

Libraries as history: the importance of libraries beyond their texts

David Pearson

An edited version of a lecture given in October 2007, as the first Charles Holden Memorial Lecture, sponsored by the Friends of Senate House Library

The catalyst for the subject of tonight's lecture was the publication, in 2006, of the three-volume *Cambridge History of Libraries*, the fruit of many years of labour by a large team of editors and essay-writers, to which my modest contribution was one of the 106 chapters that make up the work as a whole.¹ Conceived partly as a companion to the *Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, of which only two of the projected seven volumes have yet appeared, the *History of Libraries* summarises our current knowledge of the development and impact of libraries, both institutional and private, from the early middle ages to the present day, presented chronologically and thematically: it very much does what it says on the tin. It has quickly been hailed as a new cornerstone of reference and information in its field and its scholarly achievement rightly deserves to be celebrated. The key point I want to bring out is the importance of recognising that the history of libraries is a valid and worthwhile subject, that libraries are interesting things as integral parts of our cultural heritage, and that both they and the books they contain have historical and research value beyond the purposes for which they were originally designed.

What are libraries for? This question had a more straightforward answer fifty, or even twenty, years ago than it has today. Libraries were storehouses and quarries of knowledge, held in books. Human endeavour of many kinds, including education, research, invention, business and leisure, has always depended to some extent on access to information, or on what other people have known or said, and for many centuries books have been the containers for holding and transmitting these things. Books were created to be communication devices for texts, and libraries existed to store, organise and make them accessible in large quantities. Those who have founded and funded libraries, or donated collections to them, have done so in the knowledge that they have been augmenting reservoirs of knowledge for which there is no substitute. The value of libraries has often been measured in terms of the size of their stock; more books means a greater reservoir, more comprehensiveness of coverage. There have been other sources of information but when looking for authoritative, cumulative and trustworthy places to find it and look after it, civilisation has turned to libraries.

But now the world is changing, in ways that are familiar to us all. Developments in information technology, coupled with the advent of the Internet, are transforming not only the ways in which libraries work, but also those underlying philosophies. Increasingly, the kind of content which books have provided is available over the web, either in born-digital formats or via digitised versions of printed material. There is much that remains in print only, but a great deal of retrospective digitisation in train. In 1992, at a symposium at Harvard University on the shape of rare book libraries in the twenty-first century, someone predicted that "it will not soon be economically feasible to convert much of the holdings of rare book libraries into

¹ P. Hoare (ed), *The Cambridge History of Libraries in Britain and Ireland* (3 vols), Cambridge, 2006.

electronic form”.² Today, just fifteen years later, we have the hugely successful *Early English Books Online* and *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online* databases, so that much of the printed output of the English-speaking world down to 1800 is now available in full-text digital facsimile, and we have the vast digitisation project started by Google at the end of 2004, converting the holdings of a number of the world’s major libraries, including the nineteenth-century books of the Bodleian. This initiative in turn prompted some of Google’s world-stage competitors, like Microsoft and Yahoo, to join in the game, and start investing millions of dollars into digitisation programmes of their own. In the UK the JISC has set up a Content Alliance of major players to take forward the digitisation agenda, and JISC has to date invested £22M in projects for the retrospective digitisation of important research resources.³ There are copyright barriers, as well as the cost ones, between where we are today and a world whose entire documentary heritage, including the output of the twentieth century, has been digitised, but the technology exists to make it possible. If you want to read a Shakespeare play, or a Jane Austen novel, or a nineteenth-century government report, it is no longer essential to get hold of a physical book, or visit a library; you can do it from a computer, connected to the Internet, anywhere in the world.

