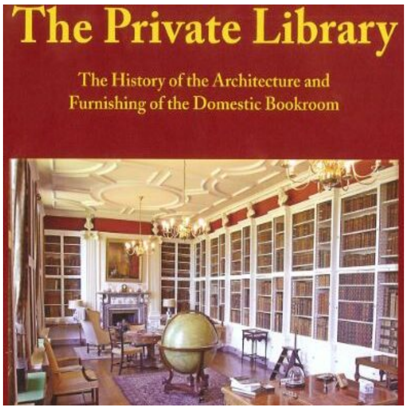
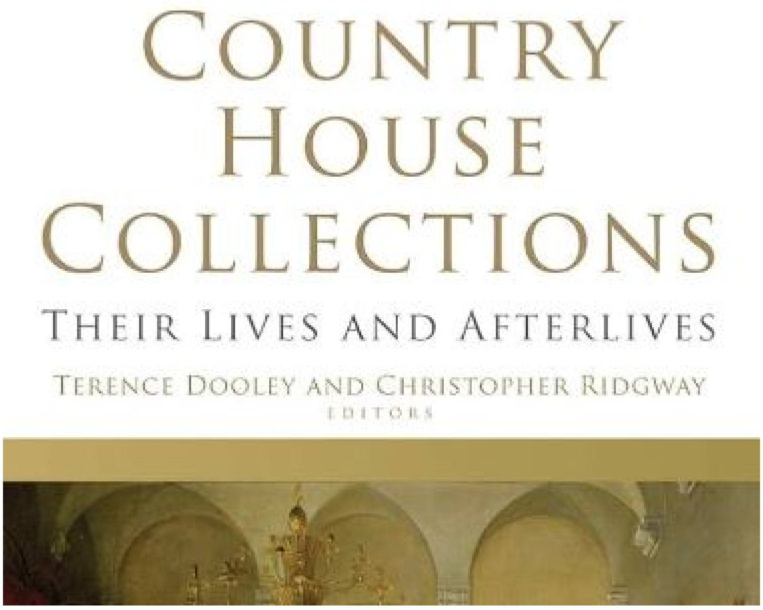

The Private Library
The History of the Architecture and Furnishing of the Domestic Bookroom

Reid Byers. *The Private Library: The History of the Architecture and Furnishing of the Domestic Bookroom*. Terence Dooley and Christopher Ridgway (editors).Â *Country House Collections: Their Lives and Afterlives*.

Reid Byers. *The Private Library: The History of the Architecture and Furnishing of the Domestic Bookroom*. New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Press, 2021. Pp. xii + 540.Â Illustrated.Â ISBN 978-1-58456-388-4.Â $85.00 (hardcover).


COUNTRY HOUSE COLLECTIONS
THEIR LIVES AND AFTERLIVES
TERENCE DOOLEY AND CHRISTOPHER RIDGWAY
EDITORS

Terence Dooley and Christopher Ridgway (editors).Â *Country House Collections: Their Lives and Afterlives.Â* Dublin: Fourt Courts Press, 2021.Â Pp. 334.Â Illustrated.Â ISBN 978-1-84682-975-8. Â â‚¬50.00 (hardcover).

In 1883, Jules Richard wrote that once a bibliophile has a collection of more than a thousand volumes, the room where they are kept quickly becomes a shrine â€“ â€˜*devient vite un temple*â€™. Reid Byers cites this observation (p. 4), and it reflects the central theme of his long and interesting book. He opens with a discussion of the simple rooms that held the clay tablets of Sumer and Babylon, and describes the book-boxes in which the Egyptians and the early Greeks put their papyrus scrolls. The rooms in which these chests were kept define what Byers calls â€˜type oneâ€™ libraries.Â Private collections seem to have existed by at least 1500 BCE in Egypt, and were relatively common among scholars by the time of the great philosophers of the Greek â€˜Golden Ageâ€™. It is unclear if the libraries of Plato and Aristotle were entirely private, or if they were academic collections, but books continued to be kept in chests in rooms where the furnishing was purely functional.Â Reading itself was done in airier spaces.

