

# THE MEANING OF THE LIBRARY

A Cultural History



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## CHAPTER 5



### “The Advantages of Literature”

#### THE SUBSCRIPTION LIBRARY IN GEORGIAN BRITAIN

*David Allan*

On December 27, 1784, a meeting took place at Perth, its purpose to discuss a document, previously drafted, bearing the self-explanatory title “Articles for Establishing a Public Library at Perth.” Forty people were present, and they duly endorsed the document, each adding a signature to the master copy. By the following spring, a fully fledged membership-based organization, funded by subscription and known simply as the Perth Library, had resulted.<sup>1</sup> The minute books, notably of the first so-called ordinary general meeting held on April 7, 1785, allow us to paint a clear picture of what was actually happening and who was involved.<sup>2</sup> There was a core group of clergymen, including Reverend Adam Peebles, an Episcopalian minister, elected the library’s first president that spring, and his two Presbyterian colleagues, Reverend James Scott, incumbent of the town’s principal church, St. John’s, and Reverend John Duff: all three were also active in the recently formed Perth Literary and Antiquarian Society, of which Scott was president and Peebles vice president.<sup>3</sup> Academic participation came from Alexander Gibson, master of Perth Academy, and his colleagues Duncan Macgregor, the French teacher, and John McOrmie, the drawing master. There were two surgeons, George Johnston and George Craigdallie, and eight lawyers, led

by David Black, the library's founding secretary. Several public officials were also involved, including the sheriff of Perthshire and nearby landowner James Murray; his relation, the local laird and collector of customs, Mungo Murray; Perth's burgh clerk, Patrick Duncan; and James Ross, the town's procurator fiscal. But the largest single occupational group, sixteen strong, were the "merchants," a catch-all contemporary label for businessmen. They included John Maxton, the Perth Bank's cashier (the library's first treasurer), and Andrew Keay, who ran the newly established cotton mill at neighbouring Stanley, as well as members of the powerful Sandeman business dynasty and several other important civic figures like John Caw and Alexander Fechney, who combined mercantile interests with prominence in burgh politics, including serving as provost several times between them in the coming years: Fechney in due course became the library's great early benefactor, leaving it £50 in his will.<sup>4</sup> By the following year, working through a subcommittee, the library had purchased its first books, housing them in the long-term accommodation that, after the original gatherings in the town's tollbooth, it had procured in the academy building by St. John's. Borrowing had also commenced and the accumulating books had started to increase the quantity as well as to broaden the range of the subscribers' own reading.

This brief sketch of the Perth Library's founding is useful not only because of the local color it offers nor merely because its extensive surviving records made it the focus of an article I published some years ago.<sup>5</sup> Its greatest value for the present purpose is that it provides a convenient way into thinking about a crucial infrastructural feature of British culture in the long eighteenth century that was genuinely nationwide in its extent. For the subscription library (sometimes then called a "public library" or a "general library," or even, by more recent historians, a "proprietary library") was an institution found the length and breadth of Britain, usually in urban settings but also serving wider hinterlands, from Kirkwall in Orkney to Penzance in Cornwall, from Stranraer on the west coast and Belfast across the water in Ulster to Chichester on the south coast and Hull on the east. In the east Lowlands of Scotland by the end of the Georgian period they had emerged in every sizeable town—not just Perth but also Dundee, Forfar, Falkirk, Stirling, Kirkcaldy, Edinburgh, Haddington, Dunbar, Cupar, and St. Andrews—as well as in dozens of

smaller communities across the same region like Elie, Strathmiglo, Milnathort, Auchterarder, Dysart, Burntisland, Largo, and Inverkeithing.<sup>6</sup>

Those who founded such institutions were generally not bashful about their intentions. Some positively flaunted their vision for the transformative role of subscription libraries. The members of the Carlisle Library, for example, boasted that their organization had secured what they called the "advantages of Literature," which they claimed were ethical and social as much as purely intellectual:

The advantages of Literature to the population of a large and opulent city are obvious to every one capable of appreciating them. An advancement in morals, manners, and taste, is a never-failing attendant upon a habit of reading and reflection: the rapid extension of the CARLISLE LIBRARY, therefore, may be placed foremost in the list of the many judicious and salutary improvements which, within a few years past, have been carried into effect in Carlisle, much to the comfort and convenience of its inhabitants.<sup>7</sup>

The rhetoric was obviously impressive, the ambitions great. And Carlisle's subscribers were, it must be underlined, by no means exceptional in the extrayagance of their claims. There is a need, however, to get behind these rhetorical flourishes and to better understand the essential features of the libraries that resulted. This clearly requires a particular focus on what might be called the "nuts and bolts" of the subscription model itself—the structure and its operations, in other words, which reveal a great deal about what these organizations were really like. But the aim in what follows is also to cast a wider look at the cultural context and to see what these institutions, and the aspirations and preoccupations that lay behind them, might tell us about the peculiar nature of British society in the Georgian age.



