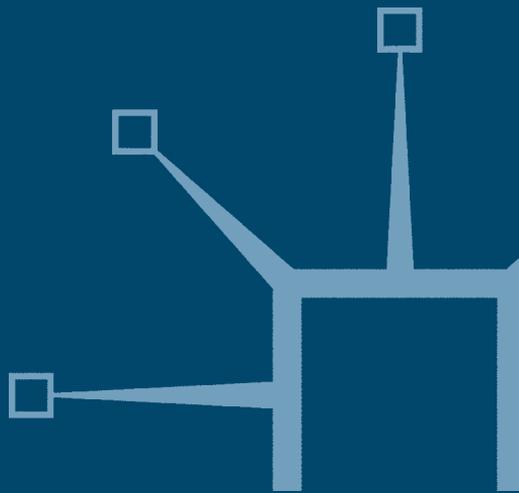


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Lost Libraries

The Destruction of Great Book
Collections since Antiquity

Edited by
James Raven



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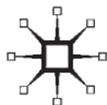
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1

Introduction: The Resonances of Loss

James Raven

In April 2003 the assault on Iraq by American and British armed forces cost not only thousands of civilian and military lives but also brought graphic reports of the destruction of much of the country's precious material heritage. Within 48 hours of the entry of American troops into Baghdad, it was claimed that looters had emptied the National Museum of more than 170,000 artefacts, while the National Library and the library at the Ministry of Religious Endowment lay in ruins. In Mosul the University Library was utterly destroyed. Interpretations of the tragedy were both immediate and problematically political.¹ Much testimony has proved to be inaccurate. According to one British commentator, writing in the heat of the moment, 'when the Mongols conquered Baghdad in 1258, they sacked the city and destroyed its library. This time, Iraqis have chosen to ransack their own capital and the legacy of their own past'.² By contrast, a leading British Islamic bibliographer condemned those 'who launched this invasion of Iraq . . . they may not have committed massacres or genocide, but they are responsible for the wanton obliteration of the historical memory and artistic and literary heritage, not just of Iraqis, but of all of us'.³ In the hours following the sack of the Baghdad libraries on 14 April 2003, Robert Fisk filed another furious on-the-spot report:

So yesterday was the burning of books. . . . The National Library and Archives, a priceless treasure of Ottoman historical documents, including the old royal archives of Iraq, were turned to ashes in 3,000 degrees of heat. Then the library of Korans at the Ministry of Religious Endowment was set ablaze. I saw the looters. . . . And the Americans did nothing. All over the filthy yard they blew, letters of recommendation to the courts of Arabia, demands for ammunition for troops, reports on

the theft of camels and attacks on pilgrims, all in delicate hand-written Arabic script. I was holding in my hands the last Baghdad vestiges of Iraq's written history. But for Iraq, this is Year Zero; with the destruction of the antiquities in the Museum of Archaeology on Saturday and the burning of the National Archives and then the Koranic library, the cultural identity of Iraq is being erased. Why? Who set these fires? For what insane purpose is this heritage being destroyed? . . .

Genghis Khan's grandson burnt the city in the 13th century and, so it was said, the Tigris river ran black with the ink of books. Yesterday, the black ashes of thousands of ancient documents filled the skies of Iraq. Why?⁴

As Philip Hensher commented of this report: "The burning of books and the destruction of works of art is so powerful a symbol of barbarism that the stench of it hangs in the air long afterwards: it is something impossible to forgive, impossible to forget."⁵

The Iraqi catastrophe came only ten years after another brutal cremation of national library holdings. Over three days, 25–27 August 1992, the grand nineteenth-century Moorish-style National and University Library of Bosnia and Hercegovina at Sarajevo [the Vijećnica] was bombarded by incendiary shells. More than a million books, both printed and manuscript, were destroyed. The librarian of the Sarajevo National Museum, Kemal Bakarsic, watched the library burn:

All over the city, sheets of burning paper, fragile pages of grey ashes, floated down like a dirty black snow. Catching a page, you could feel its heat, and for a moment read a fragment of text in a strange kind of black and grey negative, until, as the heat dissipated, the page melted to dust in your hand.⁶

