



Library: An Unquiet History

By Matthew Battles



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On the survival and destruction of knowledge, from Alexandria to the Internet.



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Through the ages, libraries have not only accumulated and preserved but also shaped, inspired, and obliterated knowledge. Matthew Battles, a rare books librarian and a gifted narrator, takes us on a spirited foray from Boston to Baghdad, from classical scriptoria to medieval monasteries, from the Vatican to the British Library, from socialist reading rooms and rural home libraries to the Information Age.

He explores how libraries are built and how they are destroyed, from the decay of the great Alexandrian library to scroll burnings in ancient China to the destruction of Aztec books by the Spanish—and in our own time, the burning of libraries in Europe and Bosnia. Encyclopedic in its breadth and novelistic in its telling, this volume will occupy a treasured place on the bookshelf next to Baker's *Double Fold*, Basbanes's *A Gentle Madness*, Manguel's *A History of Reading*, and Winchester's *The Professor and the Madman*. 11 b/w illustrations.



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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Battles, a contributor to *Harper's* and a Harvard librarian, offers a distinguished portrait of the library, its endurance and destruction throughout history, and traces how the library's meaning was questioned or altered according to the climate of the time. In accessible prose, Battles recounts the building and burning that have marked the library's long history. The Vatican Library built by Pope Nicholas V set the standard during the Renaissance, and the one built by the Jews in the Vilna ghetto during WWII showed the importance of books to a community under siege. Meanwhile, the mythic third-century B.C. book burnings by Chinese emperor Shi Huangdi were an effort to erase history, as was the catastrophic destruction of millions of books by the Nazis in the spring of 1933. Dynamic characters lend this history a novelistic tone: Julius Caesar began the library movement in Rome; Antonio Panizzi, an Italian revolutionary and exile, turned the library of the British Museum into one of the world's greatest in the 19th century; more recently, Nikola Koljevic, a scholar turned Serb nationalist, directed the siege of Sarajevo that led to a book burning at the Bosnian National and University Library. Battles also enlightens readers regarding the evolution of bookmaking, the card catalogue and the role of the librarian, including the most famous of all, Melvil Dewey, whose decimal system was only a small part of his influence. This always compelling history illustrates Battles's theme: despite the rule of barbarians or megalomaniacal kings, angry mobs and natural disasters, people's hunger for books has ensured the library's survival. 11 illus.

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From [Booklist](#)

Battles, a rare book librarian at Harvard, takes the reader on a world tour of the library from ancient times to the present digital age, making stops in Nineveh and Alexandria, Athens and Baghdad. He considers the book culture and important collections of medieval Europe, which were assembled and maintained by popes and monks, and the founding of the first "public" library--by Cosimo de' Medici in 1444. Among the other "librarians" who capture his interest are classicist Richard Bentley, who in 1694 was appointed Keeper of the Royal Library; Antonio Panizzi, who produced the first catalog of the British Library (the first volume, covering the letter A, took seven years to complete); Melville Dewey, creator of the decimal classification system and founder of the American Library Association; and Herman Kruk, head of the Vilna ghetto library. The book is less a formal history than an exploration of the concept of library and how it evolved. Battles writes in an engaging way, and his book will be appreciated by librarians and book lovers. *Mary Ellen Quinn*

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Review

"One might expect a book that...[is] huge in scope and academically dry....*Library* is neither....[An] engaging book." (BookPage)

"A must for every home or institutional collection." (Kirkus Reviews)

"Elegantly written....A great read, flowing over many time periods and geographic regions." (Library Journal)

"Battles turns an all-seeing telescope on the most spectacular galaxy in our intellectual heavens?that magnificent constellation of books we call a library?and brings into focus the brightest stars and blackest holes in its dynamic history." (Richard Lederer, author of *A Man of My Words*)

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Brenda Schweiger:

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Gina Hill:

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