The subscription library's roots evidently lie in rather earlier and simpler organizations.<sup>8</sup> The key ancestor is what contemporaries knew as the "book club" (or occasionally "book society" or even "reading society"). Quite unlike the term's modern use, describing either a vehicle for those

who wish to discuss what they have read (as in the Richard and Judy Book Club, linked to a recently popular television program) or, in a very different context, a commercial publisher's device for persuading people to buy books they may not really want (as in the Reader's Digest Book Club of fond memory), the Georgian book club was, like its eventual progeny the subscription library, fundamentally proprietorial—which is to say that it was a circle of individuals who contributed their own hard-earned cash so as to be able to choose and buy certain books collectively. The first examples seem to have arisen among clergymen in neighboring rural parishes in Huntingdonshire, Cambridgeshire, and Bedfordshire soon after 1700, but the phenomenon soon broadened out considerably so that by later in the century there were at least several hundred book clubs active across the country, and they had clearly become so widespread and so popular that they attracted knowing mockery in Charles Shillito's satirical *The Country Book-Club* (1788).<sup>9</sup> A crucial characteristic, however, was the principle that, once an individual text had been read, it would be sold, usually to a member, and the proceeds used to facilitate new purchases. In short, a book club, at least in theory, had no permanent book collection. Indeed, so important was this defining feature that some subscription libraries alluded to their purposeful avoidance of it in their own formal names: the Lichfield Permanent Library in Staffordshire, the Hereford Permanent Library, the Gloucester Permanent Library, and so forth—the word “permanent” here signalling that these institutions were emphatically not mere book clubs of the older kind. Not surprisingly, however, many subscription libraries nevertheless did coalesce out of preexisting book clubs. The Liverpool Library, for example, was founded in May 1758 when two book clubs, and possibly a third, came together for that very purpose, as their members finally decided to retain the books they had been buying.<sup>10</sup> Some book clubs, confusingly, even retained their old monikers despite mutating into subscription libraries, such as the so-called Huntingdonshire Book Club Society, founded in 1742 but with a sizeable permanent collection in its possession by the 1780s.<sup>11</sup> This had clearly become, in all but name, a large and flourishing subscription library.

The first wave of subscription libraries to emerge, whether ex nihilo or from out of prior book clubs, belongs to the 1740s and 1750s, with the

famous Leadhills Library, founded in November 1741 by Lanarkshire miners, having a credible claim to be the earliest.<sup>12</sup> Some of them also provided influential models for emulation, and there is much evidence of blatant copycat activity as aspiring founders often simply followed a precedent from elsewhere. At Leeds in 1768, for instance, it was the Liverpool Library across the Pennines to which the original proposers made explicit reference when promoting their own scheme.<sup>13</sup> Similarly when Manchester's Portico Library was established in 1806 and Nottingham's subscription library was created ten years later both sets of founders based their plans on Liverpool's second major library, the Athenaeum, active since 1800.<sup>14</sup> Imitation also seems the only possible explanation for the rash of subscription libraries across southern Lancashire and in the neighboring West Riding of Yorkshire, where the unusual nomenclature of "circulating library" was adopted despite that term mainly suggesting to Georgian ears a commercial venture owned by a bookseller and hiring out books to fee-paying customers for a profit: the unique concentration of slightly discordant names like Halifax Circulating Library, Manchester Circulating Library, Warrington Circulating Library, and Ashton-under-Lyne Circulating Library in this one region hints strongly at founders simply spotting something interesting in a nearby town and enthusiastically following suit.<sup>15</sup>

From the permanency of their book collections, once established, several implications followed that shaped the subscription libraries and determined how they would operate. One, dictated by their growing assets and by membership numbers that quickly exceeded those of mere book clubs (which only rarely had even twenty participants), was a tendency to greater formalization: after all, the Liverpool Library by 1800, for example, had 893 subscribers and 8,157 books, while at Carlisle in 1819 there were 163 members and 1,463 books.<sup>16</sup> The enhanced rigor that resulted is nicely captured in the rulebook of the library at Dalkeith near Edinburgh, founded in 1798, with its strict laws on such things as penalties for members losing a book or, even worse, passing on borrowed items illicitly to third parties.<sup>17</sup> But rule making can, of course, all too easily become a habit of mind. At its most extreme the increasing officiousness led some libraries to legislate about the most unexpected things: for example, domestic animals. Thus at Wolverhampton in 1795



