The Significance of Libraries, Four Cases

David Kaser*

Libraries have an absolutely essential role to play in the full maturation of any advanced culture. Progress in all fields of human endeavor is inexorably limited where there are no libraries; social and national fulfillment can come into being only where there are libraries to serve as the aggregate memory of the group.

It will not be the purpose of this paper, however, to argue or debate in support of this proposition. This paper will instead describe four little-known cases out of human history wherein the enormous social value of libraries became apparent either to individuals or to communities. Taken singly, or perhaps even together, these four stories prove nothing, but they do demonstrate something—namely, that libraries are sometimes deemed sufficiently important to justify great individual or group sacrifice.

A TOLTEC LIBRARY NETWORK

Librarians world-wide in the last decade have striven to develop library networks. To place this effort in proper historical perspective, however, one must look back to the first such network of which there is record, as it was developed a thousand years ago among the great pre-Columbian civilizations of Middle America. Through Indian documents which are between five and eight hundred years old but which have been only recently deciphered, translated, and interpreted we can now begin to develop a rather clear understanding of what kinds of libraries existed in pre-Hispanic America and the purposes for which they were established. We find that the culture of that time and place required a three-level library network. At the apex of this pyramid of library services there were a very small number of research institutions where the highest priests of that

*Dr. Kaser is Professor in the Graduate Library School of Indiana University. This paper was read before a convocation before the New York State Department of Education.
theocratic nation were trained, and where the new literature of the civilization was reviewed in a kind of academy for acceptance into or rejection from the canon of documents to be preserved. The libraries in those few research institutions sought to be comprehensive in their collecting of the documents of the culture. At the next level below these research institutions were the more numerous school centers for the education of scribes adequate to the needs of the regions in which the schools were located. The libraries in these schools contained the basic texts requisite for study and learning purposes and might be considered analogous to the baccalaureate collections in the world today. And finally there were the limited but popularized accounts of the great works, in summaries and outlines adequate to meet the needs of the local communities. These were in some cases rather like “crib notes” to remind the local priest of the liturgy or to help the village story-teller recall the line of the epic. And books were available to be handed back and forth among these three levels of libraries as needed. Here indeed was an early library network conceptualized and designed to function in accord with the needs of a particular culture.

Perhaps the most remarkable tribute to the essential nature of libraries in a culture ever to be recorded comes from this time and place. The story is perhaps partially mythical in its origin, but it is also remarkably pervaded with elements of verisimilitude and may be pure history. The Nahuatl Codex in the Royal Academy at Madrid tells of a time, apparently near the end of the first Christian millennium, when the wise men of the Toltec nation on the Mexican plateau, in response to direction from their God, set out Eastward across the Caribbean Sea, taking the libraries with them. Society appears at first to have let them go. Who needs libraries? Sometime after their departure, however, the Toltecs began to realize that without books they had no longer the means of keeping alive their aggregate cultural memory. The Madrid Codex records that there was then a great outcry from the people who began to realize that they had lost the light that showed them the way. The following are a few lines from the text:

Will the sun shine, will it dawn?
How will the people move,
how will they stand?
For they have gone away, they have carried off
the black and red ink, the painted books.
How will the people exist?
How will the earth continue, the city?
How will there be stability?
Who is it that will govern us?
Who is it that will guide us?
Who is it that will show us the way?
What will be our standard?
What will be our measure?
What will be our pattern?
From where should we begin?
What will be our torch, our light?²

The story, however, has a happy ending. In order to repair
their bibliothecal deficiency, the Toltecs conducted a census of their
population and found still among them four old priest/librarians—
custodians of knowledge, if you will—who had retired long before
the exodus of their working colleagues and had chosen not to
participate in the trek eastward. The Toltecs entreated them now to
come out of retirement and to commit their remaining years to
reconstructing the records of the past. The Codex, which even
identifies these four worthies by name, then continues as follows:

Then they rediscovered the count of the days,
the annals and the year count,
the book of dreams;
they ordained it as it had been kept,
and as it has continued,
the time that endured the domain of the Toltecs,
the domain of the Tepanecs,
the domain of the Mexicans,
and all the Chichimec domains.³

Whether myth or history, and there is some circumstantial
evidence that this may be a true story, this incident bespeaks
eloquently the undeniably compelling nature of a library system
within a culture. Here was a library network that was so interwoven
with the fabric of the culture that, had it been removed, the very
culture itself would have disintegrated. Born and developed out of
a cultural need of that society, it became itself a key integral
ingredient of the society, essential to its survival.

