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Tales from the Book Room: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Country House Libraries and their Books

The intention of this paper is to discuss ways in which the production of private library history can suffer from not being sufficiently inter-disciplinary, and to suggest new partnerships between some established disciplines. My aim is to reconstitute the private library as part of the élite household, and to move further towards a social history of the country house library. The latter aspiration will be familiar as a research theme from Girouard's still influential book, *Life in the English Country House*, first published in 1978.¹ The book is still the first point of departure for most writers and researchers considering the role of the country house library room, and its influence is clear in Gervase Jackson-Stop's architectural and design history of the English country house, *The English Country House A Grand Tour*, as well as John Brewer's cultural history of the eighteenth century, *The Pleasures of the Imagination*.² Girouard tackles the social history of private library architecture in his chapter on 'Virtuosos and Dilettanti.' He considers the expanding intellectual and cultural range of élite social life from the late seventeenth century and its impact on country-houses, as repositories for artistic and scientific collections. Discussing the role of libraries, he sets out a broad narrative of progress, from the rarest late medieval aristocratic collections, to the gradual rise of the library room. This begins as the mid-seventeenth century study, becomes increasingly common as a grand library room in eighteenth-century great houses, and is a repository for treasure from the Grand Tour. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the use of these rooms embraces both that of the family sitting room and a room for more public entertainment, until they appear to lose their intellectual function in the nineteenth century, becoming 'morning rooms' for gentlemen.

Girouard's discussion has put the architecture and contents of private libraries on the cultural map that is being drawn up around the English country house. Yet despite the enduring synthesis he produced, and it is an achievement for one chapter to become so enshrined in the literature, elements of his approach are problematic and due for revision. A single narrative of progress for the emergence and fashioning of the country house library in England is ripe for dissection by socio-economic rank and between regions.³ Aristocratic palaces and the county gentry 'big houses' may need to be considered as quite separate cultural environments, supporting and shaping a range of family identities across time.⁴ The narrative also, inevitably, shows in its age in the arguments which it does not address. There are interdisciplinary research communities contributing to projects known as the 'history of the book', as an artefact, and the 'history of reading' as a social practice.⁵ Since 1978 research on the 'who' and 'what' of books has vastly expanded, tackling the production and distribution of the printed book and the consumption of texts.⁶ The idea of 'the book' has been problematised in a way that was not available to Girouard in the 1970s, but new research questions do not appear to have fed back into the study of private libraries. There is still no new synthesis between private library architecture and collections. Understanding the library room appears to have fallen through the gaps between research communities, and is a missing element in the general move towards a social history of books.⁷

The materials available to work with to restore this absence include the individual library room and its form and decoration, its place in the house plan, the

furnishings and collections within it, the origins and formation of the book collection, the family archive. Obvious sources, but often subject to methodological limitations. In particular, the survival of evidence can place severe limitations on the reconstruction of individual libraries. The loss of generations of family papers limits the possibilities for tracking the book purchases, design decisions, and building accounts that went into the creation of a formal library room. The destruction of country houses, particularly during the twentieth century, without visual records again removes many interiors from reach. Book collections have been sold off without surviving or adequate catalogues, hampering any evaluation of the formation and scope of the books. These are familiar problems, but for a traditionally empirical approach that English architectural history has maintained, they condemn research to failure to answer the most basic questions of the location, form and contents of many library rooms, or even to be sure that such a room existed.

