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EDWARDS DREAMS OF ALEXANDRIA: LIBRARY HISTORY IN THE SERVICE OF PUBLIC LIBRARY ACTIVISM (Paper)

Abstract

Our paper explores the relationship between Edward Edwards's *Memoirs of Libraries: Including a Handbook of Library Economy* (1859) and 19th-century Britain's Public Library Movement, especially the Public Library Acts of 1850 and 1855. Focusing on the instrumentalization of library history for the movement's agenda, we show how Edwards projects the roots of this movement deep into antiquity and rhetorically creates a narrative of British deficiency set purposefully at odds with British patriotic and colonial sentiments, deriving from this vertical and horizontal comparison his arguments and advice for the establishment of municipal public libraries.

1. Introduction

We all came together here this year to contemplate where we are going as a profession by contemplating where we came from. Who would think that studying the modes of thinking of our professional ancestors would deliver any relevant insights and arguments for the problems we are facing going forward? The answer is: Edward Edwards. When arguing and lobbying for the establishment of municipal public libraries in 19th-century Britain, he had - in Britain - only the past to work with. And when he and his collaborators asked themselves how to invent a future with public information access in every small town of Great Britain, he turned the past, as we will see, into his most powerful argument.

Our paper explores the relationship between one eccentric work of library historiography, written by one of the leading figures of the British Public Library Movement (Kelly 1966, 163,

fn. 1), and the aims of the movement itself, especially the Public Library Acts of 1850 and 1855. Edward Edwards's 2,000-page *Memoirs of Libraries: Including a Handbook of Library Economy* was published in two volumes in 1859, ¾ of which make up the historic part on the development of libraries from Pharaonic Egypt all the way to his own times, while the last quarter is reserved for the part called 'Library Economy.' Focussing on the instrumentalization of library history in service of the argument for the establishment and maintenance of municipal libraries, our paper will show how Edwards projects the roots of this movement deep into antiquity and rhetorically creates a narrative of British deficiency set purposefully at odds with British patriotic and colonial sentiments, deriving from this vertical and horizontal comparison his arguments and advice for the establishment of municipal public libraries.

Up to the mid-19th century in Britain, just like in the US and even a few decades later in Canada, it was mainly private philanthropy or the subscription library model that granted (more or less) public access to book collections (Kelly 1966, 185-240; Lerner 2009, 129-31; Wilson & Berrigan 2018, 656-57). Outside of London and barred from social libraries by high membership fees and member-cooptation, members of the working class had to rely on the profit-oriented selections of the circulating libraries, that is, they had neither free nor comprehensive access to the information of the time. When Edward Edwards, one of Britain's earliest public library professionals, "obtained his first reader's ticket" in 1834 at the age of 22, "the British Museum was still the only large and freely accessible public library in London" (Munford 1963, 16-17) and one of only a very few in Britain.

2. Edward Edwards and the British Public Library Movement

Edward Edwards (1812-1886) was the son of a bricklayer and was educated informally under the tutelage of family and friends (Munford 1963, 14-15). He never sat for a portrait or photograph,

so the only representation we have of him is in this painting by John Phillip, which he sat for a profile for in 1848. Edwards sits in the shadows, almost indistinguishable except that he holds what looks to be one of his beloved parliamentary blue books. He was fortunate, as a young working class man, to be able to satisfy the scholarly bent of his mind at the British Museum (Munford 1963, 17) and became an ardent advocate for increasing accessibility to the library for citizens who, like him, came from the working classes. At the age of 23, he published a lengthy response to the minutes of the Select Committee on the British Museum suggesting multiple reforms (Edwards 1836) and the same year stood before the committee to give evidence (Munford 1963, 19-21). This was the beginning of his involvement in the legislative and reform work that would lead to the establishment and spread of public libraries in Britain.

