

# 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