

# Why care about Libraries?

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*I spy, with my little eye, something beginning with ... L.  
It's a library.*

L proves to be an interesting letter in English, because it introduces so many words strongly associated with the venture we are launching today: Literature. Language. Living. Loving. Lending. Learning. Leisure. Legacy. And also: Loss. Liquidation. Lament. Lunacy. We can tell the story of our enterprise by exploring the letter L. (We can do it in Welsh too, if you want: Llyfrau (books), Llenyddiaeth (literature), Llythrennedd (literacy), Lloerigrwydd (lunacy).

Long before I was asked to give this talk, in Chapter 3 of my autobiographical memoir, *Just a Phrase I'm Going Through*, I had written about one of the magical worlds I experienced as a child:

the world of reading. I learned to read very quickly and, according to my mother, I was always reading. We couldn't afford much by way of books, but the local library was only two minutes away. I got to know every inch of its children's shelves, and steadily worked my way through them, using my allowance of two books per person per week. ... And then there was the joy of ownership. A book was *my* book, even if it was due back at the end of the week. The words were mine. I was their master. Years later, when I came across Jean-Paul Sartre's *Words (Les Mots)*, I was delighted and amazed. This was my story, too:

I never scratched the soil or searched for nests; I never looked for plants or threw stones at birds. But books were my birds and my nests, my pets, my stable and my countryside; the library was the world trapped in a mirror. ... Nothing seemed more important to me than a book. I saw the library as a temple.

A temple indeed, but so much more. A library is a refuge, a second home, a leisure centre, a discovery channel, an advice bureau. It is a place where you can sit and draw the shelves around you like a warm cloak. Those who threaten any library service with cutbacks and closures are the most mindless of demons.

There is, indeed, something that literally takes away our minds when we lose a library. Or put it the other way round: when we gain a library we gain a source of wellbeing. The inscription over the door of the library at the ancient city of Thebes read (in classical Greek): 'The medicine chest of the soul'.

How best to capture the spirit, the ethos, the value of libraries? Over the centuries, people have marvelled at them. It doesn't have to be a huge establishment, such as the National Library. Even the smallest village library captures the magic described so well by the Scots poet Alexander Smith (1830-67):

I go into my library, and all history unrolls before me. I breathe the morning air of the world while the scent of Eden's roses yet lingered in it, while it vibrated only to the world's first brood of nightingales, and to the laugh of Eve. I see the pyramids building; I hear the shoutings of the armies of Alexander.

And the American political writer Norman Cousins (1915-90) agrees: 'A library ... should be the delivery room for the birth of ideas - a place where history comes to life.'

The lauding of libraries crosses centuries and cultures. First and foremost they are seen as repositories of knowledge, windows into history. 'A great library', said Canadian scientist George Mercer Dawson (1849-1901), 'contains the diary of the human race.' And American essayist Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-82) echoes the theme:

Consider what you have in the smallest chosen library. A company of the wisest and wittiest men that could be picked out of all civil countries, in a 1000 years, have set in best order the results of their learning and wisdom. The men themselves were hid and inaccessible, solitary, impatient of interruption, fenced by etiquette; but the thought which they did not uncover to their bosom friend is here written out in transparent words to us, the strangers of another age.

Women too, of course. Emerson's phrasing is of his age, but his sentiment is universal.

The metaphor of a library as a treasure trove is a recurrent figure. Here is British poet and journalist John Alfred Langford (1823-1903): 'The only true equalisers in the world are books; the only treasure-house open to all comers is a library.' And Malcolm Forbes (1919-90), the publisher of Forbes magazine, is in no doubt about the appropriateness of the wealth metaphor: 'The richest person in the world - in fact all the riches in the world - couldn't provide you with anything like the endless, incredible loot available at your local library.' But writers seem almost to be competing to find a metaphor that best captures the function of libraries in society. This is English clergyman William Dyer (1636-1696): 'Libraries are the wardrobes of literature, whence men, properly informed may bring forth something for ornament, much for curiosity, and more for use.' And, 400 years on, this is writer Germaine Greer (1939- ): 'libraries are reservoirs of strength, grace and wit, reminders of order, calm and continuity, lakes of mental energy'. For Norman Mailer (1923-2007), a library was 'a sanctuary', for Francis Bacon (1561-1626), 'a shrine', for Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986) it transcends life itself: 'I have always imagined that Paradise will be a kind of library'.

I like the reservoir metaphor - a library as a source of knowledge, waiting for us to simply turn on a tap. Like water, libraries are essential to our wellbeing. As the American social reformer Henry Ward Beecher (1813-87) said, 'A library is not a luxury but one of the necessities of life.' It is a means of self-improvement, of advancement. As American historian Arthur Meier Schlesinger (1888-1965) put it: 'Our history has been greatly shaped by people who read their way to opportunity and achievements in public libraries.' Or, as poet and humorist Richard Armour (1906-89) put it in 1954: A library...