Edwards came of age in an era of reform. Parliamentary reforms broadening the franchise as well as reforms addressing the living and working conditions of the poor and working classes had been proposed, but none as yet had touched on educational matters. The revolutions occurring in Europe in the late 1840s and the agitation of Chartists in England for universal male suffrage made “ameliorating the condition of the working classes”—and thereby tamping down the sparks of homegrown revolution—a priority (Charing 1995, 48). To be clear, upper class public library activists, such as Edwards’s patron William Ewart, MP, most often framed the public library as the foundation of an orderly democracy that would not only make Britain ascendant (“Report”, 1849; Charing 1995, 50; Peatling 2004, 39) but also enable a form of social control by offering the masses a “rational” way to spend their leisure time, ideas aligned with the prevailing doctrines of individualism and self-improvement (Charing 1995, 48). Edwards himself, however, while certainly a ‘self-improvement poster child’ and seeming to express some

of these patronizing ideas in his *Memoirs*, was nevertheless sympathetic to the Chartists and even signed the petition outlining their demands (Munford 1963, 53).

In 1848, Edwards was called upon by Ewart to collaborate in bringing forward a bill to provide for the establishment of public libraries in towns. Edwards readily agreed, and when a Select Committee was called to take evidence on the public library question, Edwards answered hundreds of questions about education, public access to books in England, and the state of public libraries in other countries (Munford 1963, 63-65; "Report" 1849). Based on his evidence, the Committee was convinced that public libraries "have long existed on the Continent" ("Report" 1849, iii) and drew the conclusion that Edwards led it to: that Continental literature and peoples had flourished while both had suffered in England, all due to abundance of public libraries on one and the lack of public libraries in the other ("Report" 1849, iii).

Motivated by this sting to national pride, the Public Libraries Act was passed in 1850. It was a "permissive" measure that allowed town councils in places of at least 10,000 inhabitants to put to a vote whether to levy a rate (up to a halfpenny on the pound) for establishing a public library. The money could be used to erect and maintain a building and pay staff, but not to procure books (Greenwood 1890, 65). The 1855 Act raised the rate that could be levied to one penny per pound and reduced the population requirement to 5,000. One of the first rate-supported public libraries to open under the 1850 Act was the Manchester Free Library, and Edwards became its Principal Librarian (Munford 1963, 86). Here, he pioneered reforms he had espoused decades prior such as extending library operating hours to accommodate working class patrons (e.g., Munford 1963, 98, 110, 118). This experience undoubtedly provided the meat for his *Memoirs of Libraries*, especially for its appended recommendations on library economy, which was written during his years in Manchester.

More than this, though, in the context of the continued push for improved legislation and the slow uptake of the Public Libraries Act in Britain (Manley 2001, 211; Greenwood 1890), *Memoirs* served as an extension of his almost ironic appeal to Britain's imperialist pride he previously made before the Select Committee. In the work's Introduction, for example, he states that "[i]f, in some things, Englishmen may [...] have warrant to claim, with a pride untainted by arrogance, their hardwon privilege of 'teaching the nations how to live,' - most certainly they may acknowledge, without either humiliation or reluctance, that in many others they have still much to learn" (Edwards 1859, vol. I, 7). What Edwards is suggesting here is that for England to live up to its image of itself as a leader on the world stage, it needed to become a leader in the establishment of what he saw as the "the highest and most socially significant" library type: the municipal free public library (Munford 1963, 141).

3. *Memoirs of Libraries: Historical Narrative and Political Argument*

From the outset, Edwards describes his book's 'propagandist' purpose (Munford 1963, 141) in no uncertain terms: To him, "[t]he rise and progress of collections of books, and more especially of public collections, is not merely a matter of minute and antiquarian research" (Edwards 1859, vol. I, 5). Though Edwards, as might be expected, panders to his Victorian audience when stating that a treatise such as his should naturally begin with the libraries of the Greeks and Romans or maybe even of the Egyptians, his history takes a surprising turn when he finds the ancient antecedents of the modern public library in the unlikelyst of places, such as the Assyrian King Ashurbanipal's palace at Nineveh (7th cent. BCE; Edwards 1859, vol. I, 8 and 15-16). In this way, he connects this ancient history not only with the Public Library Movement but also with the most recent archaeological discoveries.

