

8 *Last Words*

ON 18 June 1940, Greg wrote to John Quincy Adams, the Librarian of the Folger Shakespeare Library:

Dear Dr Adams

Your letter of 3 June has just arrived, with its more than generous references to my very modest qualifications. I value your opinion greatly, however wildly exaggerated it may be.

By the time this reaches you, you will be able at least to guess at the magnitude of the disaster that has befallen the cause we have at heart. I cannot speak of it.

Ever yours
W. W. Greg¹

The day on which this letter was written is of some consequence. The day before France had surrendered to Germany. In Greg's letter, 'the darkest hour' is captured in the authentic voice, not of a soldier or politician, but of someone who cared for the literary and historical heritage of the book, and the preservation of documentary evidence. In parliament, that same day as Greg wrote to Adams, Churchill spoke of the battle about to commence, upon which 'the survival of Christian civilisation' depended, pitted, as it was, against 'a new Dark Age made more sinister, and perhaps more protracted, by the lights of perverted science'. What the letter reveals is the depths of Greg's despair and, implicitly, the way in which he saw the newly established Folger Shakespeare Library as the institution that would carry forward the preservation of the literature and values that he believed were not simply at risk, but on the brink of destruction.

It is important to realise what Greg so evidently understood: that all books become unique, and there are many stages through which they do so. In the choice of script or type, paper, and format, every document is distinguished from, and connected to, those with which it is most closely related. Then there is the later history of ownership, annotation, and, quite often, rebinding—sometimes as *sammelbände*, sometimes through breaking up such collections. There may have been efforts to remove the trace of previous owners through washing, scraping, obliteration, or excision. As artefacts, books contain other signs of life and use than the underlining and annotation of an owner, or their signature, bookplate, or stamp on the boards, flyleaves, or title:

¹ Folger Shakespeare Library, MS Y.c.1098 (2).

there are books with the thumbprints of pressmen, the paw prints of a domestic cat,² the footprints of a bird,³ the pen scrawls of a child, tobacco burns, wine stains, remnants of food, pressed flowers, scissors, spectacles, and writing instruments. The history of collecting and of dispersal is part of this material history as well. Each and every book, manuscript or printed, is an historical artefact in its own right.

As well as the books that survive, there are many others that have been destroyed by their owners, or through circumstance: books have been thrown away after reading, used for toilet paper, turned to cinders in accidental or deliberate fire, shot through or blown to pieces in war, twisted and crumpled by earthquake, carbonized by volcanic eruption, lost at sea, suppressed by authority, pulped by librarians, consumed in an explosion while being 'conserved' with the rocket propellant diethyl zinc,⁴ used for wrapping paper or lining the dishes for pies,⁵ being torn to pieces, or read until their physical structure disintegrates. Some books survive mutilated almost beyond recognition, and certainly use. Other volumes have suffered irreparable damage through mistreatment and neglect including the effects of damp and mould, the damage from insects or bacteria, or being cut up by bibliographers wanting examples of printing-house ornaments.

Compared to the damage and destruction that is regularly done to books, the silence of the shelves is an enlightened Elysium. Yet, for all of our uses of communication, of documents and texts, for all of what libraries preserve as a witness to a society and its civilization, much of what we do and think is lost to posterity. When we treat books and manuscripts simply as texts, we compound the possibilities of not understanding the past because we remove the archaeological evidence that gives the artefacts historical meaning. From this perspective, the damage that we do to libraries by treating literary documents as sites of information is manifold. For all its triumph, in manuscript, in print, and through electronic and recorded resources, the written testament is but

² Noticed in a copy of Jonson's 1616 *Workes* in the Newberry Library, Chicago, shelfmark Case Y135 J735, 4H4^v-5^r. As the leaves are not conjugate, it is likely that the cat with the muddy paws belonged to an owner rather than to the printing-house; it was, perhaps, the pet of George Rutland of Newcastle, who had the volume rebound in the early nineteenth-century, and who annotated his copy extensively.

