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Jeremy D. Popkin

University of Kentucky, popkin@uky.edu

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Saying Farewell to a Library

Jeremy D. Popkin

With due pomp and ceremony, the University of Kentucky has now celebrated the opening of our new university library. We all know we've outgrown M. I. King, and there will be little mourning for the old building with its awkward layout, its lack of seating and its other defects. Change and progress is the American way: out with the old, in with the new, the bigger, the better.

So they have been saying in France this year, too, as one of the world's largest libraries, the Bibliothèque nationale, has started to transfer its collections to a huge new building along the Seine River that cuts through the city. The *Bibliothèque François Mitterrand*, named after the late president who pushed the project through as a monument to his government, dwarfs even our impressive W. T. Young building. Four 18-story glass towers housing books and offices stick up from the corners of a rectangle over 300 meters long. Below ground level, vast reading rooms will seat over 3600 readers who will have access to some 12 million books and periodicals. The new library will be fully computerized, completely up-to-date, ready for the challenges of the new millenium.

As in the case of UK's new library, the new Bibliothèque nationale de France's relocation leaves behind an older structure, the Bibliothèque Nationale on the rue de Richelieu. Like most other American scholars of France, I know that building well, having worked there regularly since my graduate-student days. (Because my father also did research there, my connection with the building goes back even further: I used to play on its steps when I was three years old.) When I finished a short research trip in Paris in June 1997, I realized it would probably be my last day in the old library. (Like M. I. King, it will continue to house specialized parts of the collection, but renovation will completely transform the structure.) As I raised my gaze to the towering ceiling of the main reading room, I realized that I was saying goodbye, not just to a building, but to an era, to a civilization for which a library was above all a gateway to the past rather than a tool for building the future.

All architecture historians know the main reading room of the Bibliothèque nationale, designed by Ernest Labrousse in 1859. It was one of the first buildings other than factories and warehouses to be built using the new construction materials of the industrial age, iron and glass. Like the designers of new libraries today, Labrousse meant to be up-to-date and to show that new technologies could be applied to create an environment for the study of the accumulated wisdom of civilization. Slender iron columns allowed him to support the roof of a reading room large enough to accommodate the influx of nineteenth-century readers who had long since outgrown the narrow confines of the elegant *Bibliothèque du roi*, which serves nowadays as the library's manuscript reading room. In an age before light bulbs, the great glass skylights high overhead were meant to replace messy and dangerous candles and gas lamps.

For all its nineteenth-century modernity, however, the main reading room of the Bibliothèque nationale advertised in every way its connection to the traditions of the European past. Labrousse's iron columns, daringly modern for their day, were fluted and sculptured to resemble the marble columns of Greek temples. Around the sides of the room, plaques bore sculptured portraits of the great authors of the past: Aristotle, Dante, Descartes, Goethe. Other plaques celebrate the donors whose gifts formed the core of the library's world-famous collections. The twentieth century has not always been kind to the library: memorials on the walls preserve the names of staff killed in the two world wars, adding a new dimension of historical reference. Using the library's catalogues can be a trip through history, as well. Finding a call number may require using catalogues reflecting every stage of that arcane art, from manuscript volumes through card catalogues to the printed volumes of the library's main catalogue, and finally an on-line catalogue accessed through computer terminals.

The new library has been designed to cut all these connections to the past. Its walls are blank surfaces of concrete, glass, metal, or polished wood. The new library is almost devoid of decoration. In our multi-cultural day, who would dare select a mere dozen great personages to adorn the ceilings and represent the heritage of civilization? There is no indication that the plaques honoring donors, former librarians and war dead will follow the books from the old library to the new. No doubt some of the invaluable catalogues will make the trip, but plans are to eventually merge

them all into an upgraded on-line system. The main research collection will still use the Bibliothèque nationale's distinctive cataloguing system, but librarians proudly showed me the Dewey Decimal labels on the books in the new public-access collection. The new library will have many practical advantages, but it has been almost deliberately designed to break with the past and look only to the future, represented in the glowing screens of the computer terminals scattered throughout the building.

