# Library history

## FOUR TEXTS AND A WEBSITE

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This essay stands as a report of a few months of an independent study conducted by the author about library history. The theme was explored both as a personal interest motivated by the mentions of library history during classes of Library and Information Science at City, University of London, and also as a felt need to investigate library history more deeply, as I became involved in developing oral history and narratives about London's public libraries for the *Layers of London* project, a website being built by the Institute of Historical Research of the University of London.

Here, I attempt to recapitulate my study by telling a brief story about library history from 'four texts and a website'. Evidently, the website is Layers of London. The four texts correspond to four works of librarians, historians, and academics investigating library history, not necessarily because they are seminal, but because they in some way represent important aspects of the field and introduce significant issues. In that sense, this essay is structured in five short sections, each corresponding to one of these four texts, and the last one referring to Layers of London, which serves also as a concluding section.

**1**

**JESSE SHERA, *ON THE VALUE OF LIBRARY HISTORY*, 1952:**
ON WHAT IS HISTORY (FOR) AND THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURE

The American librarian, academic and author Jesse H. Shera (1903-1982) has left us (thankfully!) an incredible amount of writings on library science; here we will have a look at an article called *On the value of library history* (1952), where Shera attempted 'to examine the contribution which history can make to an understanding of the role of the library in society'. It can be said that he had always been concerned with the social function of libraries, and his *Sociological foundations of librarianship* (1970) is still fundamental reference to the studies of libraries in society. In this brief article, however, his focus is on the value of library *history*, and to address this question Shera set firm ground using the work of another librarian, academic and author, Lee Pierce Butler (1884-1953). He starts his paper by noting how, in the 1930s, Butler was resisting trends in librarianship of focusing on 'process rather than on function' and on techniques of manipulation and administration by announcing the importance of library history:

> In opposition to this excessive preoccupation with the techniques of library operations, Pierce Butler wrote his *Introduction to Library Science*. In this credo not only did he set forth a philosophic frame of reference within which librarianship could be seen as an integral part of the contemporary culture, but he argued strongly for a recognition of history as basic to an understanding of the library in relation to its coeval culture. Not only did he reveal that a knowledge of history is essential to the librarian's complete intellectual equipment, but he showed history itself to be the logical starting point for almost every inquiry into the nature and function of the library as a social agency. (Shera, 1952)

Apart from Butler's ideas, Shera also utilised British historian R. G. Collingwood definition of history for more foundational support:

> *What is history for?* ... My answer is that history is 'for' human self-knowledge. It is generally thought to be of importance to man that he should know himself: where knowing himself means knowing ... his nature as man. ... Knowing yourself means knowing what you can do; and since nobody knows what he can do until he tries, the only clue to what man can do is what man has done. The value of history, then, is that it teaches us what man has done and thus what man. ... [History is] a science, or an answering of questions; concerned with human actions in the past; pursued by interpretation of evidence; for the sake of human self-knowledge. (Collingwood, 1946, In: Shera, 1952)

When it comes to library history, then, Shera affirmed that a broader historical view would have avoided misconceptions about what libraries are and are 'for', misconceptions that, in his view, resulted in adverse consequences to librarianship. He then calls for a *reorientation* of research in library history, one that should not occupy itself with details, fact-grubbing, and a provincial approach; one that should stop considering the library 'as an isolated and independent agency existing in a social vacuum', which is how he understood most of library history

had been written by then. For Shera, library historians had accomplished some advancements in the field, 'but they did not question the current underlying assumptions about the function of the library in society, and hence they failed to explain why it came to be the kind of public agency it now is.'

At this point, Shera calls Butler once again for his aid. One of Butler's most famous conceptualisations is his 'tripartite definition of culture', which he coined in his article Librarianship as a Profession (1951): culture is 'an organic integration of a scholarship, a physical equipment, and a social organisation'. Shera then nicely builds from Butler's ideas as he concluded that:

> Valid library history, then, can be written only when the library is regarded in relation to this tripartite division of culture, a phenomenon which not only has physical being, is formed in response to social determinants, but finds its justification as a segment of the totality of the intellectual processes of society. The library is an agency of the entirety of the culture; more specifically, it is one portion of the system of graphic communication through which that culture operates, and its historic origins are to be sought in an understanding of the production, flow, and consumption of graphic communication through all parts of the social pattern. (Shera, 1952)

Shera would have been glad to read Elmar Mittler's article *The library as history: Library History Research after the Cultural Turn* (2016), where the German librarian describes how library history has been finding its way through the study of culture. He notes that 'the main focus of library history is changing with new research methods and the interests of cultural history. Library history as institutional or organisational history is really only of minor interest. Rather, the relevance of the library as part of the history of different fields of study is coming into greater focus'. He goes on to describe how history in general has become a much more diversified discipline throughout the twentieth-century, owning greatly to the Annales School and their introduction of culture, anthropology and ethnography to scholarly investigations, and the admittance of the most unique and sometimes small ('smells', 'body', 'paper') themes as subject of historical inquiry. Library history has not been left out, as has benefited from broader notions of what history can be.