³ Again, noticed in a copy of Jonson's 1616 *Workes*; this time, Folger Shakespeare Library, shelfmark STC 14751 copy 1, H3^r: illustrated in Bland, 'William Stansby and . . . *The Workes of Benjamin Jonson*', 7.

⁴ This astonishing story is told by N. Baker, *Double-fold: Libraries and the Assault on Paper* (New York, 2001), 111-34.

⁵ See Greg, 'The Bakings of Betsy', *Collected Papers*, 48-74; Jonson also refers to the practice in 'An Execration upon Vulcan', 1.54.

a fragment of that larger lost work of the living word, and the history of its preservation.

Libraries are about fragments.⁶ Their first lesson, the law of the catalogue, is that no literary document exists in isolation. This is as true of the most simple as the most erudite of witnesses. What we do with these fragments is discover the relationships that exist between them (physical, textual, historical), and from that discovery we construct a pattern of understanding: when we write something down, we distance ourselves from its meaning, and conceive of it as relating to something else. As soon as we understand that all texts have *contexts*—other words, other ideas, against which they exist—we enter into a far more fruitful and complex understanding of the human record. On a higher level, we also discover that all libraries are incomplete, and that each library has its own particular role as a witness to civilization; and as scholars, we need to recognise that our records of their holdings may be incomplete.

Libraries are libraries of libraries, built up from an accumulation of both single volumes, and collections put together by scholars, families, and booksellers. If books have editions, libraries have collections, yet libraries are not simply collections of books, nor are multiple copies of a text historically ever quite the same (for a start, a duplicate is not the original copy acquired and so is present in a collection for another reason than the first); nor may two 'copies' be physically the same. In a more profound sense, all libraries are fragmentary witnesses to the use of the history of the written word.

All libraries are incomplete, and each library that serves the public or a specific community, has its own role as a guardian of the inscriptions, manuscripts, printed books, and, more recently, other media in its trust. Such collections are never haphazard, and their continuing maintenance and development needs to fully engage with the history of their form as well as with their meaning. As a consequence, the practice of analytical and descriptive bibliography, is informed with an ethical and historical responsibility towards the preservation and care of printed books, manuscripts, and other documents as artefacts of cultural heritage, by demonstrating that the iconic works of imagination and intellect can only be fully understood in relation to the material and textual histories of those other marginal and mundane items alongside which they were created, consumed, and kept.⁷

⁶ For a discussion of the importance of literary and historical fragments: G. W. Most (ed.), *Collecting Fragments* (Göttingen, 1998).

⁷ For further reflections on the function and responsibilities of a national library, see McKenzie, 'Our Textual Definition of the Future', 277.

The first simple, obvious fact about early modern documents (the manuscripts, books, drawings, letters, accounts, and contracts that all used paper) is that most of the evidence does not survive. In an earlier chapter, it was observed that between 1500 and 1700 almost all paper in England was imported. Certainly, there were elements of a domestic trade, but it was not until after 1700 that it became a significant manufacturing industry in its own right. If we look at the import figures from the viewpoint of establishing a minimum of how much paper was used between 1500 and 1700 (broadly tripling over the course of each century, with any local output being in addition to this), then we are talking about the domestic consumption of, at least, c.6–7 billion sheets of white paper during that 200-year period (the important point is the order of magnitude, not the exact figure), and that does not include the trade in imported books.

As far as domestic book production is concerned, we have c.90,000 entries for pre-1700 books and broadsides printed in Britain, some of which involve minor distinctions such as variant imprints for title-pages. Of these, many items survive as unique copies, and some as fragments; the vast majority of pre-Civil War books are represented by no more than ten copies, with most items there are fewer extant witnesses than that.⁸ Even if we were to guess at the quantity of surviving manuscripts, we would have to acknowledge that the vast majority of written texts have been lost. If we were to propose that 3–4 per cent, or even 6–8 per cent of all the paper that was used survives (no-one has counted how much actually does exist), the point would be the same: there is reason to believe that at least c.95 per cent, possibly as much as 98 per cent, of the paper that was used in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries has perished.