a polite reminder was issued that "Members are requested not to bring dogs."<sup>18</sup> At Halifax the problem of canine misbehavior was so great that a specific fine was introduced, sixpence for every member entering with a dog, while at Huntingdon the regulatory response was the memorable rule that "No dog shall be suffered to come into the Club Room, under the penalty of the Owner's forfeiting a bottle of Wine."<sup>19</sup> As well as the proliferation of regulations pertaining to a variety of potential scenarios, the increasing scale of operation also entailed the creation of executive subcommittees and the election of individual officers, as at Perth from the outset, to act on behalf of the wider membership—subject, naturally, to constitutional checks and balances prescribed in the regulations. This is what had clearly happened at Stamford in Lincolnshire, for example, where the 1787 library rulebook listed the officers and committee members for the benefit of all forty-six current members.<sup>20</sup> Formalization also meant the periodic creation of printed catalogues as a guide to the ever-expanding book collection. These, such as one that survives from Macclesfield in Cheshire in 1800, are often the only substantial documentary evidence historians now possess of a specific library's activities.<sup>21</sup> Most of the larger institutions also quickly identified a need for at least one employee to act as paid librarian, producing these catalogues, looking after the books and managing access and borrowing by the subscribers.

Much the most important consequence of owning a growing permanent collection was, however, the need for a permanent home. A book club could easily meet monthly on a reasonably casual basis in a tavern or coffeehouse: in Nottinghamshire the Newark Book Society, for example, long met at the town's Kingston Arms.<sup>22</sup> It might even persuade a friendly proprietor to let them keep a locked trunk on the premises containing their not very many current books. The subscription library's requirement for accommodation for at first hundreds and then eventually thousands or in some cases even tens of thousands of books on a permanent footing obviously created logistical problems of a wholly different order of magnitude. Formal renting, perhaps in a bookseller's back room as for the Amicable Society at Lancaster in the 1780s, or, as in Perth in the same decade, wangling a favorable tenancy from the corporation, or a school, was one obvious recourse. This would have been true also of the many smaller libraries like those mentioned earlier in the

eastern Lowlands: leasing a room would generally have been all that was possible. But in certain cases, especially later in the period, constructing dedicated premises was the solution of choice wherever feasible, since only this could provide full and exclusive control over access to the building in which a library's increasingly valuable property was housed. It is to the architectural decisions made at a time when the Grecian style was all the rage that the names of some of the most prepossessing of these institutions, like the Portico in Manchester and the Lyceum in Liverpool (the latter a name change for the old Liverpool Library to reflect its brand-new, purpose-built accommodation), are owed. Other groups, especially by the 1820s, embraced the Gothic with equal enthusiasm: the Carlisle Library's building is a good example. Many of the resulting edifices, often prominently positioned in the townscape, reflected the towering ambitions as well as the considerable self-regard of those involved: these were articulate statements about the importance of the institution, and, perhaps, of its proprietors, rendered unmistakably in fine masonry.

The financial affairs of the larger libraries also tended to be correspondingly complicated. A building, especially if bespoke, did not come cheap: £914 at Tavistock in Devon in 1822, for example, for a Grecian confection known as the Propylaeum, and a reported £1,850 at Hull a decade earlier.<sup>23</sup> Fitting them out could also be expensive. Taking into account the perceived need for a suitably high-quality finish—Corinthian capitals, false ceilings, balconies, even grand pediments, and glazed domes were often regarded as essential—it is not hard to appreciate how the costs could often mount: overruns, as original estimates proved wildly over-optimistic and continually needed raising, were a normal part of the experience for libraries undertaking these sorts of building projects. And the routine running costs of operating a library, whether in its own building or not, were also substantial, not infrequently stretching well into the hundreds of pounds each year: annual expenditure of £357 at the Bristol Library Society, for example, in 1810.<sup>24</sup> This in turn is why membership costs were sometimes so high: at the Lyceum in Liverpool it was already half a guinea per annum by the 1790s with an initial joining fee of a further five guineas—the same prices as at York.<sup>25</sup> Accordingly it is easy to understand why concerns about fair and open decision making, about keeping officers and subcommittees on a tight rein, about

maintaining proper accounts and producing accurate documentation, and about managing and monitoring access to the institution's property all bore heavily on the thinking of participants. It was because the scale of operation in many cases and the consequent costs for those involved had comprehensively outgrown the simple book club format where a handful of people met periodically in the back room of a hostelry to put a little money into a pot to fund some additional reading matter.



Brief allusion has already been made to the sorts of people involved in these institutions, at least to the limited extent that the Perth Library might be regarded as a classic example. But there is actually no such thing as a standard model for the membership of a Georgian subscription library. There is, moreover, a methodological problem when reconstructing the social composition of these institutions, and that is the difficulty, familiar to historians as to statisticians, created by survivor bias in the run of evidence. For it is precisely the grandest, most well-heeled, most prosperous, largest, and longest-lasting libraries in the more significant urban centers that tended to compile and conserve the most prodigious quantities of self-referential documentation. And it is therefore these that also tend to be heavily overrepresented in the historical evidence that has come down to us. Hence, for example, we can enumerate the founders of the Perth Library—and even add some interesting biographical color in many cases—but we cannot name the people who patronized many of the smaller libraries that sprang up across rural Fife. As a result it is necessary for us to talk instead in rather more general terms about the broad types of membership base found in different kinds of institutions, usually but not always reflecting local demographic patterns.

