

# Richard Ovenden, 'Burning the books: a history of knowledge under attack'.

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## Book review

Richard Ovenden, *Burning the books: A history of knowledge under attack*, John Murray, London, 2020; 308 pp.: ISBN 9785290378757 (hardback)

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Richard Ovenden, Bodley's Librarian at the University of Oxford, probably needs no introduction to the majority of readers of this review. This book, which was abridged and broadcast on BBC Radio 4 in September 2020, has a slightly misleading sub-title. It's not so much a 'history of', as a series of case studies, roughly in chronological order, of attacks (sometimes accidental, but often deliberate) on stored knowledge, from ancient collections through to modern libraries and archives. The emphasis is very much on Europe (and in particular, the United Kingdom), but the Americas and other parts of the globe do get mentioned.

The book is the product of some detailed research (and Ovenden, in his lengthy list of acknowledgements, notes the help he received from, among others, some of his staff), extremely well-written and is a plea to national libraries, national archives and other major collectors of materials to be much more assertive about how their and others' collections should be protected.

The book comprises an Introduction and 15 chapters, followed by acknowledgements, picture credits, footnotes (most of which are bibliographic citations, but some provide further explanation of matters in the main text), a bibliography and a well-structured index.

As the author stresses, readers need to be mindful that not all actions against collections were malicious and that norms of behaviours were very different in the past. Nonetheless, anyone reading the sorry catalogue of events can only feel frustration and anger at decisions that were made, especially when they were designed to deliberately attack or erase the culture of a group of people. Ovenden reminds us that collecting and storing *everything* was (and arguably still is) unrealistic because of space, cost and other considerations, so some weeding is inevitable. There are also privacy and other related issues that make storage of everything undesirable in some cases.

An early chapter looks at the fate of the library at Alexandria, and notes just how little we know about what it contained and how it vanished. It seems it suffered the fate of a slow but steady decline rather than a spectacular single act of destruction, but we may never know exactly how big it was or how it met its fate. One abiding message from it, however, is that the pursuit of gathering and pre-serving knowledge is a valuable task, and its loss can be 'an early warning sign of a decaying civilisation'. Another chapter examines the destruction of the great monastery libraries in the English Reformation under Henry VIII, as seen through the eyes of John Leland, an agent for King who made a detailed inventory of the libraries he visited.

Another chapter looks at the foundation of the Bodleian Library, noting that it was one of the first libraries to catalogue and index its collections. In 1620, it seems also to have been the first library to produce an author catalogue. Bodley noted that a library needed certainty in revenue, putting his money where his mouth was by disinheriting his own family in favour of the library. One wonders what his family thought about that decision.

Another chapter looks at the deliberate (by the British army), and later accidental, burning of the Library of Congress in the 19th century. Because libraries until recently primarily held inflammable materials, such fires were all too common. Other chapters examine the problems that arise when a major literary figure insists that when they die, their unpublished manuscripts, diaries and correspondence are destroyed by the executor, and how sometimes such wishes were obeyed and sometimes not. He draws attention to the case of Philip Larkin, who asked for such material to be destroyed even though he was a professional librarian. Ovenden commends the idea of keeping such records, but only allowing them to be examined or published well after the person's death. Copyright term, that is, life + 70 years, is, I would argue, appropriate, but of course this must be written into instructions to an executor.

In another chapter, Ovenden discusses the burning of the library of Louvain University when Germany occupied the town at the start of the First World War. He concludes that German soldiers who thought they had been fired upon by local civilians did it. I was not previously aware that Article 247 of the Treaty of Versailles required Germany to furnish Louvain University with manuscripts and so on corresponding to the number and value to those destroyed in the burning by Germany of the Library. I also did not know that in May 1940, German forces in their second invasion of Belgium again destroyed that Library.

Another chapter provides the sorry history of the collection and destruction (and in some cases, the saving) of the vast collection of Jewish books and manuscripts in Vilna, Lithuania, by the Nazis from 1941 to 1945. It is worth noting that Kathy Preiss' recent *Information Hunters* describes in detail how librarians and information managers, mainly from the United States, helped restore many of the looted items to their original owners.

The author also considers historical examples of deliberate theft of books from one country by another and the policy of UK Governments to refuse the transfer of colonial-era records to newly independent Commonwealth countries. He ends with chapters on recent deliberate targeting of libraries and archives for destruction, and with the challenges posed by the inexorable growth of digital information and the power this gives to private corporations, such as Facebook and Twitter, rather than Governments or the public. He very much supports the UK Web Archive, and Brewster Kahle's Internet Archive, with its associated Wayback Machine. He also notes the weakness of United States's Presidential Records laws, and the slow and reluctant adoption of deliberate destruction of libraries and archives as a war crime. Finally, he commends the idea of a 'memory tax' on tech companies to help fund libraries and archives. He argues that funding of libraries has declined over the years and that library and archive professional bodies need to be much more assertive about their role in the preservation of knowledge. The final chapter, a coda, is an eloquent call to arms by extolling the enormous benefits of libraries and archives in all aspects of life, not just in storing knowledge.

Throughout the book, the author gives us some amusing asides, for example, on page 58, ‘it measures over two feet by three feet and is one of the Bodleian’s heaviest manuscripts (the library’s book-fetchers groan whenever a scholar asks to see it)’. Now we know how to really annoy the author’s staff. He also describes Byron’s entertaining Percy and Mary Shelley in his villa on the shores of Lake Geneva as ‘one of the great literary sleepovers in history’. The book’s index gives you a flavour of just how broad it is; five consecutive index entries are Ethiopia, looting; Euclid; European Union; Evesham Abbey library; and Facebook.

One minor quibble is that the author sometimes uses library-friendly terms (‘metadata’ and ‘open access’, for example) without explaining what they are to non-LIS readers. Inevitably the book is selective in the case studies explored, but I felt it was a pity the author did not look at the intriguing case of Senator Joseph McCarthy, who, as part of his infamous red-baiting period in the 1950s, made US Information Service libraries destroy their own stocks of books considered to be left wing, so they couldn’t be read by citizens in the countries where their offices were based.

This is an extremely well-researched and argued book, which should be read both by those in the LIS profession and by decision-makers everywhere.