

Precedents, predecessors

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Si hortum in bibliotheca habes, nihil deerit [aprox. transl. *If you have a garden and a library, you will not lack for anything*].

Marcus Tullius Cicero. *Epistulae ad Familiares* (book IX, epistle 4). Written to Terentius Varro June 13th, 46 BC.

The roads that I have set out to walk and describe in my postson libraries did not appear overnight, as the fruits of a mysterious act of creation. They were opened step by step, footprint upon footprint. Some of them are little paths that only a few dare to tread; others, on the contrary, are huge highways, known to and visited by all.

All of them, all the roads crossing the librarian world, have a background, a history: the story of the adventures and misadventures of our predecessors, of their discoveries and disappointments, of their successes and mistakes. If we stand where we stand

today, both in theoretical and practical terms, it is because of them and the steps they decided to take. Or not.

Those stories are piled up in a small corner of our professional geography. One that very few bother to know in depth.

I am not talking (only) about the classic "history of the book", so tiredly taught and learned in some of our LIS courses. I am talking about a history of "books" (or, even better, "documents") as defined by Cuban librarian Jorge Aguayo y de Castro: any material that can support knowledge. That is the story of each "information material" produced all around the world, in different human societies, throughout all the centuries in which humans have been encoding knowledge. It is about the creation and evolution of those materials. And it is about the options that survived, but also about those that were discarded. Because without the latter, the former would probably not exist.

It is the history of the different formats and sizes used to trap intangible memories and info into something tangible. And of the hundred types of bindings that allowed carrying such "tangible memories" around with ease, and to use them without wear and

tear. It is the history of inks, and other products used to keep words clinging better to paper, or parchment, or wood— holding them there for another year, or another decade. It is the history of scribes and printers (the Japanese described by Munsterberg, those of Clanchy's medieval England, those of Medina's colonial America...), of papermakers and paper dealers, of font designers and type founders, and of those who created watermarks and logos. The history of illustrators and engravers, of bookbinders —written by Brassington, among many others— and decorators. Also, the one of booksellers and collectors, buyers and sellers.

And, of course, it is the history of libraries and their guardians. A story that was not always a hymn to freedom, precisely. For, until quite a recent past, libraries were the repository of jealously guarded knowledge, to which only an elite had access. In their five-millennia lifetime, examples of truly "public" libraries began to appear just a couple of centuries ago: far from being the rule, the situation we know and enjoy today is the exception, historically speaking. And that is a part of the story that needs to be known, because, eventually, the services and opportunities that many public libraries are providing today are sort of "revolutionary" regarding the previous ones.

It is the history of an institution that was present in many other places besides the well-worn Alexandria, Pergamon or Nineveh (for example, in Timbuktu, as Jeppie and Diagneshowed). An institution that had many different and unique ways of expressing itself, as is clear from works such as those of Baratin and Jacob, Laubier and Rosser, Lerner or Staikos. That sometimes was not chained, nor was it a prisoner of the elites. That did not always have a physical body: many resided (and reside) in the memory of minstrels and troubadours. And that did not store just books. An institution that took root in a particular place or traveled back and forth, on the backs of animals, or on people's shoulders. That was the victim of persecutions, controls and censorship, and needed permissions from the powerful to exist. It is the history of prohibitions, and of the smugglers who circumvented them. It is also the history —reflected in countless volumes, from Raven to Knuth, through Báez— of burnings, looting and thefts, of deliberate attacks, and of destructions so radical that today they are called "memoricides".

It is the story of the restrictions and barriers imposed on knowledge, and those imposed by librariesthemselves —to their readers, and to those who could never be readers. It is the history of the struggles that made libraries what they are today, no

matter how many remnants of the past —elitism, classism, sexism, academicism, racism— have remained entrenched in some of their structures.

It is a story of art and ideas, of culture and research, but also of persons. Above all, of persons: most of them anonymous, a few with names to remember. It is a history that, being an intrinsic part of those disciplines working with knowledge and memory, should not be left in the hands of specialists in other areas. It should be an important branch of our profession, and not just a curiosity, or a topic to be studied and forgotten after passing an exam. It should be exciting, it should provoke curiosity and amazement, simply because it is an exciting, curious, amazing history... Because that is where we come from. Because, after all, we continue to do today much of what our predecessors did.

It is, in short, the history of paper and cardboard, of fabrics and leather, of records and bytes. It is our story, quite entangled, full of twists and turns, and contradictions. What are we waiting for to make it our own? What are we waiting for to add one more link to the chain, and one more page to the narrative?

To continue reading

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