Another aspect of the break with the past will be the abandonment of all the complex rituals involved in using the old library. Users weaned on American university libraries with their open stacks always took some time to learn the elaborate choreography required before one could achieve communion with a book in the Bibliothèque nationale. When one did master the necessary steps, however, one developed the assurance that comes with being an insider, at home in a world closed even to the vast majority of French citizens. (Admission to the Bibliothèque nationale requires a university degree and proof of a need to use its holdings.)

Once one had successfully negotiated with the clerks in the library-privileges office, one took one's precious card to the guard at the main door of the reading room and exchanged it for a card bearing the number of one of the 360 desks there. Connoisseurs of the library judged you by how you responded to the guard's query, "On the right or on the left?" although everyone had his or her own theory as to whether the seats on one side of the aisle were preferable to those on the other. (In recent years, the question has become more clearcut: the 180 seats on the left have plugs for computers, the equal number of seats on the right do not.) Armed with a plaque bearing the number of one's assigned seat, one marched up the reading room's center aisle to the towering podium at the rear of the room, turned to the appropriate side, and exchanged that plaque for another numbered card. If one had books on reserve, one claimed them — but only if one had been experienced enough to have provided oneself in advance with a regulation Bibliothèque nationale bookstrap, purchasable only at shops outside the library, used to tie one's volumes into a neat package.

Seat card in hand, one could finally spread one's possessions out on one's reading table, one's base for the rest of the day. But if one was in quest of books, there was still work to be done. In need of a

call number? First you try the main printed catalogue, shelved in the left rear of the room. No luck there? Perhaps the *Catalogue de l'histoire de France*, a sort of printed shelf-list of the historical collections, can help: its big red volumes have their own little revolving pedestal in a niche off the center aisle. If that doesn't do the trick, it's over to the far right side of the room, down the stairs to the low-ceilinged catalogue room, perhaps with a stop on the stair landing to consult the single reference librarian, sheltered behind an enormous desk covered with card catalogues. The catalogue room houses twenty different sets of file drawers, for anonymous works, works in non-western alphabets, works too recent to be in the printed catalogues, works in certain special collections, as well as a seemingly infinite number of reference works, among which the familiar olive-green spines of the *National Union Catalogue* constitute (for American users) a comforting island of familiarity.

At last one has the call number for one's title, in all its arcane detail, starting with the numbers that indicate the book's size and continuing with strings of letters and numbers in incomprehensible patterns. Back to the foot of the librarians' podium in the main reading room to put in one's request. In pre-computer days, I knew the instructions on the brass-metal slot for filled-in call slips better than I knew the Pledge of Allegiance: "Bulletins are to be put in one at a time, head down. No more than three requests at once, and no more than ten per day." Nowadays, one puts one's numbered seat card in a computer reader and types the call number into a terminal. Then one can go back and sit down, open one's newspaper, or perhaps hunt around the reading room for a friend and step out for coffee.

If the library gods are on one's side, one will eventually hear the squeaking wheels of a delivery cart and books will suddenly appear. Often, however, it's not the book but a printed form: the title you have requested is not available because it is (1) being used by another borrower, (2) at the bindery, (3) lost, (4) no book corresponds to the call number you provided; or, the most humiliating news of all, (5) has already been delivered to you in response to a previous request. Or perhaps you get instructions to find your book (1) up on the podium, behind the librarians, in a special section where they let you read items too small or too delicate to be entrusted to you at your regular seat; (2) in the rare book room; or (3) in the microfilm room. In any of these cases, you

pack up half of your worldly possessions (computer, note cards, what have you), being sure to leave enough evidence on your desk to make it clear that you intend to return, and set off, to be issued a new seat card and fill out a new request for your material. When the day is over, you go through all these procedures in reverse: return the books and your seat card at the podium, reclaim your plaque, stop at the exit to exchange the plaque for your reader's card, and finally leave the building.

