A Plea for Private Libraries.¹

IN bringing this subject before the Library Association, it has been my endeavour to eliminate as much as possible everything which relates to sentiment. Much might be said of the feelings which animate the man who builds up a library, resolving that it shall contain the best works in all languages, dealing with all the sciences and literatures which successive generations of mankind have produced. Neither do I intend to trouble you with the historical aspect of the question. To do so would be quite foreign to my purpose. My intention is to attempt a slight sketch of the ways in which private libraries may supplement the work of public libraries, and to show that by their means work can be accomplished which lies outside of the sphere of the rate-supported or endowed institutions.

A few words are necessary by way of explanation of the term private as applied to libraries. I exclude all proprietary or club libraries, which, although in a measure private, have each a public of their own, and seldom refuse to allow material which is otherwise inaccessible to be made use of by properly recommended persons. The libraries I have in view are those which are owned by one individual and of which he possesses the entire control. At one time I had thoughts of restricting my remarks to what might without exaggeration be termed great private libraries. But, alas! we all know too well how their number is becoming fewer each year; and, although what influence recent legislation may have on great collections remains to be seen, it is greatly to be feared that it will have a deterrent effect on the accumulation of literary and artistic property in private hands. A well-known writer has remarked that "the age of great

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libraries has gone by." Now we cannot dispute the fact that the tendency at the present day is to gather books by tens, whereas the omniverous collectors of past generations bought them in hundreds and thousands. But while such collections exist as Chatsworth, Britwell, the Huth and others, containing so much that is most precious both in print and manuscript, the remark I have just quoted must be taken with a certain reservation. Those of you who have the management of a public library must be only too sensible how often your desires to add to its literary riches is sadly fettered by its poverty. Poverty, although no disgrace, is often attended with serious inconvenience when a book or manuscript comes into the market the acquisition of which is important to your library, but the money to purchase it cannot be found. But there is another fetter by which a public librarian is chained, viz., proportion. Although Birmingham may collect Shakespeariana and Belfast works on linen, neither can allow any of the great classes of literature to suffer. Works on linen manufacture must be kept up to date in Birmingham, and English poetry and drama cannot be neglected in Belfast without serious damage to the usefulness of these institutions. Now the means which the private collector possesses may be narrow, or he may have great riches at his command. But as he has no public to cater for, nor committee to criticise his actions, he may, if he chooses to do so, spend a large sum on a single volume. An instance where this has been done, and the book with remarkable generosity immediately placed in the national collection must be still ripe in your recollection. The private collector may throw his whole energy into the acquirement of a single class of books, gathering into his stores all that relates to the subject of his predilection. It is in this way that so many valuable special collections have been formed, the usefulness of which is known to every worker in the literary field. Of course it is a matter of deep regret that any special collection on which much time, thought and money have been expended should be scattered. But when such is the case the dispersal of the books is an opportunity which public libraries make use of by purchasing the works that are lacking on their shelves. The sale of a special collection is frequently an advantage to private libraries. Such a sale often results in the formation of one more perfect collection in place of two of a less complete character. But happily many special collections are not dispersed. Instances will occur to all of you in which

public libraries, both rate-supported and endowed, have profited largely through the munificence of private collectors who have handed over in their entirety special collections of works on theology, philosophy, philology, science, literature, or history, to be freely used by the public in all time coming. No help of a more noble kind can be rendered to a public library. It is an endowment of the most permanent nature, and with care it may be preserved intact for future generations.

Special collections require special catalogues. In order to produce descriptions that are unmistakable and in some degree satisfactory, far more time and space is required than even national libraries can afford in their catalogues. I wish to exclude in this paper allusions to particular catalogues, but I may be pardoned if I refer to the catalogues of special classes of books issued by the British Museum. I have been often deeply grateful to these catalogues for assistance, but gratitude is too frequently tempered with regret that particulars are omitted which are absolutely necessary for an exact description of the books. The private collector need have no fear of making his descriptions too lengthy. This applies with special force to books printed in the fifteenth and early in the sixteenth centuries. Although I mention these there are many other divisions which occur to me as I write, such as English books previous to 1640, English broadsides, Papal Bulls, books printed in Central and South America of an early or even comparatively modern date, books printed in the East and nearly always in very small editions; of all these we have only meagre descriptions to guide us. I have no desire to underrate the special bibliographies on these subjects. Many of them are excellent so far as they go, but how seldom do they supply an exact collation, or even a collation of any kind whatever.