Shelving is the defining element of Byersâ€™s â€˜type twoâ€™ libraries of Hellenistic Greece and the Roman Republic. The arrangements at the great libraries of Pergamum and Alexandria must surely have influenced those of private citizens but, as the author laments, we are not sure if their *armaria* were open or closed, cupboards or shelves. (He neglects to mention that the late Latin word *pergamenum* [parchment] signified books from Pergamum.)Â It is in this part of his discussion that we have the first example of a jarring clash of styles: Byers writes that “Cleopatra had Caesar from the moment she rolled out on the rug, and while he was hanging around Alexandria … Sullaâ€™s son Faustus kicked in some of the books that Dad had taken as spoils from Athens …” (p. 53). It is not clear to me why he strikes these notes. In any event, as the Roman Republic became the Empire, all patricians and intellectuals had domestic libraries. Indeed, they often had portable ones, too. Byers reminds us that Alexander had a travelling library â€” it is interesting that he doesnâ€™t mention the *bibliothÃ¨que portative* of that other great conqueror, Napoleon. (He does mention, however, William Hakewillâ€™s famous portable library, now at the University of Leeds. A hinged folio-sized box was made for him in 1617; it contained fifty small volumes. Byers provides a picture, and others are easy to find on online.)

The Roman Empire saw the beginning of private libraries where storage and reading were brought together: the so-called â€˜type threeâ€™ arrangement in which rooms had shelves but also seats, desks, tables and so on. In his *Epistulae ad Atticum*, Cicero writes admiringly of the beautiful shelving constructed by Pomponius Atticus, his close friend â€“ and financial backer. We now find *armaria* (in their modern sense), together with concerns for lighting, color and library furniture. Seneca wrote of book cupboards of citrus wood and ivory, and Byers reproduces a picture of an elegant example in chestnut, from Pompeii: it measures about seven feet by four, has shelves, and two doors with diamond-shaped grilles. These important developments coincided with the emergence of the codex, whose displacement of the scroll was virtually complete by the fourth century.

With the fall of Rome came an abandonment of Byersâ€™s â€˜type threeâ€™ libraries, and a return to earlier and more primitive arrangements; these remained prominent until the Renaissance. Bookshops and private libraries became rare, and literacy was maintained largely in ecclesiastical and, particularly, monastic settings. There were, however, some important individual collectors, the most notable of whom was Richard de Bury, author of the fourteenth-century *Philobiblon.* This cleric, Bishop of Durham and Lord Chancellor, had unparalleled opportunities to amass a large library â€” and, as Byers fails to point out, was not above granting favors in return for books or, indeed, outright theft.

The â€˜type threeâ€™ library returned with the Renaissance, accompanied of course by greatly increased production and circulation of books. In 1494, Aldo Manuzio (known to us as Aldus Manutius) established a press in Venice, and his publication of Greek and Latin classics in compact volumes did much to encourage private collecting among such luminaries as Jacques de Thou, Cardinal Richelieu and Jean Grolier (for whom the New York club of bibliophiles was named). In the early seventeenth century, Gabriel NaudÃ© published his famous *Advis pour dresser une bibliothÃ¨que,* in which he told his readers why and how to establish a private library, not omitting advice about the desirable quality of books and the architectural features of rooms devoted to them. In England, the Protestant Reformation saw the dissolution of the monasteries, with the accompanying loss, destruction and theft of many thousands of books. Not unrelated were a rise in university holdings and increasingly large private libraries. Robert Cotton amassed a vast collection of manuscripts in the early years of the seventeenth century, rivalled only by that of Thomas Phillips in the nineteenth. Cottonâ€™s library was eventually given to the nation, a destination desired by Phillips, too. Negotiations failed, however, and the many sales of his collection began in 1885; it was only in 2006 that the last remnants went on the auction block.

Byers provides only one chapter on private libraries in China, Japan, India, Arabia and Africa. We lack a great deal of information about such collections in the pre-colonial era; afterwards, arrangements typically reflected the preferences of the colonizers. The author then moves his main focus to the English country-house library. (The libraries of Washington and Jefferson are touched upon; they were, of course, in the English tradition.) It is from the mid-seventeenth-century Restoration that libraries began to figure in house plans, often using NaudÃ© as a guide (in John Evelynâ€™s translation). Samuel Pepysâ€™s famous collection is a notable case in point. Over time, purely scholarly libraries were replaced or supplemented by â€˜family librariesâ€™ (beginning in the early eighteenth century) and, later, by â€˜social librariesâ€™. Tourists in many great houses will be familiar with those large rooms in which book display and library furniture are now accompanied by sofas, wing chairs, lamps, carpeting, and other requisites for comfort and general social activities; these often included pianos, globes, desks and decorative objects of many kinds. A further development saw private libraries opening to the public on a wider (if still restricted) scale than ever before.

