

## 24<sup>th</sup> June 1840: the speech that gave birth to The London Library

By 1840, Thomas Carlyle was actively pursuing the idea of establishing a lending library in London. Disliking the disruptions of the British Museum's Reading Room, and stung by the fact that other cities in Britain, including Manchester and Liverpool, had established lending libraries, Carlyle was determined to make up the deficit in London. A Committee had been formed, newspapers had taken an interest and early subscriptions were coming in.

But more subscribers were needed if the idea was to be made a reality. A public meeting was arranged for Wednesday 24th June at the Freemasons' Tavern in London's Great Queen Street. Presided over by Lord Eliot, the meeting included speeches by Lord Monteagle, Rev H.H. Milman, Lord Lyttelton, Charles Buller, RM Milnes, George Cornwall Lewis and William Christie.

But the floor belonged to Thomas Carlyle who delivered the following speech that effectively launched the London Library.

"It does not become us, who are as yet only struggling for existence, who are merely nascent, and have nothing but hopes and a good purpose, to commence by casting any censure on the British Museum. Accordingly we mean no censure by this resolution. We will leave the British Museum standing on its own basis, and be very thankful that such a Library exists in this country. But supposing it to be managed with the most perfect skill and success, even according to the ideal of such an Institution, still I will assert that this other Library of ours is requisite also.

In the first place by the very nature of the thing, a great quantity of people are excluded altogether from the British Museum as a reading room. Every man engaged in business is occupied during the hours it is kept open; and innumerable classes of persons find it extremely inconvenient to attend the British Museum Library at all.

But granting that they could all go there, I would ask any literary man, any reader of books, any man intimately acquainted with the reading of books, whether he can read them to any purposes in the British Museum? A book is a kind of thing that requires a man to be self-collected. He must be alone with it. A good book is the purest essence of the human soul. How could a man take it into a crowd, with bustle of all sorts going on around him? The good of a book is not the facts that can be got out of it, but the kind of resonance that it awakens in our own minds. A book may strike out of us a thousand things, may make us know a thousand things which it does not know itself. For this purpose I decidedly say, that no man can read a book well, with the bustle of three or four hundred people around him. Even for getting the mere facts which a

book contains, a man can do more with it in his own apartment in the solitude of one night, than in a week in such a place as the British Museum.

Neither with regard to circulating libraries are we bound to utter any kind of censure; circulating libraries are what they can be in the circumstances. I believe that if a man had the heroism to collect a body of great books, to get together the cream of the knowledge that exists in the world, and let it be known that he had such a Library, he would find his advantage in it in the long run; but it would be only in the long run; he must wait ten or twenty years, perhaps a lifetime; he must be a kind of martyr. You could not expect a purveyor of Circulating Literature to be that! The question for such a person to ask is not: "Are you wanting to read a wise book?" but "Have you got sixpence in your pocket to pay for the reading of any book?" Consequently he must have an eye to the prurient appetite of the great million, and furnish them with any kind of garbage they will have. The result is melancholy – making bad worse - for every bad book begets an appetite for reading a worse one.

Thus we come to the age of pinchbeck in Literature, and to falsehoods of all kinds. So leaving all other institutions, the British Museum, and the Circulating Libraries, to stand, I say that a decidedly good Library of good books is a crying want in this great London. How can I be called upon to demonstrate a thing that is as clear as the sun? London has more men and intellect waiting to be developed than any place in the world ever had assembled. Yet there is no place on the civilised earth so ill supplied with materials for reading for those who are not rich. I have read an account of a Public Library in Iceland, which the King of Denmark founded there. There is not a peasant in Iceland that cannot bring home books to his hut, better than men can in London. Positively it is a kind of disgrace to us, which we ought to assemble and put an end to with all convenient despatch.

The founding of a Library is one of the greatest things we can do with regard to results. It is one of the quietest of things; but there is nothing that I know of at bottom more important. Every one able to read a good book becomes a wiser man. He becomes a similar centre of light and order, and just insight into the things around him. A collection of good books contains all the nobleness and wisdom of the world before us. Every heroic and victorious soul has left his stamp upon it. A collection of books is the best of all Universities; for the University only teaches us how to read the book: you must go to the book itself for what it is. I call it a Church also – which every devout soul may enter – a Church but with no quarrelling, no Church-rates, ..."

"The remainder of the sentence", says the reporter of the Examiner who covered the meeting, "was drowned in cheers and laughter, in the midst of which Mr Carlyle sat down".