English cathedral cities, for instance, constitute a particularly well-defined subgroup, with the clergy from the chapter, the town churches, and the surrounding district often amounting to between 10 percent and 20 percent of all library members: at Norwich in 1792 the proportion of clergymen stood at 12 percent, at Worcester in 1818 it was 13 percent, while at York five years later sixty-five of the 477 members (or 14 percent) were reverend gentlemen, including the archbishop himself and the dean.<sup>26</sup> Another recognizable pattern that is readily illustrated from

the surviving records is that of what might be described as the county or country town library—the institution located in the sort of urban center that chiefly functioned as an administrative, economic, social, and cultural focus for the population of a substantial rural area. Such memberships tended to be dense with local landowners, mainly prosperous farmers and country gentlemen: Stamford is once again a very good example, with its sprinkling of squires, as are Shrewsbury, Penzance, and Bury St. Edmunds.<sup>27</sup> There are also, meanwhile, clear signs of a type of library that was particularly heavily patronized by the new middle classes—people, in other words, involved in the expanding commercial and industrial activity of the Georgian era, including gratifying confirmation of what even then were emerging as familiar occupational stereotypes for certain towns and localities. At Wolverhampton, for example, at the time increasingly known for its role in the Black Country's metalworking industries, the subscribers included toolmakers and toy makers; at Lancaster, a port town especially noteworthy for its American hardwood imports, the founders of the Amicable Society included numerous Quaker ship owners and also Robert Gillow of the great local furniture-making dynasty; and in the early Liverpool Library there were, as one might predict, a smattering of chandlers, rope makers, sailmakers and sugar importers.<sup>28</sup>

The involvement of female readers was also commonplace. In fact, like the clergy, women frequently made up a sizeable minority of subscribers: for example, 18 percent at Norwich in 1792, 21 percent at Lancaster in 1812, and 20 percent at Worcester in 1818.<sup>29</sup> The formal admission of female proprietors was, it seems, invariably welcome, even though this only occasionally was made explicit (as at Lewes in Sussex, where the library's regulations expressly permitted their inclusion, and also at Lancaster in 1775, where the minutes preserve the moment when the initial proposal that women should be enrolled as members was accepted).<sup>30</sup> Yet there is a complicating factor when attempting to gauge levels of active female participation from the surviving membership lists: the phenomenon of group subscription. For it was very common indeed for one member of a household to subscribe and for this to confer borrowing privileges on the entire family. Documentary proof of this survives in one case because the library characteristically bureaucratized it. At Wolverhampton a pro

forma certificate carried the following formulation: "I certify that the bearer [blank space for a handwritten name] is an inmate of my family, and as such is authorized by me to frequent the library, and to have books from it as for myself."<sup>31</sup> The same happened at the Portico, with the rule-book confirming that "The Library and Reading-Room shall be open to the Ladies of the respective families of the subscribers."<sup>32</sup> Another suggestive piece of evidence comes from what is missing from the registers: at many institutions (at Lancaster in 1812, for example) there are no instances of female subscribers sharing a surname with the men—so no wives, no unmarried daughters or spinster sisters. This either demonstrates that none of the men had any close female relations who wanted to join or, as seems infinitely more likely, that only women who did not already have a husband or father or brother who was a member bothered to subscribe, and pay the necessary dues, independently.<sup>33</sup> There is therefore every reason to think that actual female users of the subscription libraries were almost certainly far more numerous than the recorded female subscribers.

We need also to consider, of course, despite the huge problems with the lack of evidence for the humblest institutions, the scope that existed for the involvement of working-class readers. Two developments in particular are worthy of mention in this regard because they did bring readers from poor backgrounds into the subscription library's ambit. The first was the authentic working-class membership-based library, usually small in scale, such as the one at Luddenden in the West Riding around 1830, about which we know because one member, William Heaton, a Methodist weaver and an autodidact entomologist, subsequently published some poetry along with a memoir; or the self-improvement society and library founded at Failsworth near Manchester by the weaver and future journalist Ben Brierley; or in the same decade the library at Edwinstowe in Nottinghamshire of which the artisan painter—and, again, working-class autobiographer—Christopher Thomson was a cofounder.<sup>34</sup> How many of these institutions existed we do not know and never will, because virtually none left durable evidence. The second avenue into this world for the reader of limited means about which it is still possible to say something was, of course, for the costs of participation to be transferred to someone else. In practice this meant the formation of subscrip-

tion libraries where patrons or employers paid on behalf of working-class users or at least subsidized them. Often designated artisans' or apprentices' libraries and probably quite widespread by the end of the Georgian period, when they were linked to the emergence of full-blown mechanics' institutes, there are a small handful from which documentation is still extant, in places like Nottingham, Liverpool, and Birmingham.<sup>35</sup> The difficulty with this sort of institution, however, was that, unlike the orthodox proprietorial libraries in which Heaton, Thomson, and Brierley participated as owners, by introducing the philanthropic involvement of nonusers they also potentially compromised the conventional rights of the readers to exercise exclusive control both over the library in general and over book selection in particular. This awkward state of affairs brings us neatly to the question of the kinds of reading experience that subscription libraries in practice actually made possible.