**DR. BRAY'S GRAND DESIGN**

A next network existed some three centuries ago. In 1696 a
young Anglican divine named Reverend Thomas Bray was assigned by the Church of England to serve as commissary to the Colony of Maryland, which he did for many months. The culture shock suffered by this young cleric serving in the wilds of America took an unusual focus, because in his judgment it was books more than anything else that the American colonists needed. The library scene on this continent was indeed bleak at that time. In fact, there were only two or at most three libraries in all of the British Colonies at that time, with fewer than 3,000 volumes total. Harvard had had a library since 1638, and the town of Boston has sustained some kind of public book collection since 1657. Perhaps the College of William and Mary in Virginia owned a book collection, but there were none others of record in the colonies. Princeton and Columbia Universities were not yet in existence, and there was not even yet a bookstore either in New York or Philadelphia. How, Dr. Bray wondered, could man exist without books?

Returning to England, Dr. Bray dedicated the rest of his life to remedying the bookish malnourishment that he had seen in the Colonies. He conceived what he called his “Grand Design” for getting requisite literature into the hands of the Colonists, a design comprising a four-level pyramid of libraries throughout British America. He described his library network in a book published in 1701 entitled Bibliotheca Americana Quadripartita. In this book Dr. Bray delineated a network which would at the top-most level comprise a fairly large library in each of the provincial capitals in the British Colonies in America. Second he would provide a library in each Colonial parish which would belong to the local rector and which would contain the books necessary for him to fulfill his priestly functions. The third level was to be a series of laymen’s lending libraries, each to be kept under the supervision of the parish rector but to be available to all members of the community. The fourth was to be a lending library for the clergy. It was Bray’s intention that book-form catalogues of each of these libraries would be prepared and circulated to the other libraries so that books could be lent from one to another in accord with the social need. Again, this is very similar to networks being established today.

In order to accomplish this enormous feat, Bray established the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge in 1699, and
in 1701 he established also the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts. These two organizations were to serve as channels through which he would distribute books to England's colonies. He then spent the balance of his life, some three decades, soliciting books and donations from merchants, churchmen, statesmen, and philanthropists in England and in turn forwarding them to the many libraries which he placed in colonial communities in accord with his grand design. Through his efforts the fantastic total of 37,000 volumes was placed in American towns and villages before his death.

It is not significant to us here that most—although certainly by no means all—of these books were religious in content. They were religious in content precisely because in those times that was what was important. No more could the seventeenth-century burger negotiate the dangerous shoals of temporal life without such guides to right living than could the ship's pilot navigate the treacherous currents of the channel islands without mariner's chart and sextant. These were the necessary bookish implements for spiritual survival, of significance equal to the books on materia medica, husbandry, and military science which Dr. Bray also provided to the American colonist.

It is instructive for us to note that Dr. Bray's exciting and extensive efforts in support of libraries in America came eventually to nought. Only a handful of the books sent under his care to the New World came a half century later into the more permanent social and subscription libraries that began by 1750 to dot the land. To borrow a twentieth-century term, we would say today that the requisite "infrastructure" was not yet in place adequate to their survival, a phenomenon easily recognized by any who have worked with books and libraries in developing countries. In other words, they lacked that congeries of necessary support systems which could assure their permanence. Lacking public buildings in which to house libraries, Bray placed them in the parish rectories, where they soon came to be viewed as part of the rector's personal effects. There being no satisfactory system for keeping the collections alive and growing, they soon became simply collections of old books. Although Bray's two societies welcomed requests from their corresponding rectors for additional books, the local rectors seldom
had any idea what new books were available in London that would be useful to their parishioners. When they did request books, it sometimes took as long as two years for them to be delivered, or the ship sank, or the rector died of the cholera, or the manse burned to the ground, or any other of a thousand eventualities that so frequently made the lives of our ancestors more precarious than our own. The library network was not, in other words, sufficiently grounded in the public will to insure its permanence. Rather than being developed by the culture itself out of its own felt need, it was superimposed upon American society by a well-meaning but paternalistic external agency. Left to itself following Bray's death, the whole noble effort languished and died. Important though it may have been in the ideal, books and libraries had not yet risen high enough on colonial society's list of priorities to survive.