So while libraries remain a familiar and well-used part of the landscape, for educational, professional and recreational purposes, an axe has been laid at the root of that fundamental philosophy set out earlier. We don’t yet know how profound the blow will be, because the technologies are so new and the developments so rapid; twenty years ago we had no Internet, and ten years ago Google was just starting up. Predictions of the death of the book and the future of libraries take place against a background of great uncertainty about the stability of the new media; digital preservation is an issue of much concern, but the widespread recognition of this and the level of professional activity being directed towards it makes me think that it will be solved to the satisfaction of most people. We also don’t yet have the physical manifestation of the e-book which is genuinely as convenient to read as the book we read on our desks, or on the train, or in the bath; reading text on a computer screen is awkward for people brought up on books, and the handheld devices currently available are no match for the efficient and time-tested design of the paper codex. I believe this will change, and that one day something will come along which people do find as usable as a paperback; the potential return for those investing in developing the technology is too huge for it not to happen.

Libraries, therefore, are in a state of flux. There is much debate about their future, and what they will look like a few decades from now. The public library world is polarised between traditionalists who don’t see why they shouldn’t still be buying good quality fiction as they did fifty years ago, and those who try to revitalise their dwindling user base by rebranding them as Ideas Stores, while the authorities who run them cope with their ongoing funding crises by steadily cutting their budgets and services. Higher education libraries are generally in better health, as the centralised delivery of learning and research resources in a university environment remains a sensible and obvious way of providing what’s needed, though I think the traditional vision of the library as being the core of a university is less robust than it was. David

² Stanley Katz, “Form and substance in the electronic age” in Richard Wendorf (ed), *Rare book and manuscript libraries in the twenty-first century* (Cambridge, 1993), 17-21, p.18.

³ http://www.jisc.ac.uk/whatwedo/programmes/programme_digitisation.aspx.

Eastwood, the Chief Executive of the Higher Education Funding Council, is on record as saying how important it is for universities to invest in their libraries, but most campuses have their share of voices, some of them influential, who see the library as a place of dwindling relevance.⁴ As Google takes over from library catalogues, and as e-resources and e-repositories increasingly provide the wherewithal for study and the housing of research outputs, the role of libraries, particularly those geared to teaching and learning, is increasingly redefined in terms of social spaces, access to e-resources, and training in information literacy. They become information commons, a phrase originally coined in America which is moving into UK parlance with the recent opening of the handsome new information commons building at the University of Sheffield.⁵ But we are very much in a time of transition, where the future as we see it might be isn't actually here yet, and a lot of the existing fabric is still very necessary; new research is still published in print, particularly in the humanities and social sciences, and people need both old and new books to do their educational business. At the present time, only a tiny percentage of the books on the many miles of shelves in Senate House are also available in digital form, and its libraries continue to provide a valued and well used service to the academic community across London and beyond.

While these changes have been going on in the way that libraries function, other changes have been taking place around the ways in which the history of books and libraries is studied. If the purpose of libraries has traditionally been defined in terms of the aggregation and making accessible of texts, so historical bibliography – the umbrella term that was long used to embrace that package of enquiry around the history of printing, publishing, libraries and the book trade – had a similarly text-centric rationale. Philip Gaskell's 1972 *New Introduction to Bibliography* – probably the leading reference work of its generation in this field - summarises the thinking of several decades of bibliographical scholarship in stating that the chief purpose of bibliography is to serve the production and distribution of accurate texts; its overriding responsibility must be to determine a text in its most accurate form.⁶ The great achievements of enumerative bibliography in the twentieth century, whose short-title catalogues gave us an authoritative map of the output of the handpress period, were partly stimulated by this rationale; it is necessary to know how many editions of a work were printed, and the order in which they appeared, so as to be able to establish correct versions of texts in their original state, and to track subsequent variations.

Since the late 1950s, when Lefebvre and Martin's celebrated book *L'Apparition du Livre* was published, the corrective spur to this approach has steadily gained momentum and we have now moved away from historical bibliography – a term that is less and less commonly encountered – to the history of the book.⁷ During the last few decades particularly, we have become increasingly interested in wider issues beyond the fixing of texts - not only in the ideas that books contain, but also in the impact they had on earlier generations. The ways in which books were distributed and circulated, their physical forms, and the ways they were owned, read and annotated all contribute to a greater understanding of social, intellectual and economic

⁴ "Libraries critical to HE success", *CILIP Update* 6(5), May 2007, p.17.