Broadly speaking the books acquired by subscription libraries tended to be the outcome of two conflicting impulses. On the one hand there was the freedom of readers who were also owners and members to decide, by some combination of individual proposal and collective approval, the books that the library would buy: this expectation, of course, implied a potential for glorious chaos as the collection would inevitably reflect individual subscribers' myriad wishes and whims. On the other hand there was the strong desire for order imposed by prevailing notions of taste, decency, and propriety. These constraints were especially potent in practice because Georgian culture was not notably open-minded about appropriate reading material. Indeed they gave rise to a series of specific anxieties that the construction of an institutional collection was always liable to exacerbate. One was closely related to the commitment of many participants, as we have seen, to the strict emulation of precedents from elsewhere, which were accepted as in some sense establishing standards to which other libraries needed to aspire: as the minutes at Nottingham record, for example, it was agreed shortly after that institution was founded in 1816 "That the Librarian [should] make out a list of books marked in the Liverpool catalogue & that Mr Almond Mr Hutton and Mr Pearson be requested to look over such catalogue and mark against

them the prices at which such books can be obtained"—in other words, the early members assumed that the Athenaeum's catalogue defined the sort of collection to which they too should aspire.<sup>36</sup> A further concern when shaping a burgeoning institutional collection was the whole thorny question of dubious literature. In some cases this meant merely texts of an inherently argumentative nature that might inflame tempers or trigger unseemly disputes between members. This was why at Newark, for example, a rule declared books of "party politics and polemical divinity" strictly inadmissible.<sup>37</sup> But the commonest problem, at least as it was understood by contemporaries, was the novel, a literary form that from midcentury, the era of Fielding's *Tom Jones*, Richardson's *Pamela*, and Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling*, was sweeping all before it in public taste, much to the horror of many critics.

The issue with novels was, or was usually held to be, twofold. One concern was that narrative fiction seemed to be so constructed by manipulative and morally bankrupt authors as to sensationalize or white-wash bad behavior and encourage emotional incontinence among readers through blatant titillation. The other worry, closely related to the first, was that such literature was also simultaneously much more likely to appeal to and therefore to lead astray those vulnerable readers with the weakest constitutions, specifically women, the young, and—a fascinating Georgian perception—servants, as a consequence threatening not just public morality but also the social and political order. This set of deeply rooted prejudices about the dangers of fiction meant that the place of the novel in subscription library collections was inherently and inevitably contentious, with many institutions laying down obiter dicta on the subject: "No Novel or Play shall be admitted into the Library, but such as have stood the test of time, and are of established reputation," as the nervous founders of the Leicester Literary Society put it in 1790.<sup>38</sup> Between the right of members to choose, however, and the fear of what might happen when they did, libraries continually struggled to negotiate. Usually this entailed committees receiving general policing powers in relation to questionable titles. But inevitably disputes could arise, since the difference between acceptable and unacceptable work is almost always in the eye of the beholder and in any case the very idea of censorship being imposed by a subgroup ran counter to the democratic ethos and proprietorial expectations of the paying membership as a whole. At

Uxbridge in Middlesex in 1819, for example, it is almost possible to hear the conflicting impulses at work as the members objected to the high-handed way in which one new text, bought at one member's suggestion, had then been removed by another, but also found themselves agreeing with the underlying moral judgment about Byron's writing that had caused the incident in the first place. As the minutes record, the members "decidedly object to and blame the manner in which Don Juan has been withdrawn—as being a direct infringement of the Rules of the Society, but fully convinced of the impropriety and licentious nature of the book itself do not think proper to repurchase it."<sup>39</sup>

Such qualms, however, did not stop the novel, reputable or otherwise, finding a significant place in most subscription library collections. A good example is again from the Macclesfield catalogue from 1800: among the so-called twelves—the duodecimo format, typically used for small-size multivolume editions of popular novels—there are numerous instances of narrative fiction, including imaginative works that remain much loved, like Richardson's *Clarissa* and Ann Radcliffe's newer novel *The Italian*, as well as some less well remembered books such as *Henry Somerville* and the gothic romance *The Children of the Abbey*.<sup>40</sup> But turning back to the first page of the same catalogue we would also find more of the other types of material that subscription libraries tended to supply, because of their intense commitment, as we have seen, to "the advantages of Literature"—an ideal always implying edifying, improving books that would inform and educate. History, biography, and travel literature were extremely common everywhere. So too were essays, poems, philosophical works, and scientific texts. There was, in other words, an invariable emphasis on more serious forms of literature, the kinds of things with which a knowledgeable person needed to be familiar, whether Ben Brierley in Failsworth, who with his working-class friends was apparently ploughing through Shakespeare, Burns, and Locke, or genteel Cheshire squires and silk manufacturers, as in the case of the Macclesfield subscribers, immersing themselves in Michel de Montaigne's sixteenth-century meditative essays or devouring the autobiography of the recently deceased historian Edward Gibbon.



