The New Criterion

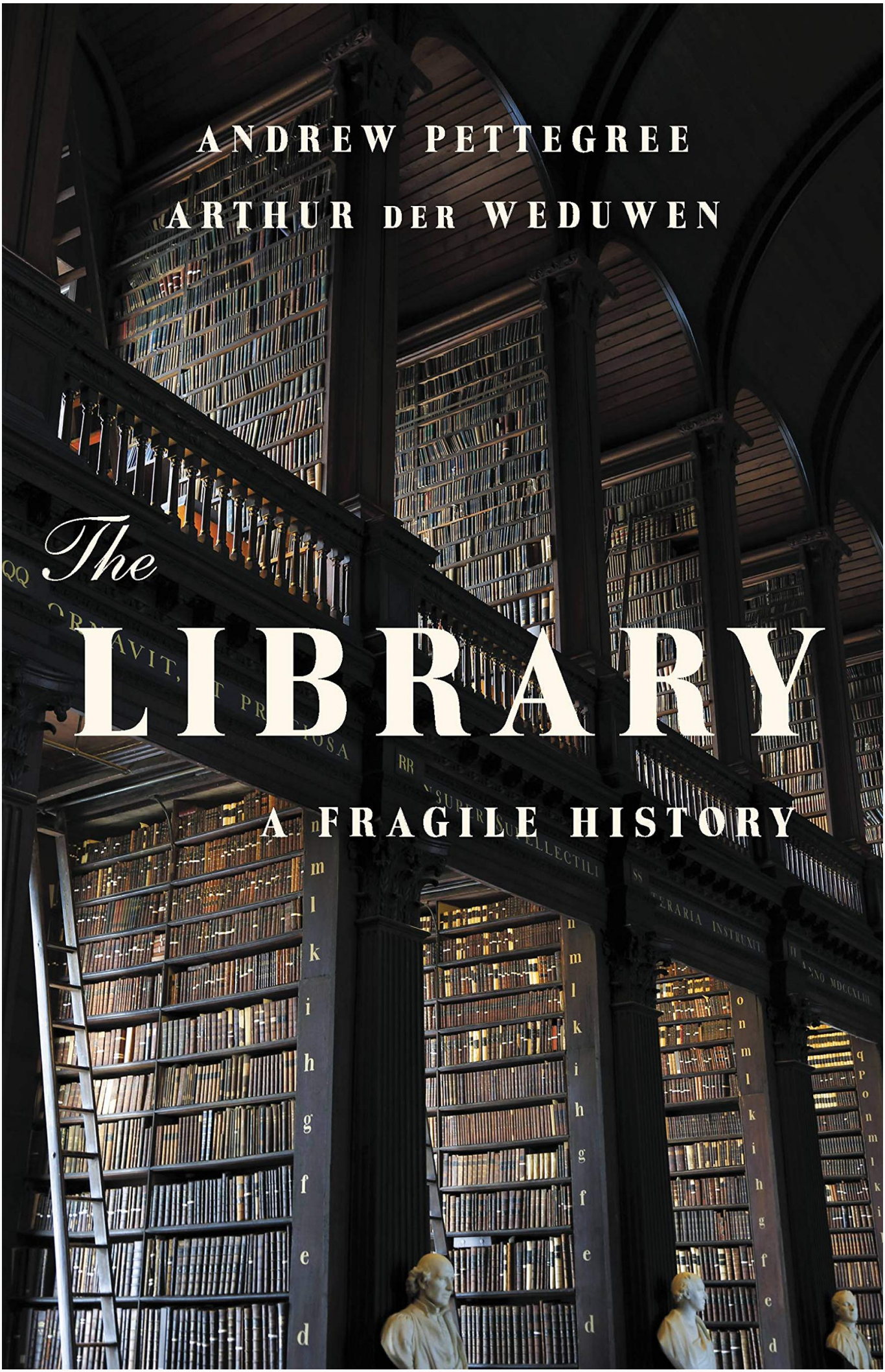
Books November 2021

Book nooks

by *Brooke Allen*

A review of *The Library: A Fragile History* by Andrew Pettegree & Arthur Der Weduwen

BOOKS IN THIS ARTICLE


ANDREW PETTEGREE
ARTHUR DER WEDUWEN
The
LIBRARY
A FRAGILE HISTORY

Andrew Pettegree & Arthur Der Weduwen
The Library: A Fragile History

Basic Books, 528 pages, $35.00

Like most people over the age of fifty, I have a tendency to think that the world of my youth (in my case the 1960s and ’70s) was the norm, the way life was and is supposed to be, and that all the social changes since then are weird deviations from that norm. That this view is patently nonsensical does not prevent it from having a strong hold on many of us. And as a child of the prosperous, relatively stable, and relatively egalitarian post–World War II period, I imagined that the public library—a taxpayer-supported institution serving the entire community, from which books can be borrowed free of charge—has long been the historical norm, a communal benefit whose utility was obvious to all but the most benighted citizens. The quiet, well-tended New York City branch libraries provided both an education and a refuge for me—and countless other children. They were also an invaluable resource for older members of the community. How could this not always have been perceived as not only desirable but also necessary?