⁵ <http://www.shef.ac.uk/infocommons/>

⁶ Philip Gaskell, *A New Introduction to Bibliography*, Oxford, 1972, p.1.

⁷ Lucien Febvre and H.-J. Martin, *L'apparition du livre*, Paris, 1958.

history. The pioneering thinking of Don McKenzie on what he came to call the sociology of texts – how the material form in which texts are transmitted influences their meaning – has focused the attention of many contemporary bibliographers and literary historians onto the importance of the whole book, and not just the words on the page.⁸ We have become increasingly aware of the connection between communication and format, realising that the way a text is perceived may be influenced by the physical form in which it is encountered. Interest is focused more on the whole book, as a physical artefact and a designed object that people have interacted with, and not just the words on the pages. The history of the book has come to be defined, in the words of the *Book History Reader* published a few years ago, as the role of the book as a material object within print culture.⁹

The history of libraries and book ownership, and the formation of collections, is an important part of this, as it provides a window into earlier tastes and fashions, and allows us to see not just what was printed, but what people bought and put on their shelves. Both individually and collectively, books offer a wealth of historical evidence to help us to understand their impact and influence in previous generations. Books have never been passive conduits; they have, in their three-dimensional formats, physical characteristics which have both affected the ways in which their contents have been received, and been exploited for their artefactual potential. You can do all kinds of things to books, once the printed sheets have left the printer: you can bind them in different ways, you can write things in them, you can tear things out of them. The qualities they have as objects are not only part of the history of communication, but also of the history of art and design. The Everyman series, which started up at the beginning of the twentieth century and has brought literature to wide audiences, was successful not only because it chose good texts but also because its stylish and very effective format encouraged takeup. The design of the early volumes, clearly influenced by William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement, turned Morris's ideas into affordable reality in a way that his expensive, limited edition Kelmscott Press books could never do.

A book which has been annotated can give us a direct insight into the interface between author and reader, can show not only that a text was definitely read and absorbed but also perhaps how it was received. Thomas Carlyle, for example, wrote his thoughts on Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* in the margins of a copy which is now in the Sterling Collection in Senate House Library.¹⁰ According to the latest Oxford University Press edition of *Aurora Leigh*, this is "the foremost example of the mid-nineteenth century poem of contemporary life, and a richly detailed representation of the early Victorian age". This certainly wasn't Carlyle's view: "How much better if all this had been written straight forward in clear prose", he snorted. "A very beautiful tempest in a teapot. What a gift of utterance this high child has – and how very weak and childlike all it has to say!". Annotators don't have to be famous or recognisable people in order to have something worth noting; we can observe first-hand evidence of the development of the Reformation in England not only from Henry VIII's annotated copies of theological texts relating to divorce, which you can find in the British Library, but also from the small English religious

⁸ D. F. McKenzie, *Bibliography and the Sociology of Texts*, London, 1986.

⁹ D. Finkelstein and A. McCleery (eds), *The Book History Reader*, London, 2002 (2nd edn, 2006).

¹⁰ SHL [S.L.] I [Browning, E.B. – 1857]

tract of the 1540s on whose flyleaf is written: “I bought this book when the testament was abrogated that shepherds might not read it. I pray God amend such blindness”.¹¹

People annotate their books in various ways, and of course many people don't annotate them at all – the idea of writing in a book has always been anathema to some people, in the past as it is today. Collectors used to think that annotations in books, including ownership inscriptions, were defacements which detracted from their value, hence the vogue particularly in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries for taking books apart and washing the leaves to remove any offending ink markings, something which today we look at with regret if not downright horror. Most people today regard an annotated early book as more interesting than one with untouched, spotless pages. Yale University Library recently published a catalogue of a special collection acquired in the 1990s, of renaissance books whose distinguishing feature is that they are annotated, often by unknown early owners.¹² People write notes on flyleaves, on titlepages, and in margins, and if they're really serious about it they have their books interleaved with blank paper so they have plenty of space to write. They draw in books, and they may write things in which are nothing to do with the text – the most obvious and commonly encountered example is probably the habit of using the flyleaves of Bibles to record family events, births, marriages and deaths, where the physical manifestation of the word of the Lord provides a suitable place to hold a record of such significant events.