Here is where people,  
One frequently finds,  
Lower their voices  
And raise their minds.

And it brings together people from all walks of life. As 'Lady Bird' Johnson (1912-2007), former American first lady, commented: 'Perhaps no place in any community is so totally democratic as the town library. The only entrance requirement is interest.'

Along with these brief observations, we must not forget the longer and more thoughtful recollections. Esther Hautzig (1930-2009), deported to Siberia as a child during World War 2, wrote an account of her time there, called *The Endless Steppe* (1968). This is what she says:

There was one place where I forgot the cold, indeed forgot Siberia. That was in the library. There, in that muddy village, was a great institution. Not physically, to be sure, but in every other way imaginable. It was a small log cabin, immaculately attended to with loving care; it was well lighted with oil lamps and it was warm. But best of all, it contained a small but amazing collection from the world's best literature, truly amazing considering the time, the place, and its size. From floor to ceiling it was lined with books - books, books, books. It was there that I was to become acquainted with the works of Dumas, Pasternak's translations of Shakespeare, the novels of Mark Twain, Jack London, and of course the Russians. It was in that log cabin that I escaped from Siberia - either reading there or taking the books home. It was between that library and two extraordinary teachers that I developed a lifelong passion for the great Russian novelists and poets. It was there that I learned to line up patiently for my turn to sit at a table and read, to wait - sometimes months - for a book. It was there that I learned that reading was not only a great delight, but a privilege.

Let no one forget that. If you want to truly appreciate the value of reading, imagine it being taken away from you. Imagine a Siberia with no library. Or a Rhosneigr.

Of course, we are not the first to ponder the implications of losing a library. Listen to the claim made by American cardinal Terence Cooke (1921-83): 'America's greatness is not only recorded in books, but it is also dependent upon each and every citizen being able to utilize public libraries.' Listen to American astronomer Carl Sagan:

The library connects us with the insight and knowledge, painfully extracted from Nature, of the greatest minds that ever were, with the best teachers, drawn from the entire planet and from all our history, to instruct us without tiring, and to inspire us to make our own contribution to the collective knowledge of the human species. I think the health of our civilization, the depth of our awareness about the underpinnings of our culture and our concern for the future can all be tested by how well we support our libraries.

Listen to science-fiction writer Isaac Asimov (1920-92):

I received the fundamentals of my education in school, but that was not enough. My real education, the superstructure, the details, the true architecture, I got out of the public library. For an impoverished child whose family could not afford to buy books, the library was the open door to wonder and achievement, and I can never be sufficiently grateful that I had the wit to charge through that door and make the most of it. Now, when I read constantly about the way in which library funds are being cut and cut, I can only think that the door is closing and that American society has found one more way to destroy itself.

And in Britain, listen to Victorian critic John Ruskin (1819-1900): 'What do we, as a nation, care about books? How much do you think we spend altogether on our libraries, public or private, as compared with what we spend on our horses?'

Have you noticed? I've just quoted from a Roman Catholic cardinal, an art critic, a scientist, and a science fiction novelist. All sending out the same message. There can be few subjects like libraries to unite such disparate and distinguished minds. And the reason is clear. Libraries are truly special. As American writer Lawrence Clark Powell (1906-2001) put it: 'To be in a library is one of the purest of all experiences.' The point has long been appreciated here in Wales. In 1916 the Welsh Department of the Board of Education published a booklet, *A Nation and its Books*. On page 11 we read:

The future of our people depends largely on our books and on our libraries. No teacher is more helpful or more candid than a book, no friend is a better friend than a good book, no school is so inexpensive as a library. ... Every town should have ... its library... Every village ought to have a library.'

And if it already has one, it ought not to lose it.

Once a library is gone, it is gone. It cannot suddenly be resuscitated. As the British politician Augustine Birrell (1850-1933) once said: 'Libraries are not made; they grow.' That takes time. Behind each library, no matter how small, is a history of growth, watered by the professionalism of the library's caretakers and the enthusiasm of its readers. It is not an enterprise that can be measured by numbers. It is quality that counts, not quantity. No political body should fall into the trap of judging the success of a library solely in terms of the number of its visitors. That lone reader in the corner: who knows what personal potential will be realized in the future because of today's library experience? As American poet Archibald MacLeish (1892-1982) said: 'What is more important in a library than anything else - than everything else - is the fact that it exists.' If it exists, it will be used. And French writer Victor Hugo (1802-85) sums it up: 'A library implies an act of faith'.

A century ago, in 1911, a king and queen symbolized that faith. They visited Aberystwyth to lay the foundation stone of the National Library of Wales. In 2011, a future king and queen will come to live nearby. In my poetic imagination, I hear Prince William looking towards Rhosneigr - down on it, even, from his helicopter - and repeating my I Spy rhyme. 'I spy, with my royal eye...' - but will he have to end it with '*nothing*' beginning with L'? It is a scenario that I trust our political leaders will ensure we will never see. It is time for them too to make an act of faith.