

*The Library: A Fragile History*. Andrew Pettegree and Arthur der Weduwen. New York: Basic Books, 2021. 528 pp. \$35. Hardcover, 9781541600775.

Andrew Pettegree and Arthur der Weduwen's 2021 book, *The Library: a Fragile History*, is a relatively short text with an expansive scope, which crafts a narrative encompassing nearly the entire history of book collecting. The authors weave themes of fragility and change throughout the text, reinforcing the idea that libraries are neither permanent nor indestructible through a series of historical examples. The book is arranged in six sections, with an introduction and a postscript. These are roughly chronological, although more attention is paid to their thematic relationships than their temporal ones.

The first of these sections, "Inception and Survival," covers the largest period of time, touching on the foundations of book collecting from antiquity into the fifteenth century. It sets the tone for the book, establishing a broad definition of the term "library" that includes everything from the municipal archives of the Roman Republic to the private collections of individual priests and scholars. It asks, "what, crucially, was the public for a public library?" (27), a question which has a consistently shifting answer as time progresses and social attitudes change and is examined throughout the text. Another theme which is established early is the frequency with which libraries are lost or destroyed, not necessarily through malicious intent. As the authors state, "neglect was a much more potent enemy than war or malice" (22). Historically, many of the collections that garnered the greatest reputations were those curated by wealthy monastic communities with particularly bookish abbots, such as John Cassian or Benedict of Nursia in the early Middle Ages. Such collections frequently fell into disrepair once their original curators depart, establishing a cyclical pattern of creation and dissolution which is brought to the foreground in *The Library*. Throughout the section the authors refer to specific historical case studies as representative of the cultures and time periods that they are drawn from. Though these generally serve the narrative of the text, the intense focus given to some such figures occasionally loses its connection to its broader themes of fragility and change

The second section begins with discussion of the advent of moveable type-face printing, a technology that made book collecting a more accessible practice, ballooning the size of collections into the sprawling libraries of the early modern era. The authors emphasize the fact that early printers had no explicit intention to revolutionize book production and even sought to emulate the stylistic elements of manuscripts with their work. Nevertheless, the first chapter of this section is not titled "The Infernal Press" without cause. The authors detail a period after the proliferation of printing technology during which "the sheer quantity of new books in circulation certainly drove down prices" (81). They draw a correlation between the production of printed texts and a decrease in the appeal of library-building among the ruling classes of Europe, writing that "as more people amassed collections of books, the great libraries of the manuscript age lost their lustre" (84). A countermovement to this, in which manuscript books were valued for their craftsmanship and differentiated from the common printed text, was only just beginning to grow by the late fifteenth century. The authors highlight King Mathew Corvinus of Hungary and Margaret of Austria, who curated manuscript collections during a period when printed books saturated the market. Both are framed as relatively unique, remarkable individuals; their connections to a burgeoning antiquarian movement do not become apparent until later in the text.

The authors draw a direct correlation between print technologies and the Protestant Reformation. They focus primarily on the pattern of creation and destruction of libraries which accelerated during this period. The ability to relatively easily print and disseminate approved texts when the official religious stance of a region changed enabled what the authors describe as a "tit-for-tat struggle, with books stoking

the fires of controversy throughout Europe” (103). This struggle consumed large portions of early print collections, such as the library of Fernando Colon, which was subject to scrutiny of the Spanish Inquisition when it was bequeathed to the Seville Cathedral after his death. Colon himself is framed as an especially significant figure, with his style of collecting contrasted directly against that of that of Desiderius Erasmus.

Part Three focuses on the aftermath of the incunabula era and the Protestant Reformation, highlighting the private collectors who maintained personal collections during a period in which institutional libraries were subject to the threats of neglect and censorship. The authors describe this as a “recalibration of the library, through the creation of thousands of personal collections” (124). These collections were largely in the hands of a rising class of urban professionals, many of whom built private libraries as an extension of their careers. The argument for such a recalibration is somewhat weakened by the emphasis placed on individuals over institutions in earlier sections. Given that many of the earlier libraries are essentially framed as grandiose personal collections, the shift seems less a recalibration than a democratization, with professional classes taking up the mantle of collector which had been set down by the aristocracy.