I might add as an aside that this is of course a bit of a paradox for librarians – we are all very much geared to forbidding the marking of library books, which is a perennial problem in academic libraries. Opening a book and finding that it has been highlighted and clumsily underlined in biro by inconsiderate former borrowers is deeply irritating but if the annotations happen to be 300 years old we will regard it as a specially interesting copy. The speed with which today's scribble can become tomorrow's interesting annotation is illustrated in Lynne Truss's bestseller *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*, which mentions a 1950s book in Senate House Library whose marginal insult on the author's theories by an unknown reader of the time struck her as interesting.¹³ I think the only stance we can reasonably take is to say by all means write in books and turn them into objects for posterity, but only if they belong to you personally and not to a library.

But the mere ownership of a book, whether annotated or not, is also potentially valuable evidence of previous interest in it, or of its impact. Reconstructing the contents of private and institutional libraries not only allows us to compare them with other collections of their time, but also to build up wider pictures of book ownership over the centuries, looking at average sizes, changing trends in language or subject, and in the place of origin of the books. We can see which books were popular and which were not; books have survived in very uneven ways and ones which are rare today may once have been much more widely read than ones which have survived in relatively large quantities. When I was doing some work some years ago on the contents of the libraries of English bishops in the early seventeenth century, the books

¹¹ The tract is referred to in S. Schama, *A history of Britain volume 1: At the edge of the world?*, London, 2000, p. 316.

¹² B. Rosenthal, *The Rosenthal Collection of Books with Manuscript Annotations*, New Haven, 1997.

¹³ Lynne Truss, *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*, London, 2003, p.177. The SHL book in question is E. Partridge, *You Have a Point There*, London, 1953, shelfmark YAH Par.

that could most commonly be found recurring between them were not any of the works of literature or science of that period that we commonly celebrate today, but the works of St Bernard, and a Latin book by Lancelot Andrewes concerned with theological controversy.¹⁴ In the annals of the scientific literature of the later 17th century, Johann Becher's *Novum organum philologicum* is today a rare and almost unheard-of, and certainly unstudied, book, but the fact that a copy survives today which was successively in the personal collections of Robert Boyle and Robert Hooke may give us pause to think it was perhaps more highly regarded in its day.¹⁵ This kind of investigation is being further encouraged by the growing number of studies which take a particular title and look at what we can learn by looking at lots of copies of it. Owen Gingerich's work, on Copernicus's book in which he propounded the theory that the earth goes round the sun, is a nice example: he examined every surviving copy of the first two editions of *De revolutionibus*, over 600 books in libraries all round the world, including the one in Senate House Library, and used the evidence of ownership and annotation not only to show how quickly Copernicus's ideas spread across Europe, but also how contemporary scientists networked with one another.¹⁶ Eamon Duffy has published a book on Books of Hours which depends extensively on looking at the annotations of lots of individual owners in early liturgical books to gain insights into devotional practice around the time of the Reformation at a personal level.¹⁷

We are richly endowed, in the UK, with libraries of all kinds whose contents and history offer research value and historical insight beyond the textual content of their books. Cosin's Library in Durham, now a part of Durham University Library, was founded by John Cosin in the 1660s as a library for the diocese of Durham, an early example of a public library.¹⁸ Cosin, who died in 1672, was Bishop of Durham from the time of the Restoration in 1660, and before the Civil War was an influential senior figure in the ecclesiastical and establishment hierarchy, as Dean of Peterborough and Master of Peterhouse in Cambridge, a leading light in the royalist, Laudian wing of the Church. The growing success of the parliamentary cause in the early 1640s meant he had to flee abroad and he spent the Interregnum in France as a chaplain to the English court in exile. His Library, which is substantially his personal collection of books, survives today very much as he left it when he died, in the purpose-designed building which stands between Durham Cathedral and Durham Castle. Its contents reflect the various stages of his career: the books he acquired as a student and a don in Cambridge at the 1620s and 30s, and the ones he bought as a bishop in the 1660s. In between is a distinctive layer of books acquired in France, in exile, including tracts associated with the protestant Huguenots there with whom Cosin had contacts. Books from these various periods have distinctive physical characteristics, as well as reflecting his interests, subject-wise; many of the earlier books show us the variety of ways in which books in Cambridge were bound and circulated in the early seventeenth century. Books from the middle years show the Huguenot pamphlets