Like what Shera had already diagnosed in the 1950s, Mittler also comments on early library history as unproblematic, 'mainly seen as a story of the improvement and professionalisation of their management, buildings, classification and user services', with a focus on those in position of power. However, with the 'cultural turn' and the widening of library history, the field has become 'an expanding area of research' that admits all kinds of valuable inquiries, like Book history, for which 'the meaning of an object is part of the interaction and the experience of the person. So books are no longer neutral texts transporting information tools and part of the "discourse", they are objects of material culture with which people interact'—therefore significant element for the understanding of libraries in their social and cultural milieu.

Mittler suggests other fields of inquiry for library history as well, like those of gender studies, cultural transfer, and the study of memory. He concludes his article by optimistically announcing the establishment in the University of Osnabrück a research centre for anthropological library history, with a special focus on 'the contradictory roles of the library in the early modern period'.

## 2
## KRISTIAN JENSEN, *SHOULD WE WRITE LIBRARY HISTORY?*, 2016:
### ISSUES WITH LIBRARY HISTORY AS A DISCIPLINE

This paper by Kristian Jensen from the British Library provides a reflective step back before we continue exploring more achievements and current issues of library history. In his words, the article 'has no ambition to be more than a provocation, I hope a thoughtful one, for lively debate'—surely he was successful in that.  Jensen departs from the question: 'There evidently is such a thing as library history, but should there be? What are the distinctive characteristics that make it a genre or discipline of its own?'

Not that there isn't enough corpus of research being produced as 'library history' so its existence would be questioned; quite the opposite, as 'more academic work is published on it than ever before', with attention to the recent, massive French Histoire des bibliothèques françaises and the Cambridge History of Libraries in Britain and Ireland. The quality of these works cannot be disputed; but Jensen is questioning something else:

> One can find splendid studies which examine the role of public libraries in the twentieth-century Scandinavian models of democracy and one can find highly professional studies on the role of libraries in the life of a Cistercian monastery. These themes are far apart and it may be hard to see what binds them together as Library History. Covering a fascinatingly wide range of themes, the lively diversity of Library History may also seem to be a nearly unmanageable lack of cohesion. (Jensen, 2016).

Jensen see particular problem in recent library histories that encompass millennia, from the library of Alexandria until the digital libraries; he refers specifically to Campbell's *The library: a world history*, but also works such as Battle's *Library: an unquiet history* and Lerner's *The story of libraries: from the invention of writing to the computer age* would fit in this category of very broad library history; Jensen asks: 'Can one meaningfully ask questions of such a diverse set of institutions? Are these phenomena—these libraries—really in the same category, or is Library History one big error of classification?'. An assumption all these histories seem to share, and which makes library history a difficult discipline to defend, is that 'libraries are libraries and that they share an inherent something'; without problematising this, it becomes very difficult to write meaningful library history.

However, not all is bad news to the field from Jensen's perspective; even though he provides significant arguments for library history *not* to be considered an independent subject,:

I am very optimistic about the opportunities which libraries offer to those who want to write about them from historical perspectives. ... So even if there is no Library History as a unified discipline, there is space for historiography on libraries, the writing of the histories of libraries rooted within disciplines, be they political, economic, cultural history, art historical, the study of vernacular literatures, the classics, politics or sociology. We owe it to the importance of our subject matter to be ever more reflective of the field where our specific work is placed and aimed, who our readers are, and whether our method is appropriate. (Jensen, 2016)

## 3
## ALISTAIR BLACK, *NEW METHODOLOGIES IN LIBRARY HISTORY: A MANIFESTO FOR THE 'NEW' LIBRARY HISTORY*, 1995:
### DEFENDING AND PROMOTING A BROADER, THEORETICAL, DEEPER LIBRARY HISTORY

Jensen concluded his provocative paper by stating that: 'As the writing of the history of libraries starts in this marginal position, speaking among ourselves [library historians] is not enough; we need to redouble our effort to become an integral part of the discourse of others'. Two decades back, British librarian and academic Alistair Black, very much in consonance with Jensen, wrote that 'not only should we on the library history community reach out to wider history, but wider history should be encouraged to embrace us.' (Black, 1995). Even though Black *does* believe that library history *is* 'an academic subject in its own right', in this *manifesto* he calls for a 'new' library history, one that should not be taught as part of the Library Science curriculum—though not as a discrete subject, but in a 'flexible and unobtrusive yet theoretical fashion', infiltrated where appropriate 'in the areas of the curriculum where it could help students make sense of the services and techniques they are studying'.

