

Lost Libraries

Reviewed by Paula Grunseit

James Raven, ed., *Lost Libraries: The Destruction of Great Book Collections since Antiquity*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2004

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What could be more traumatic for a librarian than to watch a library burn?

All over the city, sheets of burning paper, fragile pages of grey ashes floated down like a dirty black snow. Catching a page, you could feel its heat, and for a moment read a fragment of text in a strange kind of black and grey negative, until, as the heat dissipated, the page melted to dust in your hand.

Here, Kemal Bakarsik, librarian of the Sarajevo National Museum, describes the burning of the Vijećnica (National and University Library of Bosnia and Hercegovina, Sarajevo) in August 1992 after three days of bombing. More than a million books, printed and manuscript, were lost in this one terrible event. How do we even imagine such a loss, let alone comprehend its implications for humanity?

Lost Libraries is edited and introduced by James Raven (Professor of Modern British History, University of Essex, and Director of the Cambridge Project for the Book Trust). Each of the fourteen chapters takes the form of a scholarly essay presenting us with a particular viewpoint on the broader implications of what it means to lose libraries. The very concept of a library is examined, as are some of the mythologies surrounding library loss, including Alexandria and the 'library of Aristotle'. The reader also gains an understanding of some of the history of libraries and their development.

In its entirety, the book spans centuries, the globe and various media — opening with the cuneiform tablets of Mesopotamia and closing with a discussion of two films: Truffaut's 1966 interpretation of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* and Taradash's 1956 film *Storm Center*. In light of the recently 'refurbished' sedition laws, this discussion is particularly relevant.

For centuries, libraries and archival collections have been the victims not only of natural disasters including fires (Sarajevo, 1992), floods (Florence, 1966) and earthquakes (Tokyo, 1923). They have also felt the impact of mankind's menacing hand via wars, propaganda, political agendas and incidents of pure vandalism. The statistics of loss are staggering.

Despite the odds, throughout history, desperate and often heroic attempts have been made to preserve libraries and save great collections. In 1526 the Turks defeated the Hungarian army and Louis II, King of Hungary, died on the battlefield. As soon as this news reached the capital, Buda, its citizens left the city on boats or wagons loaded with whatever they could and buried the rest. Mary of Hapsburg, the King's widow, had the Hungarian royal archive loaded onto a barge and sent it up the



Danube towards Hungary's second city, Bratislava. She was hoping to save the archive from the encroaching Turkish troops. Tragically, the barge and the Hungarian royal archive sank into the mud. The royal Corvina Library collection was built by King Louis II's predecessor, King Matthias Corvinus, and at its peak in the 1480s represented the second largest library in Christendom. Many of the most precious books were chained to the shelves making a rescue attempt difficult. Sultan Suleiman's troops raided the library after their arrival in Buda in early September of 1526. Many items were taken back to Constantinople, many were stolen or sold on the open market and the rest of the collection was neglected until the late 1800s.

Librarians have always been in an invidious position. At times they have been forced to preside over and participate in the dismantling and destruction of collections and at other times have even died for their cause.

During the dissolution of more than 700 monasteries under Emperor Joseph II in the Hapsburg empire between 1782 and 1787, large portions of the holdings of monastic libraries were initially transferred to university libraries. In 1786, university librarians were forced to sell entire sections of the monastic libraries to papermakers for pulp. Some monasteries could not afford to transport their libraries to the universities and in these cases auctions were held at the monastery. In one case, those books not suitable for auction were offered to a cheesemaker who used them as wrapping paper.

In September 1941, shortly before they established the ghettos, Germans entered the Mefitse Haskala Library in Vilna, Lithuania, and shot the librarian. Herman Kruk, a librarian from Warsaw, took on the task of opening and managing Vilna's famous 'Ghetto Library'. This is one of the last entries from the diary of his deputy, Zelig Kalmanovitch, before they both died in Estonian death camps:

All week long I selected books; several thousands I cast with my own hands on the rubbish pile. A pile of books is scattered on the floor ... — a cemetery of books, a brother's grave, books that were hit by the war of Gog and Magog just like their owners ... And if salvation will hasten to come, perhaps we may be able to save a remnant from the pile. Would that it were so!

In *Storm Center*, Bette Davis stars as a feisty librarian who loses her job for refusing to remove *The Communist Dream* from her non-fiction shelf. Her community casts her out and when the library burns down, the townspeople have an epiphany and decide that censorship is bad after all. Bette vows to rebuild the library. As Kalmanovitch said, 'Would that it were so!'

Unfortunately, some questionable decisions have been made by libraries although the role of governments in supporting cultural endeavour must surely come into play here. In March 2001, during a process of 'deaccessioning', the University of Western Sydney admitted that 10 000

books including antique editions had been buried as landfill because of a shortage of storage space.

Perhaps the most sinister acts of destruction of all — those of ‘deliberately targeted pillage’ — have been used to achieve what some refer to as ‘literary genocide’.

One of the most recent, tragic examples chronicled in *Lost Libraries* is China’s attack on Tibetan culture in the late twentieth century. It is estimated that ‘in addition to 60 per cent of its literature, an estimated 85 per cent of the nation’s written materials and documents were destroyed’.

One might imagine this book to be dry or difficult. On the contrary, it is fascinating reading, if traumatic and even shocking. Although I was more ‘drawn’ to or deeply affected by certain chapters, the varying styles engage and compel, and there is a visible logic in the book’s progression.

Notes accompanying each chapter provide access to many possibilities for further reading and other inclusions are an index, black and white plates, and brief biographical details of the contributors (senior academics and librarians).

The devastating litany of loss documented in these pages merely confirms what we already know — that ‘books’ (in whatever form they may take) always have been and always will be regarded by some as powerful and dangerous enough to warrant their annihilation.

Raven opens his introduction with Robert Fisk’s 2003 report on the destruction of the Baghdad libraries after the American invasion of Iraq. Philip Hensher’s comment on the report encapsulates the intense, emotional and ultimately, human response that unites us:

The burning of books and the destruction of works of art is so powerful a symbol of barbarism that the stench of it hangs in the air long afterwards: it is something impossible to forgive, impossible to forget.

[back](#)

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