The authors tie this period of collecting to a thriving book market, in which both newly printed texts and aftermarket copies were available through booksellers and auction houses. Some attention is given to the institutional libraries established during the sixteenth century, but this discussion focuses primarily on singular figures within such institutions who had an outsized impact on their development. The Bodleian Library, which opened its doors at Oxford University in 1602, is the subject of nearly an entire chapter. However, the institutional nature of this collection is not presented as a contrasting model to that which was followed by the urban professionals. The authors attribute the success of the collection primarily to “Bodley’s uncompromising ambition, combined with impeccable scholarly and political connections” (143). The social and trade networks that allowed for the Bodleian to be established take a back seat to the personal accomplishments and background of Sir Thomas Bodley himself. This focus on the individual differentiates the Bodleian from the collections of the urban professionals primarily by its scale and influence. The catalog of the Bodleian was published and sold on the open market, increasing the status of the collection and helping to establish its role as tastemaker for those seeking to build their own libraries. Similar library-building efforts were enacted concurrently by missionaries in the American colonies and on the frontlines of the struggle between Catholics and Protestants. The authors highlight the role of libraries in these conflicts, describing them as “ideological weapons with a specific mission,” which “became intellectual castles and fortresses, and an encapsulation of the values of the settlers who had crossed the seas to seize and subdue” (160).

Part Four focuses primarily on the semi-public libraries of the seventeenth century. Town and parish libraries across Europe are contrasted against the scholarly and bureaucratic libraries built by the likes of Cardinal Jules Mazarin. The former were far more wide-reaching and ostensibly more accessible than the latter. However, the authors highlight the many pitfalls into which such projects fell, chiefly a lack of materials which proved genuinely useful to their intended audiences. The authors describe a series of attempts at creating such systems, by Thomas Bray, James Kirkwood, and others, all resulting in collections which sat unused and were ultimately dissolved. In contrast, the much more ostentatious collections of statesman and religious leaders drew large audiences. The downfall of these libraries was often the very thing which made them noteworthy: their reputations. Libraries such as that of Cardinal Jules Mazarin became tools and trophies in the machinations of Europe’s political elite. Those that survived did not necessarily follow the model set out by Mazarin, but rather his successor Colbert, who chose to facilitate

the building of an institutional library under the patronage of King Louis XIV which was “not the peacock display of the great collector, but a potent instrument of the administrative state” (208-209).

Part Five of the book deals primarily with fiction, focusing largely on the novel. The authors present two models for paid, membership-based libraries which catered to different social demographics and collected different materials. The first of these is the subscription library model, pioneered by the Library Company of Philadelphia. Many of these organizations had small, carefully curated collections and were as much social clubs as they were sources of reading material. Pettegree and der Weduwen present circulating libraries as a contrasting model, the “raucous alter ego” (257) to subscription libraries. These were intimately linked with the production of serialized novels and other materials which were less reputable than those which could be found at subscription libraries. The Noble brothers are presented as exemplars of this business model, publishing books purposely written for the use of circulating libraries. Equal attention is paid to libraries as they relate to imperialism during the eighteenth century. The MacMillan publishing company, and others like it, saw benefits to printing books specifically for dissemination in the colonies with titles that differed from those sold in England. Concurrently, the British government established a national library, founded on the collection of Sir Hans Sloane, which would become the British Museum and serve as a symbol of cultural distinction for the empire. The continued development and shifting models of these diverse libraries as both sources of reading material and cultural capital throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is discussed throughout this section.

Part Six of the book is devoted almost entirely to the state of libraries in the twentieth century, describing a “patriotic bibliophilia” (323) which was endemic to libraries during the Second World War. Libraries played a key role in the political machines of both axis and allied nations, with collections being curated as a means of propaganda while the libraries of conquered nations were looted by the victors. The authors describe how the libraries of France were funneled to institutions such as the Berlin State Library before being disseminated among the victors after the war’s end. The rest of the twentieth century saw libraries, now increasingly public and institutional, continue to develop along political lines, with censorship persisting as an issue particularly among public libraries. It is in this section that the focus on singular figures largely gives way to a framing of institutions as independent from their individual members. The role of libraries and librarianship in an increasingly digital-based media landscape is addressed only in a brief postscript which also briefly acknowledges the ischool movement of the twenty-first century and other contemporary issues in librarianship.

On the whole, *The Library: A Fragile History* maintains a quick pace throughout, a fact which is necessitated by the sheer breadth of history which it encompasses. The themes of fragility and destruction which the authors weave throughout the book lends a narrative structure to the text which is reminiscent of the popular history genre of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This, combined with relatively simple language, allows the text to be accessible to library specialists and lay-people alike. Equally reminiscent of popular histories is the outsized focus placed on specific historic figures. This is generally unobtrusive, but occasionally distances case studies from their historical context. The book would prove useful, alongside supplementary readings, as the basis for a survey course on the history of books or libraries. Its primary function is as a concise, digestible overview of library history, a role which it fills more than adequately.

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