More empirical research on individual libraries undoubtedly needs to be done, and it is only recently that a heritage body such as the National Trust has begun to bring its catalogues of its individual book collections up to modern professional standards. Until provenance information, signatures, bindings and publication details are easily available to researchers, the internal history of these libraries cannot be written. Yet there are some gaps in the evidence that no remedial cataloguing can supply, and these are familiar to social historians as the bias towards certain categories of documents, estate rather than personal, and also towards documents created by adult males, when personal documents such as private accounts, letters, and memoranda books survive. A brief literature survey of case studies of individual collectors up to 1830 reveals twenty three monographs and articles on named male collectors, five on families with famous book collections, and eight named female collectors. There is a significant qualitative difference between the research on males, who tend to be aristocratic or collect on a huge scale, and females, who are gentry rather than aristocracy and tend to be revealed through their signatures on dispersed collections. My own research in the county of Norfolk suggests that out of twenty case studies of gentry and aristocratic houses, seven women appear as individuals in connection with books.⁸ On qualitative grounds, the Norfolk sample follows the characteristics of the national sample of women in the library literature: small scale ownership based on fragmentary evidence. It is not suggested here that the solution to the deficit of visible women in private library history is to go out and find some more examples. Their absence is a further demonstration of the limitations to the conventional range of sources used in writing library history from individual case studies. Instead, the idea of the library as a functioning part of a household, rather than a passive architectural shell, can reanimate the empirical groundwork, by moving on to create qualitative histories, asking wider research questions about how books and people interact, through the medium of libraries.

The form of research question is after all crucial in determining the direction of research, and has its origin within specific disciplinary conventions and interests. For historical bibliographers, the definition of a private library as a collection of books in a domestic setting in practice ignores the material context of the books. Too often, these artefacts are 'lost in space', divorced from the room and its place in the house, in the bibliographical literature. Most bibliographical studies seek to reconstruct historic collections, and the methods of assembling the collections in terms of the provenance of the books, but rarely discuss the physical setting for the books, or set them into a socio-economic context.⁹ The possibilities of understanding the collection as an active element in its social context are greatly diminished in the absence of a sense of material context.

The main interest of the present discussion is in the other definition of a library as the room for books. As built space, the rooms are left by disciplines interested in books as the province of architectural and art historians. These rooms occur in the

architectural literature as ‘fixed in time’, unintegrated with accounts of the complex formation and dispersal processes of collections. Without understanding the book history, an over-simplified identification of the manifestation of a room with the history of the books is often implicit. The survival of the latest manifestation of a library room may go unchallenged as the only library for the house, and an artificially late date by implication assigned to the formalisation of the culture of the book in each case.¹⁰ Equally, the absence of a sense of historical process in the creation of a collection also marginalises human agency: how did the books arrive, who used them and why? The question of human agency in architecture is more usually dealt with in terms of designers, architects and clients, occasionally artisans, and rarely as part of the social life of the built space. Architectural theorists and anthropologists have produced more developed conceptions of agency and the relationship between human behaviour and the built environment.¹¹ These disciplines can perhaps provide new ways of considering the formal space of the library, when integrated with current research on historically specific book collecting and reading practices, drawing on the history of the book and the history of reading research communities. The range of sources for library history is beginning to widen.

Furthermore, the dual nature of physical libraries that has been set up above can be expanded to a trinity, to include the abstract. Chartier, in *The Order of Books*, discusses the ‘library without walls’.¹² Libraries embody the tension between the quest for total inclusion of all knowledge and the reality of selective containment within one library. This problem has been commented on by librarians and collectors since libraries began, and has been historically resolved by the accumulation of catalogues of other libraries, and the creation of an over-arching catalogue of catalogues. In this way, one library can span the world. This intellectual tension between inclusion and exclusion of knowledge offers a sense of the dynamics involved in the idea of a library. Intellectual history, and the history of the philosophy of science, have more to say on the popularity of emergent disciplines from the late seventeenth century, as does contemporary didactic literature.¹³ These disciplines make explicit the significance of texts for households often implicit in historical bibliography and missing altogether from library architectural histories. Private library history suffers occasionally from the opposed stereotypes of the scholar’s library and the gentleman’s library. The multiple functions of the collection and the room, and how these might change over time, for the household of readers, educators, students and dreamers are ignored. Once again, there are more ways to re-animate a subject which can suffer from under-explanation: the ways in which private libraries functioned in the past.

