EM Forster – The London Library

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In May 1841 the London Library was launched on the swelling tides of Victorian prosperity. It celebrates its centenary among the rocks. It is unharmed at the moment of writing—not a volume out of action but the area in which it stands is cloven by the impacts of the imbecile storm. All around it are the signs of the progress of science and the retrogression of man. Buildings are in heaps, the earth is in holes. Safe still among the reefs of rubbish, it seems to be something more than a collection of books. It is a symbol of civilisation. It is a reminder of sanity and a promise of sanity to come. Perhaps the Nazis will hit it, and it is an obvious target, for it represents the tolerance and the disinterested erudition which they so detest. But they have missed it so far.

Why should a private subscription library, which appeals to only a small section of the community, arouse exalted thoughts? The answer to this question is to be found in the Library's history, and in its present policy. Speakers at its annual meetings are fond of saying that it is unique, which is more or less true, and that it is typically English, which greatly understates its claims. It is not typically English. It is typically civilised. It pays a homage to seriousness and to good sense which is rare in these islands and any-where. It has cherished the things of the mind, it has insisted on including all points of view, and yet it has been selective. Ephemeral books, popular successes, most novels, many travelogues and biographies have been excluded from its shelves. And technical treatises, such as have helped to make the mess outside, have not been encouraged either. Of course it has had its lapses; one can find trash in it, and specialisation-lumber also. But its policy has always been to send those who want trash to the chain-libraries, and those who want lumber to their appropriate lumber-room. It caters neither for the goose nor for the rat, but for creatures who are trying to be human. The desire to know more, the desire to feel more, and, accompanying these but not strangling them, the desire to help others: here, briefly, is the human aim, and the Library exists to further it.

So much for its seriousness. Its good sense is equally remarkable. For it would be possible to have these admirable ideals, but to render them unacceptable through red-tape. That is the great snag in institutionalism. There may be fine intention and noble provision, but they often get spoiled by the belief that the public cannot be trusted, that it is careless, dishonest, grubby, clumsy, that it must on no account be "allowed access" to the shelves, and is best served from behind a wire netting. The London Library, though an institution, will have nothing to do with this fallacy. It takes the risks. Its members can go all over its book-stores. There is a price to be paid; books do get stolen, or taken out with-out being entered or taken out in unauthorised quantities, or kept out too long, or dogs-eared, or annotated in the margin by cultivated scribes who should know better; but it is worth it, it is worth treating the creatures as if they were

grown up, the gain to the humanities outweighs the financial loss. Moreover, it is the tradition of the library to help the student rather than to snub, and this promotes a decent reaction at once. And "help" is indeed too feeble a word; the officials there possess not only good-will, but wide and accurate knowledge, which is instantly placed at the enquirer's disposal.

The library owes its origin to the spleen and to the nobility of Thomas Carlyle. The spleen came-first; Carlyle needed books of reference while he was writing his Cromwell, he could not afford to buy them all, and the journey from Chelsea to the British Museum Library was a vexatious one. Besides, when he got to the British Museum he found other people reading there too, which gave him the feeling of a crowd, and it is impossible to work in a crowd: "add discomfort, perturbation, headache, waste of health." Grumbling and growling at his miserable fate, he betook himself to the drawing-room of Lady Stanley of Alderley in Dover Street, and burst forth there; even in Iceland, he said, the peasants could borrow books, and take them away to read in their huts during the Arctic night; only in London was there this "shameful anomaly." The company tried to soothe him or to change the subject, but his growls continued; books, books, one ought to be able to borrow books. And before long, he effected one of his junctions between private peevishness and public welfare, and persuaded other men of distinction to combine with him in launching a library. Gladstone, Hallam, Grote, Monckton Milnes joined him. A meeting was held at the Freeman's Tavern to promote a scheme for "a supply of good books in all departments of knowledge." Lord Eliot was in the chair, and Carlyle made a fine speech. It is said to be his only speech. Here are some sentences from it:

A book is a kind of thing which requires a man to be self-collected. He must be alone with it. A good book is the purest essence of the human soul... The good of a book is not the facts that can be got out of it but the kind of resonance that it awakes in our own minds. A book may strike out a thousand things, may make us know a thousand things which it does not know itself... 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. Everyone 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 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...

At this point, Carlyle was interrupted by laughter and cheers, and sat down good-temperedly. His speech is too optimistic, in view of our present information; also too subjective in its emphasis on the "resonance" from books; also too little aware of the power of concentration possessed by many readers, which enables them today to continue through an air-raid. But it is a noble utterance. It recalls us to the importance of seriousness, and to the preciousness and the destructibility of knowledge. Knowledge will perish if we do not stand up for it, and testify. It is never safe, never harvested. It has to be protected not only against the gangster but against a much more charming and seductive foe: the crowd. "I know what I like and I know what I want," says the crowd, "and I don't want all these shelves and shelves of books. Scrap them."

The Library started in two rooms at 49 Pall Mall, with five hundred members, and three thousand books. Conditions were Spartan; no ink or paper was provided, and for a time there was no clock. In 1845 it moved into St. James's Square, and now it has a membership of four thousand, and about four hundred and seventy thousand books, together with various luxuries,

including a comfortable reading-room. Its rise is largely due to a great librarian, Sir Charles Hagberg Wright, who died last year. Hagberg Wright had a European connection, and a European outlook. He was free from the insularity which has such a numbing effect on the collecting of books, and it is largely thanks to him that one feels the library to be not English but civilised. For the moment it has one overwhelming problem before it: that of not getting smashed and not getting burnt. But if normality returns it will have the task of getting into touch with the thought and literature of the Continent, however repellent the mental state of the Continent may be. And a more congenial task—it will have to get up to date on America. It has never admitted, and it must never admit, the idea of exclusion; in Hagberg Wright's wise little pamphlet, The Soul's Dispensary, there are some pertinent remarks on this, and a curious account of the war which he had to wage after the last war with various government departments before he could regain liberty for the reimportation of foreign literature.