¹⁴ D. Pearson, The libraries of English bishops, 1600-40, *The Library* 6th ser 14 (1992), 221-257, p.228.

¹⁵ D. Pearson, Books, owners and history: books beyond the texts, in W. Marx and J. Burton (eds), *Readers, Printers, Churchmen, and Travellers: Essays in Honour of David Selwyn*, Lampeter, 2004, 7-28, p.12-13.

¹⁶ O. Gingerich, *An annotated census of Copernicus' De revolutionibus (Nuremberg, 1543 and Basel, 1566)*, Leiden, 2002.

¹⁷ Eamon Duffy, *Marking the Hours*, London, 2006.

¹⁸ See <http://www.dur.ac.uk/library/asc/printed/cosin.htm/>, and the references included there.

circulating in cheap cardboard wrappers, but also that Cosin the exile was not so impoverished as to be unable to patronise a good quality Parisian bindery; books from the later years reveal traces of the book trade in provincial Durham. In aggregate, we can gain an overview of the emphases in the collection and compare it with others of the time.

This is a library that is also interesting as architectural history, as it was the first purpose-built English library to adopt a scheme of shelving around the walls, moving away from the traditional medieval pattern of long narrow rooms with shelving jutting out between windows. This idea was a French import, inspired by Cosin's visit to the library of Cardinal Mazarin in Paris; the physical shape of libraries, and the connection between design and purpose, is another aspect of library history which deserves consideration and where English practice has often been inspired by European prototypes. As libraries grew in size, with the ever increasing number of published books, librarians worked in various ways to systematise and simplify access to knowledge. The philosopher Leibniz, who became librarian to the Duke of Brunswick's celebrated library at Wolfenbüttel in 1690, struggled with various kinds of cataloguing, abstracting and indexing systems but he also worked with the architect Herman Korb in designing a new kind of library building, built around a circular design which both represented and facilitated the interconnection of the various branches of knowledge.¹⁹ A circle has no dark corners in which obscure subjects can get lost; it symbolises unity. Domed, round libraries spread across Europe and can be seen in England most famously in Panizzi's round reading room for the British Museum Library, but also for example in the Oxford Radcliffe Camera or in Leeds University Library. Libraries as architectural statements, as buildings whose design says something about their contents, may take other forms: towers, perhaps, suggest the monumental and dominating importance of knowledge. There are some more modern examples of libraries where the building is clearly trying to get across a feeling of something both provoking and inspirational; Peckham Public Library, opened in 2000, is one of those buildings that invoke strong feelings of both liking and loathing but it won an award for its arresting design.

St Deiniol's Library in North Wales is, like Cosin's Library, another public library built around the gift of an individual collection, this time that of William Gladstone, the Victorian statesman and four-times prime minister, who died in 1898.²⁰ A keen accumulator and reader of books, he built up a collection of 32,000 volumes which he decided towards the end of his life to turn into an endowed library for the public good. This began as a temporary construction but after Gladstone's death a public subscription raised enough money to erect the handsome red sandstone building which stands in Hawarden today, which combines a reading room and bookstacks with integral residential accommodation: this is, as the library publicity proudly declares, an unusual combination. In terms of the theme of this paper, it's an interesting library on several fronts: perhaps most obviously, it's an interesting chapter in the development of thinking about the use and value of libraries around the turn of the twentieth century, and the enthusiasm which could be generated for building such a thing in a tiny village in north Wales. It is also an example of a library whose perceived value has changed in recent years. When it was first opened

¹⁹ Anthony Hobson, *Great Libraries*, London, 1970, 202-211.