To begin to answer the question, it is helpful to identify the range of meanings associated with the noun. The idea of a library evokes a collection of texts, and the synonymous identification of the built environment enclosing the collection. We know that libraries in both senses date back to the earliest literate cultures, and the western world has a tradition of libraries wherever literacy survived from the expansion of the Roman empire onwards, although it took until the late sixteenth century for the first known history of libraries to be written.¹⁴ Perhaps because of this sense of continuity of human experience, libraries seem self-evident. There is an apparently direct translation of the idea of a library from all literate cultures, and this translation also carries the identification of continuity of meaning in their formation and use.

The more archaeological sense of the continuity of libraries is the typological sequence identified by John Willis Clark in the evolution of the material culture for housing books.¹⁵ We can trace its development from medieval chained desks, at right angles to the walls, where the reader must stay with the book, to the sleek, monumental walls of books in great seventeenth-century European libraries, where the books line the walls in a pattern adopted by almost all later private libraries. Once this breakthrough in shelving has been achieved, there seems little else to say

on the subject of the material arrangement of libraries, except to catalogue the iconography of their decor, as André Masson has.¹⁶

The history of libraries in England is therefore bolstered by these ahistoric continuities, and yet hampered by our peculiar historical discontinuities. The first of these in the transition from medieval to modern is the dissolution of the monasteries and the consequent destruction of monastic libraries, both with the demolition of monastic buildings and the dispersal of the contents.¹⁷ With the sudden ending of this particular tradition of library-keeping, the secular, private libraries that must have supported the English Renaissance are barely present in the research literature, only a few exceptional collections have been analysed and the rooms themselves seem lost.¹⁸ The second discontinuity occurs in the Commonwealth period, the result of economic sanctions and seizures of goods imposed on Royalist households, and their known and conjectured impact on book collections.¹⁹ The history of English private libraries hardly exists as a coherent narrative until the late seventeenth century, and this is largely because earlier private library rooms generally have not survived, leaving us with the problem of defining libraries materially and spatially, to say nothing of the documentary problems. The present view of the absence of material evidence of early private libraries has the result that these places are not represented to us or by us, and so appear to have no history.²⁰

In summary, this is a call to unite the material and the textual in a history of private libraries. The disciplines that can be pillaged for their relevant contributions include material culture disciplines such as anthropology and architectural theory and their insights into the complex relations between humans as social actors in a material world. Socio-economic history highlights factors in the consumption of culture, the historically specific nature of gender relations and identities, and the changing understanding of the meaning of public and private in relation to the household. Book historians contribute detailed surveys of the production and distribution of the book, and historical bibliographers provide detailed analyses of individual collectors and their collections, and both schools have a limited body of theoretical literature. The impact of the format of the printed page on the reader has been widely discussed, and the active nature of the book as artefact has been established. The presentation of text on a page is related to the history of the organisation of knowledge, a subject which supports the implicit intellectual history found in historical bibliography.

Disciplines that specialise in books provide enormous resources for considering the material reality of texts. The various book research communities have not found much to say about the built environment and housing of books, and while there is considerable understanding of the provenance of books through auctions, booksellers and international trade routes, there is little available on the more anthropological provenances by kinship and inheritance. On this survey of the research community's strengths, there is room for and a real contribution to be made by a contextual approach to books and their environments.

After such an ambitious vision of a host of disciplines ready to offer up re-vitalising approaches for private library history, it seems more reasonable to conclude with a down-to-earth research problem. The origins of private libraries that Girouard began with remain problematic, but the question can be approached as a qualitative one, of change across a range of cultural forms. I have used the county of Norfolk as a sample area, for evidence for libraries, as collections and rooms, from 1660 to 1830, in order to investigate Girouard's model of gradual progression from rarity to ubiquity. Norfolk offers palatial aristocratic houses such as Holkham and Houghton, substantial seats of the nobility and gentry such as Raynham, Kimberley and Blickling, and a range of gentry houses, many with Jacobean or earlier origins, such as Felbrigg and Oxburgh. A major disparity appears between the appearance of evidence for book collections and the later manifestation of evidence for specialised rooms for housing the collections.