Before moving toward a conclusion it is necessary to say something in addition about why these people did what they did. This is the more



important because explaining the popularity and vibrancy of the subscription library model across Britain from the 1750s onward lays bare some hugely significant Georgian idiosyncrasies. Superficially, of course, they did it simply because they wanted to get their hands on more books: membership of a voluntary association of fellow readers generated far greater purchasing power and, over time, at least in the case of a proper subscription library, offered the use of a sizeable lending collection of texts. But there was clearly more to it than that. After all, there were many instances of individuals who almost certainly did not engage in this kind of associational activity mainly, or even at all, because they required more or easier access to books. Wordsworth was one, a keen user of the so-called Kendal Book Club, another library in disguise, who had his own large personal collection at Rydal Mount that even served as a private lending resource for friends like De Quincey and Arnold (indeed so capacious was it that Wordsworth actually needed to create his own borrowing records to keep track of the comings and goings).<sup>41</sup> Less celebrated but no less revealing is the case of Reverend Thomas Clarke, mainstay and sometime president of the Hull library, who, when his own books were auctioned on his death in 1798, owned a good five thousand titles.<sup>42</sup> Evidently neither Wordsworth nor Clarke, both of them regular attenders of their respective libraries over many years, was exactly short of reading material.

The Kendal institution in particular gives us an important clue as to why this type of organization attracted such people, for in addition to the opportunity to borrow books it also offered a venue for meeting friends and acquaintances as well as an annual Book Club Ball and a Venison Feast. The Huntingdonshire Book Club Society fulfilled much the same function, serving as a focus for social gatherings, including formal events like its well-attended monthly dinners, held, apparently, for three hours in the evening of the Tuesday before full moon.<sup>43</sup> In other words, these libraries were also convivial organizations that provided plentiful opportunities for sociability—for meeting and interacting with others. But sociability was not just a casual pleasure. For some participants in the subscription libraries, like the Earl of Exeter, a committee member at Stamford, involvement was a way in which local dignitaries could confer patronage and acknowledge their social obligations, especially necessary

given the claims that were frequently heard, as at Carlisle, for the moral benefits of such institutions to the wider public. Social interaction in the libraries could also involve attending instructive lectures or taking part in enlightening debates. Occasionally these formats caused their own problems, such as when the subjects covered strayed into divisive territory: they clearly did this at Lancaster in 1775, as, with the prime minister's disastrous American policy triggering outright revolution, the members felt obliged to pass a subsequent resolution regarding the relevant entry in their minute book that "that part of the society's discussion of the Subject No 26 respecting Bribing Lord North be erased."<sup>44</sup> More often, however, members' discussions, formal or informal, clung to the principle made explicit at Wakefield, that they should "cherish and maintain, on all occasions, a profound reverence for the principles of revealed religion, and . . . refrain from the expression of any sentiments or views hostile to the British constitution."<sup>45</sup>

Sociability, then, mattered intensely to the participants in subscription libraries. But it was generally properly structured and intentional in character, not random and accidental. In particular it was organized and given coherence by conversations on reading-related questions, by discussion of the library's own internal affairs, by debates on appropriate topics, and by regular dinners and periodic dances. It was also sociability that was consciously directed, in keeping with the influential doctrines of commentators like Joseph Addison and Lord Shaftesbury, toward the cultivation of what contemporaries knew and prized as "politeness"—that is to say, it was considered as constructing an amiable and emollient disposition, resolutely rational in outlook and accepting of others, always interested and inquisitive about the world and about other people but determined to avoid disagreeable conflict and seeking to form secure interpersonal relationships that would in turn become the very building blocks of peaceful and prosperous wider communities.<sup>46</sup> Politeness, in this sense, was profoundly ideological, concerned with stabilising eighteenth-century society after the disastrous upheavals of the seventeenth century that had been marked throughout the British Isles by civil war and revolution resulting from irrational fanaticism and endemic mutual intolerance. And politeness, the necessary antidote to these devastating pestilences, could best be nurtured by a concerted

commitment to sociability, in effect by joining and participating in associational organizations—not just subscription libraries and book clubs but also masonic lodges (which were proliferating rapidly at this time), literary societies, antiquarian societies, music societies, even cricket clubs (the latter again spreading like wildfire, at least in England).<sup>47</sup> This was in fact, as Peter Clark has argued, a golden age of British associationalism, and we miss something vital about the subscription library phenomenon if we view it in isolation, merely as a question of people wanting to read more books, and if we divorce it from this broader cultural and ideological context peculiar to Georgian Britain, which was positively obsessed with organized sociability, structured interaction, and the pursuit of politeness.