But given that “charm which clings to classic antiquity” (Edwards, 1859, vol. I, 8) and his own excuse that the collections of Egypt and Mesopotamia “belong rather to the domain of archæology than to that of bibliography” (Edwards, 1859, vol. I, 16), and after disputing that any early Greek book collection can actually be called a library, Alexandria, according to Edwards’s historical narrative, becomes not only Classical Antiquity’s first as in ‘most famous’ but actually as in ‘earliest library.’ Regarding the question of public access to the royal libraries of Alexandria and Pergamum it seems like Edwards projected, unknowingly or at least tacitly, the public access situation of the national library he and his readers were most familiar with, the British Museum. Wedged in between his claim of public access to Ashurbanipal’s library in Nineveh and his exploration of the Roman public libraries Edwards also treats the original and most famous Library of Alexandria as one that was “made accessible with liberality”, that is, as a public library (Edwards, *Memoirs*, vol. 1, 58).

Although this example would appeal strongly to the Victorian mind, which loved to find parallels between England and great Classical civilizations, Edwards cannot present a continuous narrative tracing public libraries all the way from ancient Assyria to the present. Probably for this reason, though, he still resorts to an extensive treatment “of those book-collections of the Middle Ages which may, in some sort, serve to bridge over for us the vast interval that lies between an Alexandrian *Serapeum* of ancient, and a Parisian Bibliothèque Imperiale of modern, [sic!] days” (Edwards 1859, vol. I, 11). Note, however, that these medieval libraries bridge, not to modern British libraries, but to a Continental one. Indeed, Edwards doesn’t spare his reader from laments over British medieval library history disasters like the 16th-century destruction of monastery libraries, which caused the churchman John Bale to complain, “Yea, what may bring our realm to more shame and rebuke than to have it noised abroad that we are despisers of learning?”

(Edwards 1859, vol. I, 360). Medieval continental libraries, in sharp contrast, had managed to survive. Edwards observes that “under the care of municipalities abroad, many an old Library of the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries has grown and prospered, [...] until we see it now, in the middle of the nineteenth, thriving still, and sometimes vigorously throwing out new roots. [...] Of thirty six notable continental Libraries, founded up to 1590, and still existing, no less than nineteen belong to Corporate towns” (Edwards 1859, vol. II, p. 560-61). Thus in Edwards’s perception, unlike in England, public support had impressively safeguarded old and valuable library collections on the Continent.

In Edwards’s work, the lines blur between historical narrative and political argument. Edwards leveraged contrasts like these to argue that state-sponsored promotion of library institutions was the right way to rectify Britain’s earlier (and ongoing) sin, beginning with his claim that it is lack of public support that has caused England’s private and ecclesiastical collections of even more recent centuries to fall into ruin and disorder. The few that had been made available to public use had seen “very great advantage indeed, which advantage has mainly resulted from transferring, under proper conditions, the library from the church into some appropriate place in the town, and settling some plan for adding to it and keeping it up” (“Report” 1849, 228). He further argued that “positive good would arise, in more ways than one, from connecting with our ancient cathedral institutions libraries of a generally accessible and useful character” (“Report” 1849, 230), that is, supported by public funds and made publicly accessible. In this way, Edwards asserted that in order to remedy his country’s perceived deficiency in the face of the great ancient examples (and modern foreign ones), England’s suffering private and professional libraries must be converted into public libraries. This was the

only way to not only preserve Britain's library heritage but to also put this heritage to work for the public and national good.

Critics in Edwards's day doubted the accuracy of the data he used to argue for how widespread publicly accessible collections were on the Continent (Munford 1963, 69, 144), perhaps not liking their implication of "national disgrace" (Munford 1963, 70). Today, it is Edwards's appeal to these very sentiments of national and class superiority to forward his claims that seems worthy of criticism. However, just like the only physical likeness of Edwards appears side-on in a historicizing painting, so do his own views seem to elude the scholar of Edwards's work. From a source-criticism and textual analysis standpoint, it is never entirely clear if the working-class author and signer of the Chartist's Charter or the strategizing adviser of MPs is narrating the argument of the work. As with much of the historical fact-bending and -blurring, we need to consider that the paternalistic premise of the work's main arguments served, first of all, an activist strategy and reveals more about the work's audience than about its author. What is certain, however, is that Edwards communicated a great sense of urgency about saving Britain's endangered collections. He draws from library history not only the arguments for action but also the principles regarding how to best manage, preserve, and expand library collections. And so it seems that just as the telos of all library history is the public library, the telos of a book on library history must be a manual on library economy.