There is nothing particularly surprising about the scale of this loss: the Reformation, Civil War, and Great Fire, all played their part, but the single greatest factor determining the destruction of paper was simply a combination of its temporary use, and the insignificance of the texts as historical documents to those who made or owned them. Paper once used is frequently discarded, and although it is durable (and rag paper especially so), it was used for its convenience, not its permanence. The caveat that follows from this is that any discussion of the uses of books and manuscripts needs to recognize the imperfect and partial nature of the evidence that we have.⁹

⁸ For an extended review of the completed revision to the pre-1640 *Short Title Catalogue*: P. W. M. Blayney, 'The Numbers Game: Appraising the Revised *STC*', *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America* (1994), 353–407.

⁹ See also, McKenzie, 'Printing and Publishing 1557–1700', 553–67.

Yet, as Glen Dudbridge has remarked, texts can ‘exist in a state which is neither full transmission nor full loss’.¹⁰ Quotations, or references to texts that once existed, may be present in other texts; annotations may be present in a book that was used to prepare another; a printed book might exist in its manuscript form but the edition may not have survived; entries in the Stationers’ Register indicate that there are books that no longer exist; edition numbers on a title-page, or regular reprinting (such as with almanacs) may reveal other printings that have been lost to posterity; the preparation of stemmata for manuscript traditions will reveal intermediaries in the transmission process that no longer survive, but whose textual variants we can surmise. Such information is useful on three counts. First, it urges prudence about the assumptions we make regarding extant materials and the patterns of production. Second, it helps identify material that might still exist but that has not yet been recorded. Third, it reveals aspects about the histories and uses of texts and documents that we might otherwise overlook. That which remains, that can be known, has been shaped not only by the impulses of creation and preservation, or the structures of understanding and the hierarchies implied by critical judgment and taste, but also by obligations, by the mutability of desires, and by forgetfulness, suppression, erasure, and neglect.

From the books that do survive, there is considerable evidence of the formation of personal libraries,¹¹ and of how books were read in the early modern period. Hence, a substantial body of work has been done on the libraries of various writers, scholars, and intellectuals. Reading, as Roger Chartier remarked, ‘is always a practice embodied in acts, spaces, and habits’.¹² Personal libraries, whether located as separate spaces or as an ordinary room furnished with books, shaped the lives of those who used them, and created shared obligations. Those practices and spaces have been explored recently with some thoughtfulness.¹³ Equally, the early modern reader might have access to parochial, cathedral, college and university libraries, or the substantial private collections of individuals such as John Dee, Sir Robert Cotton, and John Selden.

¹⁰ G. Dudbridge, *Lost Books of Medieval China* (London, 2000), 27.

¹¹ See, E. Leedham-Green and D. J. McKitterick, ‘Ownership: Private and Public Libraries’, *The Book in Britain . . . 1557–1695*, 323–38.

¹² Chartier, *The Order of Books: Readers, Authors and Libraries in Europe between the Fourteenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Oxford, 1994), 3.

¹³ For instance, H. Brayman Hackel, *Reading Materials in Early Modern England: Print, Gender and Literacy* (Cambridge, 2005); K. Sharpe, *Reading Revolutions: The Politics of Reading in Early Modern England* (New Haven CT, 2000); W. H. Sherman, *Used Books: Marking Readers in Renaissance England* (Philadelphia PA, 2008).

The problem with books is that they occupy space, and cumulatively any large collection occupies a lot of space; furthermore, readers require space, and the more books a library has, the more readers there are likely to be. Cumulatively, as well, books are heavy and that means any building that houses them has to be structurally resilient. In the past, these issues were dealt with by building libraries, some magnificent, most with a quiet dignity, to house the collections and cater to those who accessed them.¹⁴ In recent decades, digital technology has seemed to offer an alternative, by compressing the physical space of the book into a digitally encoded form.