So why, finally, did the subscription library craze eventually fizzle out? Why are there so few of these institutions—the Portico in Manchester is one—still around today? In particular, why did so many close their doors for good between around 1870 and the Second World War—like the Lyceum in Liverpool, for example, which ceased to operate in 1942 and whose splendid city-center building is now regrettably unoccupied? Partly the simple answer must be that, over time, the Georgian preoccupation with politeness dissipated. Victorian people found new things to fret about and devised new solutions in which polite sociability—so crucial to Addison and Shaftesbury, looking nervously over their shoulders at the violent and chaotic world of Cromwell and the Covenanters—no longer played a meaningful part. But partly also the problem for the subscription library by the second half of the nineteenth century was one of rival attractions, above all the result of parliamentary legislation that, in concert with Mr. Carnegie's good works, provided late Victorian and Edwardian Britons with a compelling alternative to the relatively expensive private subscription library model: which is to say, true public libraries, run by local government, ratepayer-funded, and free at the point of use, which may usually have lacked dances and drinking sessions and, one presumes, venison feasts—indeed much of the characteristic paraphernalia of Georgian sociability—but that did provide automatic access at no cost to large and growing book collections for enthusiastic readers of all social classes. And to appreciate how these new institutions generally replaced the preexisting subscription libraries even in the affections of

most of the more prosperous book-lovers, to the extent that they had largely killed them off by the 1940s, we need to recall that the Victorian or early twentieth-century public library was a quite different creature from its early twenty-first-century descendant with its DVD collections and vast reams of council literature.

Most crucially we should understand that those who first conceived and built Britain's public libraries entirely shared the burning vision of edifying literature and learning—of reading as an ennobling and morally uplifting experience—which had previously animated the idealistic subscribers at Carlisle and at Perth. Public libraries of the new kind were often architecturally at least as striking as the grandest of the old-style subscription libraries, and certainly as powerful a statement of cultural self-confidence on the part of those who erected them. But they were free, and they also rapidly accumulated book collections on a very large scale indeed, facts that quickly made them overwhelmingly preferable even to many well-to-do readers. Something of the glorious ambition of this movement is captured in the former Crumpsall Library on Cheetham Hill Road in Manchester.<sup>48</sup> The building is an exquisite example of corporation Edwardian Baroque and Grade II-listed, although it is now sadly derelict, its future in jeopardy. In its heyday, however, it possessed wonderful stained-glass windows, which when the sun shone through them created a cathedral-like atmosphere within, quite deliberately reminding the seated rows of hushed readers of the stars in the literary firmament whom they were there to venerate: Keats, Gray, and Burke from these islands; Homer, Euripides, and Cervantes from the Continent. And on the exterior cartouches, clearly cut into the stone so as to draw in the passing public from the busy high street, were the names of the four patron saints of British literature as viewed from the vantage point of late-Victorian high culture, the dedicatees of this temple of classless, publicly funded scholarship: Scott, Milton, Shakespeare, Dickens. Crumpsall Library, it should be noted, was planted in an unremarkable inner suburb of Manchester, just a couple of miles from where Ben Brierley and his friends two generations before had organized their own subscription library at Failsworth and only a short Edwardian tram ride from the Portico in the city center. And once this type of facility was available to everyone in the local population—in Cheetham Hill, to an

eclectic mix of working-class Jews newly arrived from Eastern Europe and also a middle-class enclave of factory managers and office workers—the attractions of reading became even more obvious, in fact irresistibly alluring, to even greater numbers than before. But as the most effective and convenient way for eager readers to seek the “advantages of Literature,” the emergence of proper public libraries meant that the proprietary subscription institution, a peculiar monument to Georgian Britain’s distinctive cultural moment, had very largely had its day.

## NOTES

1. Perth: A. K. Bell Library, Perth and Kinross Council Archive, MS 4: Perth Library 1784–1874, “Minutes I, 1784–1819”: 1–3.
2. *Ibid.*, 4–5.
3. David Allan, “The Scottish Enlightenment and the Politics of Provincial Culture: The Perth Literary and Antiquarian Society, ca. 1784–1790,” *Eighteenth-Century Life* 27 (2003): 1–31.
4. *Guide to the City and County of Perth* (Perth, 1805), 16.
5. David Allan, “Provincial Readers and Book Culture in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Perth Library, c. 1784–1800,” *Library* 3 (2002): 367–89.
6. My source for the existence of individual subscription libraries is the Library History Database, formerly provided online by the late Robin Alston. This is currently off-line as it is transferred to the website of the Institute of English Studies in the School of Advanced Study at the University of London.
7. *Rules for the Regulation of the Carlisle Library . . .* (Carlisle, 1819), iii.
8. David Allan, *A Nation of Readers: The Lending Library in Georgian England* (London: British Library, 2008), chs. 2 and 3. The urtext for modern students of the subscription library’s emergence remains Paul Kaufman, “The Community Library: A Chapter in English Social History,” *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 57 (1967), pt. 7: 3–67.
9. Keith Manley, “Rural Reading in North West England: The Sedbergh Book Club, 1728–1928,” *Book History* 2 (1999): 78–95 (at 79); Keith Manley, “The S.P.C.K. and English Book Clubs before 1720,” *Bodleian Library Record* 13 (1989): 231–43.
10. M. Kay Flavell, “The Enlightened Reader and the New Industrial Towns: A Study of the Liverpool Library, 1758–1790,” *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 8 (1985): 17–35.
11. Allan, *Nation of Readers*, 56.

