



A peer-reviewed student publication
of the University at Buffalo
Department of Library and Information Studies

Carlyle, Panizzi, and the Public Library Ideal

A.S. Popowich
Dalhousie University
School of Information Management
Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada

Library Student Journal,
February 2007

Review

19th century Scottish essayist, Thomas Carlyle, founded the London Library as a model for an egalitarian institution serving the common man. Carlyle disagreed vehemently with the British Museum's Librarian, Antonio Panizzi, about the role of the library in society and the need for a quiet reading room for the public. Panizzi is better remembered in the field of library science, but Carlyle's ideals live on in the London Library and in all public libraries today.

Introduction

Thomas Carlyle's personal and public writings argue for the creation of a public library to contain quality literature *and* provide quiet reading rooms and equal access. The year 1853 can be seen as a turning point in a struggle between the haves and have-nots of British society—the year progressive public policy in public services took hold, including equality in library services. However, not everyone embraced these ideas or changes. Carlyle's

idea of a library with a quiet reading room and equal access to the library and its materials were born of frustration from his experience at the British Museum and the Museum's Librarian, Antonio Panizzi. Carlyle's works, notebooks, and letters describe an intellectual who lamented the scarcity of libraries and their poor quality in Britain. The London Library still stands testament to his vision and persistence.

A Feud Begins

In his biography of Panizzi, Louis Fagan gives a bare-bones account of the conflict between Carlyle and the Librarian. This conflict stemmed from Carlyle's unhappiness with the atmosphere of the British Museum. He found the atmosphere of the British Museum unsatisfactory due to the noise from the hustle and bustle. Carlyle could not read productively among the noise and atmosphere of the "defective" British Museum reading room, "which preceded the present splendid building" (Fagan, 1880, v. 1, p. 335). Carlyle asked to be allowed to take books into other parts of the British Museum, specifically the "King's Library" which would be more conducive to reading, but Panizzi refused him "in terms somewhat too severe," which Fagan will not repeat (p. 335). Carlyle would not let the matter drop and to highlight the severe refusal of his request at the Museum, four days after the incident he submitted correspondence to the Museum Trustees. Panizzi countered with his own report which stated:

He knew of no Private Room, nor of any quieter corner in all the Library for the purpose of study than the Reading-Room; but even if he did, he did not think that in a Public Library, supported at the national expense for public use, any person should enjoy advantages and facilities denied to the generality. (Fagan, p. 335)

To this Wilson responds that, though recommended to accommodate Carlyle, Panizzi “would not let Carlyle read in the King’s Library rooms, preferring rather to lie – which came easy to Panizzi” (1927, p. 479). Despite Panizzi’s view, Carlyle was the first to recognize the need for a library—any library—to be democratic, and the roots of this go back to the beginning of his working life.



The London Library Art Room, circa 1935

Photo courtesy of The London Library

Idea of Public Libraries in Carlyle’s Writings

Carlyle’s second book, *Sartor Resartus* (published in 1831), made the connections between his ideas of a public library and its development, and was a reflection of social change in Great Britain. Jurgen Habermas (1989) locates the political triumph of the bourgeoisie, and thus the institutionalization

of the bourgeois public sphere, in the Great Reform Act of 1832. The middle class, now in power, put forward a great number of educational endeavours and social reforms in this period, including the Public Libraries Act of 1850. Habermas identifies the coffeehouse and the press as two vital elements of the public sphere, both of which are prominent in Carlyle’s book. The fictional editor’s “first thought” on receiving Herr Teufelsdröckh’s manuscript “was to publish article after article on this remarkable Volume, in such widely-circulating Critical Journals as the Editor might stand connected with, or by money or love procure access to” (Carlyle, 1937, p. 10). When we first meet Herr Teufelsdröckh, he is holding forth to a group of rapt admirers:

Lifting his huge tumbler of Gukguk, and for a moment lowering his tobacco-pipe, he stood up in full coffee-house (it was *Zur Grune Gans*, the largest in Weissnichtwo, where all the Virtuosity, and really all the Intellect of the place assembled of an evening ... (p. 15)

The “Critical Journals” and the coffeehouse were two integral elements in the rational–critical public sphere which the bourgeoisie had developed separate from official, aristocratic society, in preparation for the take-over of social and political power (Habermas, 1989). When *Sartor Resartus* was written, this take-over was complete. The Catholics had been emancipated in 1829, and Britain was on the eve of a great electoral reform. But access to books, which these educational and social reforms had made necessary, lagged behind. Public libraries in particular were not yet a priority for the middle-classes. In a journal entry of 1832, “Carlyle devoted a page and a half to the want of public libraries in Britain. He thought them ‘crypts’ and not lending libraries, complained of the nonexistence of catalogues, and advocated that ‘120 millions of money’ be allocated to set up good public libraries in every county”