So: believing or not in library history as a discipline on its own, it can be said it is agreed that library history *is* an important field of research, to be taught and learned, but always *within*, and contributing *to*, wider history. Black's 'new' library history, in the context of his writing, is one that not only addressed the issue of unproblematic narratives and uncontextualised institutional 'history', as authors cited above have already questioned, but also a library history that, as taught discipline, would fight the 1980s 'new vocationalism' trend in education. Black recognises that 'library history does not fit easily into this new vocationalism project', one that emphasised 'transferable skills', 'competency' and 'practice' rather than theoretical knowledge, learning, and social awareness. 'The new vocationalism is all about *performativity*. Good library history, on the other hand, is about *creativity*. The new vocationalism is about *doing* things in society. Good library history is about *understanding* society and about fostering *societal awareness* amongst professionals'. And bad library history, Black argues, that which does *not* address wider cultural and social history and does *not* work interdisciplinary, has helped arguments of the new vocationalism in favour of eliminating library history of library and information science curricula around the UK.

A 'new' library history, however, would help fight these trends, and for that, Black argued, it is important to determine what is the *practical value* of the subject of library history (and here Shera and Butler prove themselves important works to go back to). Black calls for the idea that 'reference back to past *purpose*, not just *practice*, help

define the aims of present day provision. Indeed, at a time when librarians are expressing deep anxiety concerning their identities and roles, defining purpose is surely a premium; historical consciousness is indispensable to the process of defining the rationale and philosophy of any organisation, a library included.' And for it to be successful, 'the superstructure of library history should and must be theoretical':

> Adopting theoretical stances will bring library history into closer alignment with mainstream history, to which close attention must be paid. Library history is best explored with reference to explanations of broader historical developments. This should go beyond mere *shallow* references to context. Simply painting a broad picture of the historical background against which library history occurred is, methodologically, not enough. Library historians need to dig deeply into the rich treasures of other history sub-sets, in search for theories and insights which can illuminate the otherwise stale and record of past library activity. (Black, 1995)

And Black has been doing just that in his compelling works on library history. Since the publication of this *manifesto*, he has written, among books, *A new history of the English public library: social and intellectual contexts, 1850*-1914 (1996), *The public library in Britain, 1914-2000* (2000), and most recently, the just published *Libraries of light: British public library design in the long 1960s*, where he uses an interdisciplinary approach with architecture and urbanism; in all of them he has been investigating libraries using the historical framework of modernity, as he believes libraries 'reflect modernism while being part of it'. As he affirmed in the introduction to the third volume of the series The Cambridge History of Libraries in Britain and Ireland: 'The 150 years period that his volume covers witnessed the emergence and development of what can justifiably be referred to as the "modern library". It coincided with the maturation of modernity: a change of gear within the broad epoch of modernity that was set in motion by the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century and the intellectual revolution of the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century'. (Black, 2006)

# 4
## WAYNE WIEGAND, *PART OF OUR LIVES:*
## *A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN PUBLIC LIBRARY*, 2015:
A BOTTOM-UP APPROACH TO PUBLIC LIBRARY HISTORY

Black stated in his *manifesto* that a new library history involves a 'broadening of scope that should also be extended to sources. Much library history, especially that highlighting users, is suited to the "history from below" approach, which sets out to view history from the perspective of those not in positions of power. ... Arguably, "history from below" sits neatly alongside the investigation of the history of libraries by virtue of the fact that they are usually institutions where a strong regulatory control (of users) dynamic operates'. (Black, 1995)

Library historian, academic and author Wayne Wiegand utilised exactly that approach in his latest work, the book *Part of our lives: A people's history of the American public library*, which he defines as a book 'primarily about people, who in multiple ways used the spaces American public libraries provided, and about the reading these patrons

obtained at their public libraries'; the title is reference to the work of Howard Zinn's 1980 *People's History of the United States'*, which uses the same 'bottom-up' approach. Wiegand explains: 'In this book I analyse "information", "reading" and "place", but although library literature does a good job analysing the first from a "user in the life of the library" perspective, it does little to explain from that view the roles public libraries have played as community places'. Therefore, he constructed a library history 'not so much by analysing the words of its founders and managers but mostly by listening to the voices of its users. ... Rather than analysing the "user in the life of the library" perspective—a top-down view that largely mirrors the library profession's perspective—*Part of our lives* adopts a bottom-up "library in the life of the user" perspective.'