Before that final departure, the Bibliothèque nationale user had undoubtedly also engaged in the time-honored social rituals that went with using the library. With its rows of seats coming off the center aisle, the main reading room lent itself to the spotting of friends, acquaintances, even celebrities — in my graduate-student days, the philosopher Michel Foucault was regularly visible at a favorite seat near the podium. Once friends were found, one arranged coffee, lunch, a drink at the end of the day. (Only the desperately penurious settled for the ghastly beverages provided by vending machines in the library itself.) Many users, myself included, often wound up spending more time outside the library than in their seats. Test anyone who claims to have worked in the BN: if they cannot describe the three or four cafés in the immediate vicinity of the library, the differences in their seating arrangements and their clientele, they are pulling the wool over your eyes, they haven't really been there.

The ways of the old Bibliothèque nationale were arcane, but their result was to bind the users into a community. Initiation into its mysteries gave readers a sense of belonging to a great tradition. Over the more than a century of the old reading room's existence, some of the library's users earned the right to be regarded as peers of the writers whose marble busts ring the ceiling. Henri Bergson, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir: they all undoubtedly slid their call slips, one by one, into the now-vanished brass slot and slipped out for coffee before returning to wait for their books.

The new library will be different. It will have its own procedures, of course, but they will be more rational and efficient, more like a supermarket — just take what you want off the shelves. The great minds of the past will no longer look down from the ceiling, and the librarians will no longer look down on the readers from their imposing podium but will encounter them on their own level. Reference works will be shelved in an orderly fashion, and the maze of catalogues will be replaced by standardized computer

terminals. Readers will create their own social rituals, no doubt, but it will be a challenge. There will be a cafeteria in the new library, as modern and efficient as the library itself, but the neighborhood around the new building is notably devoid of charm and cafés. Finding one's friends will be different, too: instead of one great reading room housing scholars in every field, there will be ten rooms specialized by subject area, with 2400 seats in all, as well as isolated carrels. (An additional reading room with 1200 seats will serve ordinary French readers who don't need access to the research collection.) No more parading up and down the center aisle, scanning the rows of desks: readers in the new library will have to find each other amid a grid of indistinguishable seats.

Nostalgia is a wonderful thing. It allows one to forget all the defects of the old and minimize the advantages of the new. The Bibliothèque nationale has to move. Its old building ran out of space for its collections years ago; in the 1980s, librarians protesting budget cuts mounted an exhibition of books damaged in its stacks, which leaked when it rained. The famous reading room was also famously uncomfortable: I developed back problems in its uncomfortable chairs, eyestrain from the bad lighting, caught colds from its drafts in the winter and fell asleep over my books in the summer afternoon heat. Sipping a last cup of coffee in a café next to the BN last summer, I found myself musing that it was probably the spot where my father, a regular habitué of the place in the 1950s and 1960s, first encountered the *Gauloise* cigarettes that ruined his lungs.

Nevertheless, I am indeed sorry to say goodbye to the old Bibliothèque nationale. From it, I have learned that a library is more than a building to house books. A true library is a community of books, readers, and librarians. It has its special customs and its unique surroundings, and it generates not just knowledge but a way of life. The Bibliothèque nationale is one of the world's great libraries, and its devotees are scattered all across the planet. M. I. King's collections are less famous and the people whose lives it shaped perhaps less numerous, but its closing will also mean rupture and loss. Who knows how many romances started across its reading tables, how many special insights illuminated users trudging up and down its overcrowded staircases? What will those of us who have mastered the skill of finding our books whether they are hiding in the Dewey-decimal section or the LC stacks boast of when everything has been catalogued in a single system and

arranged in nice, symmetrical rows on the W. T. Young shelves? A library, no matter how impractical to use, becomes part of its users' lives, and its closing, no matter how necessary, involves loss as well as gain.