Raynham is a good example, as there is documentary evidence for the possession

of a collection of books at the old manor house at Raynham, at the death of the founder of the family Sir Roger Townshend I in 1493. Sir Roger owned more than forty printed books, over half of which concerned his profession, law. The books were wrapped up and kept in chests.²¹ At least two of these bound volumes were acquired from Norfolk monasteries, a brief sidelight on the sixteenth-century patterns of dispersal of the monastic libraries into private libraries. The books can be tracked in the possession of his son, Roger II, in an early sixteenth-century memorandum book. Four generations later, the first baronet, also called Sir Roger Townshend, inherited a collection of books from his maternal grandfather, Sir Nathaniel Bacon of Stiffkey who died in 1622.²² This Sir Roger began to build the present Raynham Hall, a house in the classical tradition introduced to England by Inigo Jones, now thought to be the creation of Sir Roger and his master mason William Edge.²³ It seems inevitable that this Sir Roger, an educated and creative man, also had his own collection of books, but the architectural evidence is silent. A plan of the house, taken for the visit of Charles II in 1671, records no study.²⁴ A list of books and booksellers bills exist for the Restoration period, but one can only assume they were kept in a room usually known as a parlour or closet, that we would recognise as a study.²⁵

The pattern of evidence for the early and continuous presence of book collections in the gentry houses but tenuous evidence for how and where they were kept is repeated in the smaller houses. At Heydon Hall, an Elizabethan house in continuous occupation by the descendants of the Earle family, books valued at £40 are inventoried in 1722, and a study is named, by 1763 over six hundred books are catalogued but there is no clear evidence for where the room was until the appearance of a room fitted out by 1801 as a library.²⁶ Oxburgh Hall, built by the 1480s and still in the occupation of the original family of Bedingfeld, had until a sale in 1951 a large collection probably assembled in the mid to late seventeenth century, but no evidence for the presence of a study or library until a plan of 1774 naming a library, which was superseded by a new library after 1830.²⁷

In short, the production of a total history of private libraries must account for the disparity between the naming of the room for books and the actions of collecting, inheriting and maintaining a collection of books. Clearly, the latter is well-established among the gentry by the early seventeenth century. The evidence for the cumulative actions of book collecting outweigh the static snapshots of where the books rested. Historians of the book trade and the history of print have established the rise in availability of books through the seventeenth century, along with the establishment of grammar school and university education for males of gentry or socially ambitious families. The problem remains of how far this rapid adoption of the formal culture of knowledge embodied in books outstripped the translation of this special category of artefacts into a special category of architecture, the library room, in private houses.

Of course, one practical point to be remembered is that one or two shelves of books do not require a conceptual shift towards redesignating the function of a room. But this begs the question of exactly when such a reconceptualisation began to take hold, and was made concrete in book owner's homes. How many professionals, lawyers, doctors, academics, designated their private rooms for reading and accounting as their study, rather than their private closet or parlour, and when? What kinds of access to and ownership of books did women of the household have, and where did they choose to read privately, away from the social acts of reading aloud? When, moving through the eighteenth century, did the idea of a room that declared its main function as the housing of books become a standard component of the country house?

The evolution of functionally distinct rooms in houses can be linked to ideas of the control of space, and of maintaining social and economic distinctions between members of the household as well as within the wider social sphere, most commonly discussed in the demise of the communal great hall of late medieval and

Jacobean houses.²⁸ Can it be possible that the formalisation of the culture of the book through eighteenth-century library rooms represents an attempt to maintain social distinctions otherwise eroded by the access to print and reading begun in the seventeenth century?²⁹ If reading and sharing books became to seem commonplace, the deliberate fitting-out of a library room with appropriate iconographic decoration and a reserved place in the social relations of space might elevate a room-full of books away from the merely economic evidence of acquisition and towards the maintenance and definition of power, the power of knowledge, ordered and enclosed. Much more research is needed to explore these types of questions, but it should be clear that this research needs to demonstrate a qualitative evaluation of a range of complementary sources, visual, documentary and architectural, in order to move forward with a social history of private libraries.

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