²⁰ <http://www.st-deiniols.co.uk/>

its status as a research library, where you could find much of the content you would need to pursue work in a range of disciplines, was decidedly more robust than it is now. Many of its users today - and there is a steady stream of them - spend time there not so much to quarry information from the books on the shelves, but because as a whole it provides an environment which is conducive to study, writing, reflection or coming together in groups for educational purposes. It has also been recognised that the most interesting aspect of many of the books there derives not so much from their textual content as from the fact that they were owned, read and marked by a significant Victorian thinker: the Arts and Humanities Research Council have funded a project, currently in train, to identify and recatalogue all the books from Gladstone's personal collection, recording his annotations and reactions to what he read.²¹

Amongst our rich tapestry of libraries, large and small, spread all around the country, the libraries of the National Trust constitute a significant though not terribly well known group. There are about 160 libraries spread around the various houses between Lanhydrock in Cornwall and Wallington in Northumberland, with well over a quarter of a million books, of which a sizeable proportion date from the handpress period. Many of them were built up by successive generations of the families who lived in the houses. After centuries of slumber they are gradually coming into view, through the energies of the Trust's library staff and an associated body of volunteers who are working their way through the collections, cataloguing them onto a modern system which is not yet publicly available, but is intended to be during the next few years. Their existence was also highlighted by a big exhibition of treasures from across the collections mounted in 1999, though it was only displayed in America.²² As library history, these collections are quite obviously goldmines; although many of them have suffered from the selling off of commercially valuable books, particularly during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, enough remains to be able to trace, in many cases, the building up of libraries by successive generations of owners, with different strata reflecting their tastes and interests. They include large and spectacular collections like that at Blickling Hall in Norfolk, which includes the accumulated books of several generations of the Hobart family, but also several thousand from one particular collection built up by Sir Richard Ellys during the early eighteenth century.²³ They also include smaller but no less interesting libraries like that at Townend, a seventeenth-century farmhouse deep in rural Cumbria, a few miles from lake Windermere, lived in by one family of yeoman farmers from 1626 to the twentieth century. Here there is a small but well-preserved library including a number of books acquired in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries by family members of the time.²⁴ We can see what books they bought, and indeed what kind of books they were able to buy so far from major centres of the book trade; and because auctioneers' records survive in the Kendal Record Office, we can sometimes see exactly how they obtained them, and how much they paid for them. This is an integral part of the early social and economic history of the Lake District.

²¹ http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/awards/award_detail.asp?id=324573

²² N. Barker, *Treasures from the Libraries of National Trust Country Houses*, New York, 1999.

²³ G. Mandelbrote and Y. Lewis, *Learning to Collect: the Library of Sir Richard Ellys (1682-1742) at Blickling Hall*, London, 2004.

²⁴ M. Purcell, Books and readers in eighteenth-century Westmorland: the Brownes of Townend, *Library History* 17 (2001), 91-106.

Books in libraries like these have gone through their period of usefulness as purveyors of up to date information and ideas – you wouldn't go to an eighteenth-century encyclopaedia to get guidance on how to sell your house, or find out the population of an American state – and they have passed through another phase of value as texts which are useful for historical inquiry. Of course we have an ongoing need to access the texts of the past for all kinds of research and creative activity, but few people will travel to deepest Norfolk to read a book which is much more readily and conveniently accessible in the British Library, or Cambridge University Library. Increasingly, they may not go to those places either just to read the text, if a full-page facsimile can be called up on a computer. Yes, there are some individually rare titles in National Trust libraries where actually you may have to go to Lanhydrock see the only surviving copy of a particular edition, but these are fairly few and far between and one day they will be available in digital facsimile. What people will, increasingly, want to do is study these libraries as collections, and the books within them, for their unique qualities aside from their texts. The National Trust exhibition catalogue mentioned earlier says in its introduction that “the best and most important thing about books is that they can be read. That is how the country house library can still speak to us”. Perverse though it may sound, I would disagree with that – these books and libraries are certainly important, but not because people want to sit down and read their contents. I would agree more with a sentiment expressed elsewhere in the introduction, that “in their entirety the books that remain in the libraries offer a picture of intellectual and literary interests ... that is at least as vivid as the houses themselves”.