In the same year Seymour Maclean, city trader turned Rastafarian activist, renewed his campaign against the British Crown for the return to Ethiopia of the Magdala manuscripts, royal chronicles, the books of Dengal Maryam, the ancient bibles of Ethiopia and other artefacts confiscated by Britain in the nineteenth century. Their seizure, Maclean averred, amounted to both the violation and the burial of African heritage. The refusal of modern-day authorities to react was nothing less than institutionalised racism:

I have not played the racist card, but I believe that is their motivation. What was colonialism if it wasn't racism and what are manu-

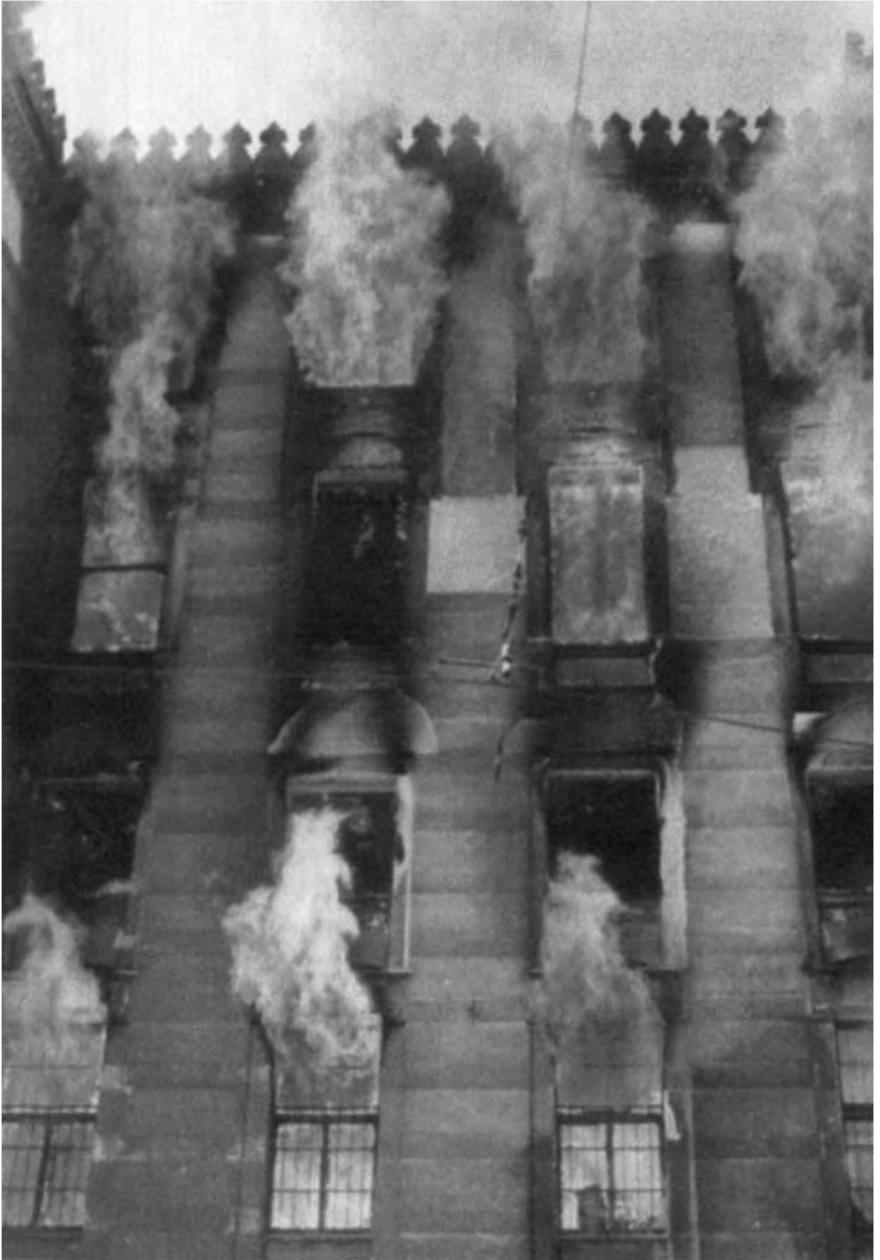


Figure 1.1 The burning of the Vijecnica, the National and University Library of Bosnia, Sarajevo, August 1992. Photograph taken by Kemal Hadzic.