Although only occupying the second half of the second volume, the 'Economy' part still comprises more than 600 pages and attempts to cover all aspects of library management. It is subdivided into *Book Collecting* (Book I), *Library Buildings* (Book II), *Classifications and Catalogues* (Book III), and *Internal Administration and Public Service* (Book IV) and it is here where we see the clear connection to the almost 1,400 pages of library history: For his library

economy manual, Edwards does not just look at contemporary and British examples (because he deems them often insufficient) but surveys the developments in the whole Western World since the beginning of print. But rather than a 1,400 page preface, the library history part becomes not only reference point and inspiration but integral justification for a manual of a library type presented as the very foundation of ‘civilization.’ Through the lens of his personal experience and since there is no model for public library support in Britain Edwards seems to strain the whole of library history since ancient times to sieve out not only his arguments for but also the best ways of how to set-up and run a freely accessible library.

4. Conclusion

In this paper, we sought to explain the peculiar nature of Edward Edwards’s *Memoirs of Libraries, Including a Handbook of Library Economy* by contextualizing it in its historical milieu and by performing work-immanent textual analysis. We showed how text and context are interrelated and how, for Edwards, library history writing was an extension of public library activism. In his work, library history provides not only the arguments but also the tools for the establishment of British public libraries.

Far from denying or downplaying the harmful imperial sentiments in this narrative, we would like to remind us here today that it was exactly this colonial and historically distorted narrative and the catering to British patriotism that helped to give birth to the world’s first nationally legislated framework for establishing public libraries—and that similar sentiments of paternalism pervaded early library philosophy in North America. Librarians have always been convinced of the nobility of their aims but have only recently started to question some of their own patronizing attitudes towards their patrons. The Committee hearings on the public library question reveal that Edwards had been building an appeal to national pride at least a decade

before the *Memoirs*' publication. *Memoirs* can thus be seen as an attempt to further amplify this argument beyond the receptive Committee members and Parliament at large to Britain's reading public and municipal legislators. But at the same time it should also be read as a critique of the Library Acts' insufficiency: While the legislation did not provide for any collection maintenance and development funds, it is the *Memoirs* main thread of argument that it was public care for book collections that gave the Continent the edge.

The Britain that Edwards worked and wrote in was not only reluctant but very unprepared to implement the Public Libraries Act when it passed (e.g., Munford 1963, 169-170). There was no formal librarianship training, no organized librarian profession (Thomas 1999, 10), and hardly any literary advice on the establishment of a publicly accessible collection in the English language. Edwards's section on library economy is, therefore, not merely a peculiar appendix but an important attempt to systematize library-historical knowledge and to adapt it in the service of a library profession. Later writers of library economy manuals like James Duff Brown still acknowledged Edwards's work as groundbreaking, in that "in the second volume of his *Memoirs of Libraries*, [Edwards] laid firmly the foundations of present library economy in a résumé and exposition of the multifarious methods of cataloging, classification, library planning and administration used in the various libraries of the world. Little followed in England until the growing needs of the work caused a few far-seeing librarians to find some means of bringing librarians together [...]" (Brown, 1920, 13).

And with regard to Edwards's historiographical legacy we need to state that his work stands at the end and at the beginning of certain forms of library historiography (Walker 1991, 59) and his biographer Munford was simply wrong that no one after Edwards would ever again attempt a history of all libraries (Munford 1963, 144). Only two years after Munford's biography,

Elmer D. Johnson published such a history (1965) which Harris would later revise (1984). And that was only the beginning of a true 'library history Renaissance'.

CAIS 22 looks 50 years backward and forward at the history and future of *information* science, with library science as its sister discipline. In this spirit, this paper looks back several decades before the beginnings of formalized library economy training in the English-speaking world and over half a century before the formation of library and documentation studies as scientific disciplines in the early 20th century (Sweeney and Estabrook, 2018, 2769-70) to an early work of library economy that was itself conceived out of a monumental history of information organization.

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