It is worth adding that books which have lived in cathedral, parish, college or country house libraries are far more likely to have preserved their layers of historic evidence than those which have suffered the ravages of generations of readers, and restorers, in large research libraries. Discarding original bindings, replacing endleaves, removing fragments, washing away or cropping off inscriptions and marginal notes are all processes which have been carried out with ruthless efficiency (and the best of intentions) by previous generations of library custodians, whose primary concern has been to keep the books in a fit state to be read. Conservators are now much more aware of the importance of preserving original evidence but a great deal has disappeared for ever. Rare (and fortunate) indeed is the historic collection, of any kind, which has not been subjected to some extent to these programmes of rebacking, rebinding, or repairing but smaller historic libraries are more likely to have been spared the worst. A seventeenth-century book called up from the stacks of the British Library is quite likely to be in a twentieth-century binding, which may in turn have replaced a nineteenth-century one, and its current physical state may have no clues at all about earlier layers of evidence which have been completely lost. The same book in a country house library will probably be in a contemporary binding, in a condition which gets us close to what it looked and felt like on the day it was bought, and will testify to the ways in which it has or has not been used and regarded during succeeding generations.

I have been focusing here on a particular way in which libraries, and individual books within them, are important as primary sources for historical enquiry, beyond the authorial content of words on pages. There are, of course, many other angles to library history, and why this is a topic worth pursuing, which you are brought out in the *Cambridge History* volumes. The importance of libraries as agents of social and

cultural change, particularly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, is a theme which is well known and extensively explored in the third volume of the series. This volume also chronicles the rise of university libraries during the twentieth century, with a chapter devoted to the libraries of the University of London.²⁵ One of the most interesting chapters in this volume, it seems to me, is the very last, in which Liz Chapman and Frank Webster reflect on “Libraries and librarians in the information age”.²⁶ Here, they challenge the received wisdom that developments in technology create the greatest drivers for change in libraries today, but point instead to the changes in social mindsets and values which they associate with what they call the overwhelming triumph of neoliberalism – the political and economic frameworks which have steadily gained ascendancy in the world following on from the collapse of communism and collectivism, and the end of the Cold War. They identify some key principles underlying the neoliberal philosophy, such as that provision of services should come from private rather than public agencies, that ability to pay should be the major criterion on which to provide services, and that profitability should be the arbiter of availability. We are all familiar with the consequences of these changes during the last few decades, as services which used to be publicly underwritten have been steadily privatised. Whether this brings welcome freedom of choice or merely shifts the levers of power from the government office to the corporate boardroom is a political argument whose swings and roundabouts I don’t want to get into, beyond pursuing a little the observations which Chapman and Webster make around implications for libraries of the neoliberal ascendancy. They believe that this will swing the balance away from the foundations of service on which libraries have traditionally been founded, as information becomes pay per view, and the notion of provision for the purposes of common good declines.

If we look at the history of libraries over the last few hundred years, one of the big trends was a shift from private to public ownership of information. Until at least the latter part of the nineteenth century, a sizeable proportion of the nation’s documentary heritage, as represented in the books and manuscripts which had survived from preceding centuries, was held in private rather than public collections. There was a network of libraries with some degree of public availability, including cathedral and parish libraries and the ancient universities, and from 1753 the British Museum Library, but vast quantities of books were held in private libraries. One of the changes of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was the gradual movement of a great part of this, via the salerooms, into national, university and other public libraries. This transfer, combined with the steady accumulation of new publications, built up a vast body of information resources, old and new, owned by and for the people, and available to them on demand.