**BATTLING FOR THE YALE COLLEGE LIBRARY**

Sometimes libraries are even worth fighting for. Such a case can be cited from Saybrook, Connecticut, in 1718, which was the seventeenth year of the existence of Yale College. In that year the Trustees of the College resolved to remove the institution from Saybrook, where it had been situated up to that time, to its present location in New Haven.

The decision at first caused little stir among the Saybrookers, but then it dawned upon them that this meant also the removal of the College Library, and that they steadfastly refused to permit. The College Library, which at that time numbered some 1,300 volumes, had been housed in the parsonage of the Rev. Thomas Buckingham on the Saybrook Green, where it had come to be thought of more as community, than as College, property.

When the College authorities came to claim the Library, the citizens of Saybrook stood in the way, and they were forced to depart empty-handed. The Yale Trustees next obtained a court order, and sent the sheriff to retrieve the books from Mr. Buckingham's house. The record of this event, as recorded by Yale president Thomas Clapp in 1766, reads as follows:

The house where the books were, was filled and surrounded with a great number of men, who were determined to prevent the removal of the books:
and therefore resisted the officers: but he with his attendants, broke open
the door and delivered the books to the trustees, on their order. 5

Even then, however, the citizens of Saybrook were not willing to
concede that they had lost the battle. The ox-wains which were
used to transport the books over the forty-five-mile distance to New
Haven, were sabotaged at night, the bridges along the way were
broken down so as to hamper the removal of the books, and the
whole operation was plagued by a retreating guerrilla action which
forced the movers to spend a week getting the books to their new
home. President Clapp tells us further that

In this tumult and confusion, about twenty-five percent of the most valuable
books, and sundry papers of importance were conveyed away by unknown
hands and never could be found again.

Whole communities, it appears, can galvanize themselves to vigorous
action in support of library causes when they are convinced that it
is in their interest to do so.

THE FIRST LIBRARY MARTYR

Librarians have also been known to die in the line of duty. The
first martyr librarian of whom there is record, was St. Lawrence the
librarian. 6 During the parlous times of the third century, in 258
A.D. to be exact, on August 10th, the imperial Roman guard
arrested Pope Sixtus and demanded of the librarian Lawrence to be
shown where the archives and other belongings of the church were
stored. Anticipating their coming, however, Friar Lawrence had se-
questered these materials in a secret location, and he refused to help
them. Frustrated in their search, the guards led Lawrence away to
judgment (of this world, if not the next). Remaining undaunted,
Lawrence was sentenced to be roasted over a good charcoal fire
until he would forswear his charge and reveal the information
sought. Strung out upon a gridiron, Lawrence watched the flames
rise around him until finally, according to the Analecta Bollandiana,
he turned his head to his persecutors and pronounced his dying
words: “Assum est; versa et manduca,” which rather exactly trans-
lated comes out something like, “I am now well done on that side;
turn me over and eat.”

From myriad such tales as these four, drawn from the long
history of libraries, we can learn much about the social utility of books and of their relationship to whole cultures, to communities, and to individuals. From Dr. Bray's Grand Design we can see that a library network, once established, brings with it no guarantee that it will long endure. It can be ahead of its time; it can succumb to infrastructural deficiencies; it can be superimposed upon a culture without ever becoming part of that culture. When, however, a library network grows naturally out of a felt social need, it is then so integral a part of that society that it and the society are indeed co-existent. From the experience of the Pre-Columbian Toltecs we can surmise that just as no individual can survive without a memory, neither can a culture survive without its aggregate memory, which is its library system. From the eighteenth-century residents of Saybrooke, Connecticut, we can see how easily circumstances can arise that would deny us library service that we have come to think of as rightfully our own. If we deserve to have library service, we must be prepared to fight to preserve it. And as librarians we can learn from St. Lawrence that when things really get bad—and they can get that bad even for librarians—when our tormentors will allow us no suacease from our travail, we can as a last resort turn our eyes heavenward and say with the Patron Saint of Librarians everywhere, "Assum est; versa et manuca."

References

1. This material is drawn largely from Miguel Leon-Portilla, Pre-Columbian Literatures of Mexico (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1969), passim.
2. Quoted ibid., pp. 124-25.
3. Ibid.
5. Quoted in Louis Shores, Origins of the American College Library, 1638-1800 (Hamden, Conn.: Shoestring, 1966), p. 27.
6. 51 (1933), 34-98.