I assume that such descriptions will be made available to librarians and other scholars. If possible they should be printed and the copies judiciously distributed. Where this cannot be done it must not be thought that the labour is lost, or the fruits of necessity confined to a select few. There are many inventions by which manuscript can be copied manifold, and one or other of these methods may serve a very useful purpose in distributing collations of difficult books.

It will be seen from the foregoing remarks that my ideal of a private library is not a preserve surrounded with high fences of barbed wire. Great possessions are a trust involving great

responsibilities. The more seriously the ethical side of the question is considered, the greater will be the desire of the proprietor of literary treasures that they should be available to students. Bouchard states in his funeral oration on Peiresc: "To this his Shop and Store-house, of wisdom and vertue, Peireskius did not only courteously admit all Travellers, studious of Art and Learning, opening to them all the Treasures of his Library; but he would keep them there a long time, with free and liberal entertainment; and at their departure, would give them Books, Coins, and other things, which seemed most suitable to their studies; also he freely gave them at his own expense, whatever things they wanted, most liberally: even as to all other learned men, well near, which were absent, and whose names he had only heard of; whatever he had among his Books or Relicks of Antiquity, which he thought might assist them in their writings, he would send it to them of his own accord, not only without their desiring the same, but many times when they were ignorant of such things." Few collectors may be in a position to practice the extraordinary generosity of Peiresc, but all can to some degree imitate his worthy example in rendering his library of service to scholars.

But, it may be urged, why retain these treasures in private hands? Would not their usefulness be extended if they were in a library to which scholars have admission by right and not by favour? To that I reply that private libraries are a kind of national literary reserve fund, and a very useful one it has recently proved. I refer to the purchase of the Spencer Library. That transaction will shortly place Manchester in possession of a library which for completeness in certain important classes of books is unrivalled. It is never wise to have all your eggs in one basket. It is appalling to think what a conflagration at the British Museum would involve. Still more disastrous would such an event prove if *all* that was precious in print or manuscript had been swept into that library. But apart from accidental loss there is the wear and tear in public libraries which is unavoidable. I suppose the time is quite within calculable distance when certain books of great value in public libraries will be rendered useless through frequent reference. For manuscripts that are much used, to have photographic facsimiles seems to be the best means of prolonging their existence, the originals only to be shown on rare occasions. The same remedy might be usefully applied in the case of unique printed books. But

there remain many books which are fast wearing out in public libraries, and the private collections are a reserve from which their loss can be made good.

Then there is the convenience of scholars to be considered. Does the retention of valuable books and manuscripts in a private library hinder or help the literary worker who would make use of them? The answer to that question will depend entirely upon the proprietor of the collection. If he realises the fact that his books and manuscripts are a trust for the *use* of which he is answerable as well as for their safe custody, it will be greatly in the scholar's favour that they are not in a public library. The restrictions as to time and place of reading can be modified to suit the circumstances of the student. If it is undesirable to lend manuscripts for use in private houses, the willingness of public librarians to take care of books of value for a limited time makes it always easy to make a suitable arrangement. By this means the student may be saved a long and expensive journey, with all the disadvantages of work done at high pressure, or when suffering from fatigue.

I fear there will always be men who guard their books with jealous care. Such people seem to think that a collated codex is a worthless thing, and that a unique book that has been reprinted has lost in money value. In my humble opinion they are wrong. If they will consult the interests and happiness both of themselves and of others they will welcome to the use of their library scholars of every nation and of every creed, men who are renowned, and those who are struggling to make a name in the world of letters. There is no more certain way in which they can add to the lustre of their collection. Although their library may be scattered, the memory of their goodwill and kind deeds, like that of Peiresc, will be handed down to future generations.

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