Alistair Black himself has praised the book, recognising that Wiegand's work 'has embraced the "new history" of recent decades, including the use of critical cultural theory theory, especially that relating to place and community. For good reason, Wiegand is regarded as the "Dean of American library history studies"' (Black, 2016). But not only did Wiegand stand by the 'new history', he also stood by his own claims for a library history richer in theoretical perspectives, which he manifested after a balance of American library history literature written in commemoration of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Library History Round Table of the ALA (2000). In that essay, following a very comprehensive review of decades of American library history, Wiegand concluded: 'On the one hand, [library history so far] concentrates too much on the library from the inside out and focuses too much on the institution, the people who practice librarianship within that institution, and the expertise used by the people within the institution itself. On the other hand, it does not concentrate enough on the library from the outside in, nor does it focus sufficiently on people who used (or did not use) the institution'. Library history, for Wiegand, was ready to reach another level:

> , one at which we use the ideas critical theorists have articulated to examine a social construction of reality and the process of cultural consumption; we also have to learn from the social and cultural historians around us who have applied these ideas to the environments in which the libraries, librarians, and librarianship that we study existed in given times and given places. (Wiegand, 2000)

## 5
## INSTITUTE OF HISTORICAL RESEARCH, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON,
### *LAYERS OF LONDON, 2017*
AN OPPORTUNITY TO BUILD A DIGITAL ARCHIVE OF ORAL HISTORY AND NARRATIVES
OF LONDON'S PUBLIC LIBRARIES

This brief study on library history aimed a deeper understanding of the field as foundations for the production of oral history and narratives for the Layers of London project, which is a website being developed by the Institute of Historical Research of the University of London; when ready, it will be a large repository of maps of London from the Roman period to the present day, exploring the city's historical development and heritage; it aims 'to tell this story both across the city as a whole, but also with reference to local areas, streets, neighbourhoods and even individual buildings. Most important of all is that *Layers of London* is open to all to contribute to the history of London's

places' (Layers of London, 2017). I heard a talk from one of the project's developers, Seif El Rashidi, and decided to contribute by recording oral narratives from librarians and users of public libraries of London; the resulting recordings, transcriptions, and photos of these libraries will then be uploaded to the website, and will be fully open to access by anyone, from clicking on the pins indicating the location of these libraries on the map.

I believe the scope of the project is in consonance with both the current 'state of the affairs' in library history and the developments of digital libraries, as explored in another module of the course. Oral history has this 'bottom-up' approach which is able to touch on cultural and social aspects of the library like no other. I establish as a following question to explore, then, how to extract meaningful historical interpretations from these narratives, as they become a corpus (by this day, I was able to conduct and record only two interviews). Wiegand himself has taken advantage of digital content for their researches on library history; in *Part of our lives*, Wiegand explained how he reached the 'people's voice': 'Because of recent technologies, uncovering these voices was easy. Some are published memoirs, autobiographies, and biographies of the famous; some are in archives across the country. The vast majority, however, are fixed in hundred of US newspapers and periodicals digitised since the 1990s into huge databases. By using "public library" as a search term I found thousands of voices in letters to the editor, and thousands more quoted in stories reporters wrote about their local libraries'. If a structured, well theorised effort of documenting London's public libraries through people's voices can be made available online, it would be a huge contribution to any further investigation of public library history.

Also, oral history can be said to be the one subject in the history field that has benefitted the most from the digital humanities and digitisation processes in general. As oral historian Daniel Boyd has pointed out: 'Over the last two decades much has changed in the world of oral history. Through technological advances, the Internet has become a practical way of making recorded sound and video available, opening up a wide range of possibilities for the presentation of material. The Internet has, quite frankly, blown the hinges from doors of the archives, and access has come to have a completely different meaning. … Beyond the monograph, the success of contemporary oral history projects is now regularly being measured by metrics pertaining to accessibility, discovery, engagement, usability, reuse, and a project's impact on both community and scholarship'. It is an exciting perspective to insert library history in such a dynamic, open field of the digital humanities, and specifically in a digital archive of oral history.

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