12. John C. Crawford, "Leadhills Library and a Wider World," *Library Review* 46 (1997): 539–53.

13. Frank Beckwith, *The Leeds Library 1768–1968*, 2nd ed. (Leeds, 1994), 4–6.

14. Allan, *Nation of Readers*, 64; Nottingham: Bromley House: "Proceedings of the Library Committee, 1816–1830," fol. 5v.

15. Allan, *Nation of Readers*, 110n.

16. *Ibid.*, 65, 97.

17. *Rules for the Regulation of the Dalkeith Subscription Library* . . . (Dalkeith, 1798).

18. Stafford: William Salt Library, MS. 101/31, Minute Book of Wolverhampton Subscription Library, 1795–1828, fol. 2v.

19. E. P. Rouse, "Old Halifax Circulating Library, 1768–1866," *Papers, Reports, etc. Read before the Halifax Antiquarian Society* (1911), 45–60 (at 46); *Laws and Regulations of the Huntingdonshire Book Club Society* . . . (Huntingdon, 1814), 8.

20. *Rules for Regulating the Subscription Library at Stamford* . . . (Stamford, 1787).

21. *Supplement to the Catalogue of the Macclesfield Library* (Macclesfield, 1800).

22. Nottingham: Nottinghamshire Archives, D463/22, Newark Book Society: "Accounts, 1784–1836," fol. 1v.

23. *A Catalogue of the Books in the Tavistock Public Subscription Library* . . . , 8; Keith Manley, "Lounging Places and Frivolous Literature: Subscription and Circulating Libraries in the West Country to 1825," in John Hinks and Catherine Armstrong, eds., *Printing Places: Locations of Book Production and Distribution Since 1500* (New Castle, DE, and London: British Library, 2005), 107–20 (at 118); *An Account of the Rise and Progress of the Subscription Library at Kingston-upon-Hull* . . . (Hull, 1810), 11, 26, 28.

24. Kathleen Hapgood, "Library Practice in the Bristol Library Society, 1772–1830," *Library History* 5 (1981): 145–53 (at 148).

25. Allan, *Nation of Readers*, 92.

26. *Ibid.*, 67–68.

27. *Catalogue of Books Belonging to the Subscription Library in Shrewsbury* . . . (Shrewsbury, 1812); *Rules and Catalogue of the Penzance Library* . . . (n.p., 1824); *Laws for the Regulation of the Suffolk Public Library, Bury St. Edmunds* (Bury, 1791).

28. Minute Book of Wolverhampton Subscription Library, 1795–1828, fol. 1v; Lancaster Public Library: MS.5147, "Laws for the future regulation of the

Amicable Society . . ."; *A Catalogue of the Present Collection of Books in the Liverpool Library* (n.p., n.d.), 12–15.

29. Allan, *Nation of Readers*, 78.

30. *Catalogue of the Books Belonging to the Lewes Library Society* . . . (Lewes, 1827), iv; "Minutes of the Amicable Society," January 10, 1775.

31. *Catalogue of Books Belonging to the Wolverhampton Library* . . . (Wolverhampton, 1835), xiii.

32. *Catalogue of the Books Belonging to the Portico-Library* . . . (Manchester, 1810), 3.

33. *A Catalogue of the Amicable Society's Library* . . . (Lancaster, 1812).

34. William Heaton, *The Old Soldier, The Wandering Lover; and Other Poems* . . . (London, 1857), xviii–xix; John Host, *Victorian Labour History: Experience, Identity and the Politics of Representation* (London, 1998), 83; Christopher Thomson, *The Autobiography of an Artisan* (London, 1847), 335.

35. *Catalogue of the Books Belonging to the Nottingham Artisans' Library* . . . (Nottingham, 1824); Thomas Kelly, *A History of Adult Education in Great Britain*, 2nd ed. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1970), 127–28.

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40. *Supplement*, pp. 1–4.

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43. *Laws and Regulations*, 3.

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ness in Early Eighteenth-Century England," *Historical Journal* 32 (1989): 586-603.

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