An important part of the authorâ€™s discussion of the nineteenth-century library is given over to a comprehensive treatment of shelves, from the woods used, to arrangements along walls and in bays, to desirable heights and depths, to the merits of adjustability, to the alphabetical ordering which is so often compromised by varying book sizes, and to the difficulties posed at corners. â€˜Metamorphicâ€™ chairs and tables that could become library ladders, book stands that revolve or are made specifically to hold large atlases and elephant folios, and display cabinets of all sorts are pictured here.Â Relatively unfamiliar objects are shown, too: iron shelf â€˜stirrupsâ€™ or â€˜bracketsâ€™ â€” stoutly fixed to shelf uprights, with handles further up â€“ allowed access to the higher shelves.

As books became cheaper, so it was possible for those of modest means to have home libraries. The collection of Thomas Dowse, a tanner, was impressive enough to be given to the Massachusetts Historical Library in 1856. At the same time, the growth of lending and public libraries â€” together with declining means to maintain large houses and estates â€“ signaled a decline in private libraries on the grand scale. Some continue to exist, of course, but many collections have been dispersed. Byers devotes his last chapter to the future of the private library, contrasting the influence of electronic media and digital books with the many reasons that printed books remain important and desirable. There are also four appendices: one presents a timeline of libraries (beginning in 3000 BCE), another returns to shelving, while adding information about particularly large or small libraries, travelling collections, and domestic libraries split among several rooms.Â The third appendix fleshes out further architectural details, turning to library ceilings, window seats and jib doors, nooks and secret rooms, and library gardens. The fourth is a pot-pourri: here we read of ladders and bookplates, of dummy books and library mottos, of standishes and pounce-boxes.

The book edited by Dooley and Ridgway is broader in scope than the Byers volume â€” it is more concerned with paintings, furnishings and *objets de vertu* than it is with books *â€”* but it contextualizes the private library and it is particularly informative on the dispersal of collections, either to museums or national libraries, or back into the market via auction. Twelve of the fourteen chapters deal with Irish and English country houses; the other two are concerned with the country-house museum in America and with the vicissitudes of Lithuanian manor houses as the country struggled with foreign occupations and the resulting appropriation of culture by changing ideologies.

Elena Porter discusses dispersal by auction in inter-war England, opening with a comment on the â€˜conspiracies of silenceâ€™ which enabled â€˜ringsâ€™ of dealers to more or less steal valuable lots. Dealers would agree among themselves to selectively refrain from bidding so as to deliberately suppress prices, after which the ring members would re-auction lots among themselves. Wendy Philips illustrates the tension in Britain between allowing private owners free reign in selling and the imposition of export controls on nationally important items. We are all well aware of the many literary treasures that have crossed the Atlantic, so this can be a knotty problem; in another chapter, we read of â€˜pillagingâ€™. In a case concluded in December 2021, the Honresfield Library â€” with manuscripts by the BrontÃ«s, Jane Austen and Walter Scott â€” was kept in England after a charity raised Â£15 million. Robert Oâ€™Byrneâ€™s chapter is about the creation and destruction of a country-house library in Tipperary during the Irish Civil War. In January 1923, the occupants were ordered out, and the house was burned; the owner was later briefly kidnapped.

Rich individuals and powerful organizations have always â€˜appropriatedâ€™ books in various ways.Â The practice dates to the famous Alexandrian library, which requisitioned all books arriving by sea (then returning only copies to their owners), and an egregious modern example is the systematic looting of private and institutional collections by the Nazis. It is useful to remember, then, that many of the grand private libraries have chequered histories. Sam Knightâ€™s article “Home Truth” (published in the 23 August 2021 number of the *New Yorker*) reveals that the assembling of great British collections was often enabled by the proceeds of imperialism and slavery. One recent survey showed that, among about 200 great properties owned by the National Trust, some 90 have â€˜colonial connectionsâ€™.

These two books are excellent, beautifully illustrated and complementary. The contributions to the Dooley and Ridgway collection are uniformly well-written and comprehensively sourced. Byersâ€™s style wavers sometimes (as I implied earlier) but his work is full of insightful descriptions and assessments.Â In a treatment that begins with the Sumerians he has of course to skip rather lightly (and sometimes unaccountably unevenly) over a vast ground, and it is a particular disappointment that only a tiny proportion of the many pictures have captions â€” but his book remains a great delight.

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Date Created
02/29/2024