In our emerging digital world, all this is changing. New online publications may be made accessible through libraries on a licensing basis, but ownership of the masterfile remains with the publisher. The digitisation of our documentary heritage is being bankrolled not by the state, but largely by Google, Microsoft and commercial publishers. Google are well known for their corporate mantra to do no evil, but these things can change. One of the more memorable moments of a JISC digitisation

²⁵ Bernard Naylor, *The libraries of the University of London to the 1960s*, in A. Black and P. Hoare (eds), *The Cambridge History of Libraries*, v.3, Cambridge, 2006, 345-356.

²⁶ Liz Chapman and Frank Webster, *Libraries and Librarians in the Information Age*, *CHL* v.3, 639-653.

conference I attended this summer was Chris Batt, the Chief Executive of the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, putting up a spoof headline that ran “Rupert Murdoch and the Russians in bid to buy Google”.²⁷ This is perhaps a little far-fetched but you could see what he was getting at. By not only developing the world’s search engine of choice, but also acquiring ownership of vast quantities of digital content, Google increasingly positions itself as the gateway to the world’s information, a title which you might think belonged to libraries. Professional thinking in librarianship for some years past has stressed the importance of access rather than holdings, of being less concerned about owning information resources as long as you know where to get them, which is in some respects a logical follow-on from the way that the digital world has developed. We do, however, have a warning of what can happen if we look at scientific journals. Canny publishers like Pergamon and Elsevier who bought up titles in the 1980s were able to squeeze huge profits and considerable pain from the academic library community in the 1990s. The backlash was one of the key drivers behind the Open Access movement, and the setting up of rival e-journals and e-repositories which are freely available on the web. The publishers have become more conciliatory, recognising that it’s in their political interests to do so, but this whole area is still something of a battleground and a melting pot. The key point here is that custody of content is an important issue, and is an area in which we are not at the present time really translating the vision that has for so long lay behind our network of libraries from the analogue to the digital age. That is, at least in part, a consequence of the shift in political thinking which is highlighted in the last chapter of the *Cambridge History*. It’s increasingly hard, in that climate, to sustain the justification for public investment of the kind that would be needed to keep the resources on the public side of the fence.

In *Attack of the clones*, the *Star Wars* film released in 2002, Obi-Wan Kenobi visits the Jedi Archive; it is depicted as what we instantly recognise as a typical large library room, full of bays of shelving, strikingly reminiscent of the Long Room in Trinity College, Dublin. The key difference between the Jedi library and the Long Room as we know it is that the books on the shelves have all been replaced by electronic capsules of information, which the users insert into computers. Is this the library of the future? Will the library of the future actually need so much physical storage space for its electronic resources? Predicting the future nature of libraries is a topic with its own literature and history, and could easily be the subject of a lecture in its own right – there is indeed a book on the subject, published in 2002, with a bibliography of over 700 items.²⁸ I think the general consensus is that most predictions that have been made during the last fifty years or so have turned out to be wide of the mark, and forecasting the future is a dodgy business. What I think we can be sure about is that there will be continuing change, and that libraries will need to adapt continuously to developments in technology, to the needs and expectations of their users, and to the political ethos in which they operate. The main thrust of this paper is around trying to get across the point that libraries, and the books within them, may have historical and research value beyond their textual content, and that recognising those values will become increasingly important as the purely textual value is seen to decline. “Libraries as history” is a phrase which sounds to have perjorative overtones, but let us see that books and libraries may be history in an entirely positive sense, with

²⁷ <http://involve.jisc.ac.uk/wpmu/digitisation/2007/07/19/conference-2007-chris-batt/>

²⁸ Gregg Sapp, *A Brief History of the Future of Libraries: an Annotated Bibliography*, Lanham, 2002.

unique properties in the fabric of cultural heritage, with a wealth of meaning worth preserving and interpreting. The extent to which they are preserved into the future will be strongly influenced by the values which society attaches to them, and why, if at all, they are thought to be important.