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In their enlightening new study *The Library: A Fragile History*, the historians Andrew Pettegree and Arthur der Weduwen show that the opposite is true: the concept of the public library did not really bear fruit until the very end of the nineteenth century, and its survival far into the twenty-first, at least in the form we think of as a “library”—a place full of books—is far from certain.1 Libraries have indeed proved fragile, as the authors show us again and again. No society, they say, “has ever been satisfied with the collections inherited from previous generations.” Sometimes—as in the destruction of the great library of Alexandria or in the Nazis’ wholesale demolition of Polish and Jewish libraries—collections are wantonly annihilated; more often they die from “neglect and redundancy, as books and collections that represented the values and interests of one generation fail to speak to the one that follows.”

Thus the fabulous private library of Christopher Columbus’s son Fernando Colón, the greatest book collector of his age—he wished his library, like that at Alexandria, to encompass all of human knowledge—was dissolved almost immediately after his death through the indifference of his heir, the iconoclasm of the Spanish Inquisitors, and the predatory greed of the monarchy. An equally extraordinary achievement, Cardinal Mazarin’s vast Bibliothèque Mazarine in Paris, was seized and auctioned off by the Frondeurs during the Cardinal’s own lifetime, and only partially restored after the crisis was resolved. “From Alexandria to the present: no one cares about a library collection as much as the person who has assembled it,” the authors tell us. Among private collections, the Baroque library of Duke August of Braunschweig-Lüneburg, which against all odds

still survives at Wolfenbüttel, is a rare exception.

Many libraries become war booty. The great medieval collection at the University of Heidelberg was appropriated by the Vatican in 1622. The excellent library of Queen Christina of Sweden was furnished by marauding Swedish armies in Germany and Central Europe during the Thirty Years' War, which among many other prizes got off with thirty-one barrels of books taken from the castle of Rudolf II in Prague. French revolutionaries vandalized monastic libraries and the collections of fleeing aristocrats, and Napoleon's armies systematically stripped Continental libraries of their treasures, leaving "no major library of distinguished medieval heritage unscathed: Milan, Urbino, Pavia, Verona, Florence and Mantua all suffered losses. Commissioners arrived with carefully prepared lists." Napoleon's administration "adopted the most centralized and efficient system of looting thus far known. . . . Instead of forcing their way into the libraries, the number of manuscripts that each state had to give up to France was written into the terms of the armistice."

Many millions of books, as we all know, have been destroyed for ideological reasons. Books and libraries "have frequently been the advance guard in campaigns to impose on a population a new kind of society, promote a new religion, or win back territory lost to a rival ideology," and if "the balance of power shifted, the libraries were regarded as legitimate targets." The library of the Aztec emperor Montezuma was among the first casualties of the Spanish conquest of Mexico; the systematic destruction of this testament to the sophistication of Aztec civilization did more than just demoralize the surviving Aztecs. Simultaneously, back in Europe, Martin Luther's theological protests were "accompanied by a torrent of print," with Luther himself acting as an early champion of the printing press through myriad pamphlets written in the vernacular. The upheaval of the Reformation "established a standard for the destruction of disapproved texts that would continue to haunt European society down to the twentieth century": religious houses were disbanded and their libraries, the fruit of centuries of labor, dispersed, while the Catholic Counter-Reformation destroyed many works of the new heretics; the first Index Auctorum et Librorum Prohibitorum was published by Pope Paul IV in 1559 during the Council of Trent.

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What people did in the name of religion during the sixteenth century they did again in the name of political ideology in the twentieth. Pettegree and der Weduwen's accounts of the book wars of the last century are dizzying: vast libraries were built up to support particular ideologies only to be burned or purged when those ideologies collapsed. "Libraries were not only the victims of war, but were active participants in the conflict." They were "weaponized." In World War II, the libraries of Strasbourg, Louvain, Beauvais, Tours, Caen, Coventry, Manchester, Plymouth, Liverpool, and Exeter were bombed, along with all the booksellers' warehouses on London's Paternoster Row. British air raids specially targeted German

institutes of technology and their libraries. Nazi troops went into Warsaw's libraries with flamethrowers in an effort to systematically destroy Polish culture at its roots; the authors classify this as "libricide," an attempt to wipe cultural memory from the face of the earth. After the war, three-quarters of the books in German libraries were deemed too Nazified, and therefore purged. In East Germany, the ddr, they were replaced by tomes consistent with the country's new socialist ideology, but four decades later, at German reunification, 80 to 90 percent of the former ddr's communist-leaning university library stock was declared functionally obsolete.