scripts if they are not the spoils of colonialism? Black people are still not being allowed to learn about their history. Do you think Bob Marley or Peter Tosh ever got to see these scripts. They didn't even know they existed.⁷

This volume of essays by scholars living in and writing about diverse parts of the globe offers new perspectives on what it means to lose libraries and great book collections. We should not, of course, automatically privilege the loss of the written word (and that word as preserved by a 'library') over the loss of other forms of cultural storage. In wholly oral cultures the sudden obliteration of a people by bloody conquest or by an epidemic introduced by invaders has led to the complete eradication of indigenous knowledge and memory. Many of the pre-Conquest peoples of North and South America who lived without a written language – most notably, perhaps, the different tribes of the Iroquois – lost virtually their entire history and accrued learning when the diseases brought by Europeans decimated the population and its shamans and elders.⁸ Most modern peoples, however, have in one form or another relied upon the written word to collect, preserve and provide (usually controlled) access to scholarship and cultural memory.

In recent years bibliography has found new audiences, its technical foundations underpinned by new scholarship and by archival and electronic resourcefulness. The study of books (both manuscript and printed) has been promoted successfully by spirited 'inter-disciplinary' approaches, some more sophisticated than others. At its best, new historical bibliography contributes to a repositioning of literary canons, to a fresh understanding of literary production, circulation and reception, and to a reassessment of the relationship between manuscript and print and between text and image. This history is one of the involvement of books and print in human activity, not simply a history of books that adheres only to questions of material production or physical description (a proper domain of continuing scholarship in descriptive or analytical bibliography). By comparison to the new histories of printing, publishing and literary reception, however, the wider cultural history of book conservation, of book collecting and of libraries is strikingly underdeveloped. Established journals of library history have broadened their ambit and new national histories of libraries have been planned, but historical thinking about the purpose, appeal and significance of libraries has been relatively unambitious. Existing comparative study of the loss of libraries is even more modest, and yet the questions such study begs open up challenging historical perspectives.

The following chapters are concerned with the consequences of library loss exactly because their study extends our understanding of aspects of social, political, economic, religious and intellectual history. What the authors of the different essays will not pursue, at least not directly, is the reconstruction of libraries, that is to engage in detail with provenance questions, intriguing though that is.⁹ Where reconstruction is considered it is where the rediscovery and reconceptualisation of a library helps explain the significance of its demise. How books and libraries have been lost is often surprisingly unclear; many local histories are accusatory, defensive or simply (and sometimes deliberately) uncertain. Moreover, the results of library loss are many and diverse. Contributors to this volume were urged to reach beyond the basic tales of destruction in order to investigate and explain broader costs and implications. For libraries worldwide, fires, floods, and earthquakes have proved fearsome foes, but particular circumstances, such as the design of buildings, bureaucratic delay, or botched and melodramatic rescue operations, have often made the loss all the more confused or sensational.¹⁰ Book collections have been ruined by war and by the conduct of dynastic and political struggle, but libraries have also been destroyed by deliberately targeted pillage – by what some commentators have characterized as literary genocide.¹¹ Some causes have been immediately explicable and the results obvious, but sometimes the consequences have taken centuries to unfold. Repercussions have not always been negative, but in many cases strangely invented histories of destruction have resulted. Exotic histories often account for a loss not nearly as catastrophic as it has been politic to represent.

There are certainly many modern examples of where the devastation of a library has been exaggerated for propagandist value. When the Bucharest University Library, located near to the Communist Party headquarters, was raked by fire in the revolution of December 1989, some 500,000 volumes were damaged or destroyed, including many manuscripts and dissertations. As dramatic reports highlighted, the losses included manuscripts of the Romanian national poet Mihai Eminescu and unique ancient Hungarian literature. More than 75 per cent of the collection did survive, however (much was outhoused), and only four of the library's incunables were lost. The catalogue also survived intact.¹² British and American academics outraged by the news footage from the Iraqi National Museum (if not the Library) were accused within weeks of absurd naïvety in accepting the interpretation of events offered by 'apparatchiks of a fascist regime'.¹³ Argument over the extent and appraisal of cultural looting descended into journalistic