There can be no doubt that much manuscript activity, as well as the composition and manufacture of books, has been transformed by digital means. Serious projects for the creation of electronic archives, and the creation of digital scholarly editions, offer the possibility of making texts and their versions available in ways that have not previously been possible. What is, at this stage, less certain is the durability of those methods, of the commitment of universities, publishers, and libraries to house them on a permanent basis, and of the willingness for them to be maintained in such a way that the primary documents are able to cope with evolving technological circumstances. The funding available to develop digital projects is often limited, the technical and archival aspects of the work can be highly complex and the project may take a great deal of time to complete, the standards and methods adopted for different projects have been inconsistent, and the institutional support is usually based on the involvement of specific individuals. Nevertheless, a commitment to the making and maintaining of digital scholarly archives and editions must be part of the future provision of university and library resources as an enhancement to, not as a substitute for, the physical book.

The problem that the digital library creates, as an additional activity, is that it may divert scarce resources away from the maintenance and development of the physical collections. The risk, which now recurs with increasing frequency, is that the digital image is seen as a substitute for the physical artefact and thus, instead of arguing from high moral principle for the provision of adequate funding, those concerned collude in the belief that the book is only a text, that a text is only information, and that the physical copy can be discarded and replaced by a digital image. At the same time, the funding that ought to be devoted to libraries, and the maintenance of the human written record, is instead diverted by governments into projects that seek to gather

¹⁴ See, R. Chartier, *The Order of Books*, 61–91; D. J. McKitterick, et al., *The Making of the Wren Library* (Cambridge, 1995).

information of an ever more intrusive nature on the lives of private citizens. The pursuit of information at the expense of knowledge and understanding as represented by considered written discourse, the privileging of political self-interest over a broader ethical responsibility that ought to be at the heart of civilized government, and the claim that such institutions have the assumed right to control the behaviour of others rather than tolerate the liberty of individual conscience, has quietly been pursued by the lights of perverted science.¹⁵

Scholars and librarians have a responsibility to the history of the book as an artefact that reflects the values of society over time and the use of the human intellect in its material forms. The ability to study a book and read its history in the hand, as well as its text on the page, is to engage in a deeper understanding of the arts of human communication and the ways in which that has evolved. Paper, script, type, structure, the traces left by other texts, the changes that have been made from one copy to another, and the attempts to control what was written are not incidental matters: without them no book or manuscript would exist as they do. As guardians of those objects that we seek to understand in this way, libraries have an opportunity to celebrate and inform about the rich diversity of physical materials in their possession; to work with scholars to explain the significance of such items, and how these artefacts relate to the beliefs, ideas, and practices of the time in which they were made; and a responsibility to those who come after, and who will use the marginal, the mundane, and the extraordinary materials in their collections, in ways unimagined, to illuminate times present and past: that is a purpose and a pleasure they ought never surrender.



¹⁵ Much the same point was long ago made by D. F. McKenzie, 'John Milton, Alexander Turnbull and Kathleen Coleridge', *Turnbull Library Record*, 14 (1981), 111 (106–11): 'As an example of its projective force in the present, one could develop from *Areopagitica* a defence of the physical book—in contrast to the mechanics of information retrieval. Preselected, institutionally controlled, commercially directed and ephemeral "information" is no more accessible to the individual than authority, short-time storage, and sophisticated technology (beyond the means of any individual) will permit. The portability and thoughtful privacy of the physical book, its hospitality (unlike VDU screens) to the formal shaping of consecutively presented thought, and even the coarse and publicly overt means required to suppress, censor and frustrate the adequate housing of *physical* books, make it a surer defence against institutional secrecy and its attendant, political tyranny.'