Pettegree and der Weduwen are fascinating when they discuss great private collectors and monastic libraries, but the most important aspect of their book is its exploration of the practical and theoretical role of the library in the lives of ordinary citizens. It is a question that does not really arise between the fall of Rome and the invention of the printing press, when literacy rates began rapidly to rise:

> What was a library: were books for display or working tools? . . . What, crucially, was the public for a public library? Was the key motivation for building a library accessibility, or the demonstration of elite power? Should the library be a place of sociability or silence, a meeting place or a place of study?

Such questions became more urgent in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as people of the lower orders, and women, became readers.

The Library: A Fragile History is a story with heroes, a few visionary individuals who greatly expanded readership and shifted the function of the library from serving as the peacock display of a great prince or magnate to being a resource for a larger public. Sir Thomas Bodley, for instance, who over the course of fifteen years (1598–1613) managed "the transformation of Oxford's library from [an] empty shell to the finest institutional library in Europe," decreed that it should be open six hours per day instead of four per week, created the first comprehensive catalogues, and imposed the unprecedented rule of silence. Or James Kirkwood and Thomas Bray, who conceived in 1690s the first national network of public libraries. ("[T]hough we be not a great or a rich people," Kirkwood mused of his native Scotland, "yet we may be a wise and a learned people.") Or Benjamin Franklin, a leader in this field as in so many others: in 1727, he and some Philadelphia associates founded the world's first subscription library. Or Sir Hans Sloane, who at his death in 1753 offered the British nation the opportunity to purchase at bargain-basement prices his library of forty thousand printed books and 3,500 manuscripts; this became the nucleus first of the British Museum and later of the British Library:

> It was the first collection of its sort to be conceived as a national resource, and one that was regarded by its readers and visitors as the embodiment of the confidence, prestige and ambition of the British people. Libraries had long been seen as symbols of cultural distinction, but that this concept could be tied directly to the nation state was a particular nineteenth-century development.

And of course there was Andrew Carnegie, probably the greatest benefactor the common reader has ever had, and, more recently, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which has pumped billions

of dollars into libraries.

One of the most interesting themes of the book is the perpetual uncertainty on the part of librarians and patrons as to just what their role vis-à-vis the general reader might be. Are libraries there to educate and shape taste, or are they there to reflect tastes already formed? Bodley specified that there be in his library no "idle books and riffe raffes," by which he meant books in English—at that time only Latin was intellectually respectable. "How far the public should be indulged in their pleasures, rather than be given what was good for them, was the subject of tortured debate throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries," the authors write. Fiction, throughout this period, was looked on as unwholesome and a waste of the reader's time, and librarians tried techniques like putting novels in closed stacks or mixing them confusingly with nonfiction to keep readers from subsisting exclusively on a diet of unreality. The American Library Association tried to guide public taste by providing a list of recommended titles (mostly improving nonfiction) and removed authors they found morally questionable—a list that included Thomas Hardy, Émile Zola, even Henry James!—from their guides. In the meantime, the commercial circulating libraries, run by booksellers (most notably Mudie's, in Britain) were giving readers what they craved: lightweight fiction, and plenty of it. We learn that

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> It was only after the First World War that the library shed its nineteenth-century identity as an instrument of social reform, and tentatively embraced its new role as much a part of the entertainment industry as it was a source of enlightenment, improvement and redemption. . . . As the twentieth century wore on, it gradually became clear that fiction was in fact the libraries' main defense against obsolescence.

What is its defense against obsolescence today, or does it even have one? New technology has not killed off the book, surprisingly enough, but books no longer attract many people to libraries, and this situation is intensifying daily: the authors quote a study predicting that within the next five years the average person will interact with connected devices every eighteen seconds. And then there are changing social mores: the rule of silence has already gone by the wayside, and countless librarians are under pressure to turn their domains into "community hubs" where people interact and collaborate rather than sit in peaceful contemplation.

There is a tremendous amount of information in this volume. What does one take away from it? Most of all, the fact that libraries—their shape, form, purpose, patrons, clientele, whatever—are constantly changing. The squat, comforting, functional Carnegie libraries of New York that have survived for a century or more will not survive much longer; many of them have already been repurposed. Forward-thinking planners find it hard to resist the opportunity "to present a new concept of information technology, ideally with a shiny new building attached."

(The authors relate a dreadful tale, that of the new San Francisco Public Library, a building that was designed with "all the computer terminals, meeting spaces and breakout rooms one could ever want" but no room for the library's three million books.)

So, those of us who'd walk a mile to avoid a "community hub" had better enjoy our cozy Carnegie libraries while we still can, which might not be for very long. If we're lucky enough to frequent a library that still adheres to the rule of silence, so much the better. I pay a hefty yearly fee to a circulating library so as to ensure silence, comfort, card catalogues (an almost extinct species), and knowledgeable, well-trained librarians (ditto). I had long thought that any public library should be able to provide these things. Now, having discovered how recent, how tenuous, and how fragile an institution the public library really is, I take nothing for granted.

Brooke Allen writes frequently for *The New Criterion* and other publications. A former Professor of Literature at Bennington College, she now teaches in its Prison Education Initiative.

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 40 Number 3 , on page 68

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