters. Essays become detailed to reflect the expertise of the contributors and the topic but it does lead to more of an eclectic mix than a comprehensive synthesis. Thus articles such as Evelyn Kerslake's on the "Feminization of Librarianship: The Writings of Margaret Reed" and "Lawyers and their Libraries" by Guy Holbion, are juxtaposed with more generic pieces.

The role and nature of the library has changed from one in which the physical storage and cataloguing of material was pre-eminent, the earlier custodial focus, to one in which physical library buildings are less relevant for many researchers and they have become one stop information shops and social hubs for students. A reader at the Bodleian in the eighteenth or nineteenth century would not have found too much different, except in scale, if transported to libraries for most of the twentieth century. To walk into current university libraries, with their learning commons, cybercafés and digital repositories, with no books in sight, would, however, be a different experience!

Rice University's March 2007 De Lange 'Emerging Libraries' Conference - 'How Knowledge Will Be Accessed, Discovered, and Disseminated in the Age of Digital Information' rather ominously stated in its preamble: "The traditional concept of a library has been rendered obsolescent by the unprecedented confluence of the Internet, changes in scholarly publication models, increasing alliances between the humanities and the sciences, and the rise of large-scale digital library projects. The old ways of organizing and preserving knowledge to transmit our cultural and intellectual heritage have converged with the most advanced technologies of science and engineering and research methodologies. Such rapid and overwhelming changes to a millennia-old tradition pose significant challenges not only to university research libraries but to every citizen. If the traditional library is undergoing a profound metamorphosis, it is not clear what new model will take its place.

More information has been produced in the last several years than in the entire previous history of humanity, and most of this has been in digital format. Libraries are not storage places any more; they are less and less a place. The critical issues now include: How can that information be efficiently accessed and used? How do we extract knowledge from such an abundance of often poorly organized information? How might these enormous digital resources affect our concept of identity, our privacy, and the way we conduct business in the new century? Insight from many disciplines and perspectives is requisite to begin to understand this phenomenon to identify ways to help chart a future course"

Sentiments which infuse, particularly in an historical context, 'The Cambridge History'. The UK journal' Library History' notes on its website "Throughout history, libraries have been the repositories of knowledge of all kinds. Without libraries, we would know nothing of former ages nor the thoughts of our ancestors. In the age of computers and the Internet, a new concept has arrived in the form of the 'virtual' library: technology may have developed, but the idea of a library as a source for knowledge still survives".

The Cambridge History' superbly documents the creation, distribution, and organisation of knowledge over 1500 years Liz Chapman and Frank Webster, in the final chapter of Volume 3, reaffirm that "while the neo liberal ascendancy seems set to swing the balance far away from the foundations of service on which libraries have operated for many years…the basic duties of librarians, to provide a range of information, remains the same".

Libraries, themselves, however, must adapt and change in the Web 2.0 and future digital environments to ensure adequate knowledge frameworks. Whatever else, free and informed access to information, in order to make considered decisions in the twenty first century, is more essential than ever.

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