(Froude, cited in Carlyle, 1977, v. 13, p. 177). Carlyle lamented the lack of libraries in Britain in broader terms as well:

Thanks too for your promise about Books: this pray do not forget. I am often wonderfully circumstanced here for Books; like an old Hebrew doomed to make bricks, and with no straw allowed him! This is a great evil under the sun. Why is there not a "Majesty's Library" in every county town? There is a Majesty's Jail and Gallows there already. You, who know thoroughly about this matter, should stir up the world to think of it. (p. 177)

Even at this early date, 1832, Carlyle was aware of the importance of libraries, and already advocating the creation of a publicly supported, publicly accessible, library system. Legislation to support this idea would not come into effect for almost two decades.

Two philosophical trends connect *Sartor Resartus* to the development of the public library in England. Alistair Black, in his *New History of English Public Libraries*, attributes the impetus behind public library to Idealism and Utilitarianism. A key proponent of idealism, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "cultural critique of commercial society stands at the beginning of an idealist tradition embracing Carlyle, Ruskin, Arnold, Morris, Green, Tawney and others" (Black, 1996, p. 43). Carlyle's book was an attempt to popularize, or at least explain, the Idealist philosophy which was so prevalent in German literature at the time. In a notebook entry of 5 December 1826, Carlyle writes:

Coleridge says, "Many men live all their days without ever having an *idea*; and some days with thousands of things they call *ideas*; but an Idea is not a Perception or Image, it cannot be *painted*, it is infinite." Such was his meaning (not his words): I

half or three-fourths seem to understand him. (Norton, 1972, p. 78)

It is this sympathy for, if not immediate understanding of Idealism that allows Carlyle to see immediately the importance of public libraries. "For while it is true that Utilitarians warmed to the idea of state-assisted rational recreation for diversion, they did so gradually, in stark contrast to those who recognized readily the social criticism of a brutalizing industrial world in need of soothing aesthetic culture" (Black, p. 142). Already, Carlyle's request for a quieter, more tranquil reading room at the British Museum had taken on a greater significance.

Sartor Resartus, in the words of one editor, "expresses, in a highly metaphorical way, some of the elements of a philosophy as perennially attractive to men as that of Plato, regardless of what the contemporary data of knowledge happen to be: namely, idealism" (Carlyle, 1937, p. li). According to Black:

From the intellectual tradition of Classical thought was borrowed the example of a civilized and harmonious existence in the Greek *polis*, where individuals acted morally as educated citizens of a sophisticated political society. Plato's *Republic* was an abiding influence on idealism. (1996, p. 145)

This view of a perfectible society was the basis for Carlyle's view of libraries, and sheds further light on his relationship with Panizzi. When Gladstone introduced his first Budget in 1853, Carlyle wrote to a supporter of the Government:

If you could persuade Gladstone to take off that extremely scrubby little tax on foreign books ... he may do a perceptible benefit to the one or two serious students still extant in this

country. A perceptible benefit, not a great one—ah no; and on the whole if he won't, and can't, the Muses (with Panizzi's breech seated on the throat of them, and little conscious of the crime in the posture, he, poor devil!) must still try to live if they can. (cited in Wilson, p. 478-479)

The whole question of the quiet reading room, and all of Carlyle's animosity towards



The London Library Reading Room, circa 1935
Photo courtesy of The London Library

Panizzi, arose from his view that “individuals acted morally as educated citizens of a sophisticated political society” (Black, 1996, p. 145). Any hindrance to that education was not only inconvenient to Carlyle, but irresponsible and unethical. In a journal entry, Carlyle summed up the episode neatly: “the blame is not in [Panizzi], but in the prurient darkness and confused pedantry and ostentatious inanity of the world which put him there, and which I own he fairly represents and symbolizes there. Lords Lansdowne and Brougham put Panizzi in; and the world with its Hansards and ballot-boxes and sublime apparatus put in Lords Lansdowne and Brougham” (cited in Wilson, 1927, p. 479). It is interesting to note Carlyle's middle-class sentiment that Lansdowne and Brougham owe their positions to the voters and not to birth.

The reference to Lord Brougham brings us back to *Sartor Resartus*, in which Carlyle

airily dismisses the first section of Herr Teufelsdröckh's work as “likely to interest the Compilers of some *Library of General, Entertaining, Useful, or even Useless knowledge*” (1937, p. 37). Formed by Lord Brougham in 1825, the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge was what Alistair Black refers to as “the utilitarian flywheel”. In the second half of the 1820s (that is, while Carlyle was working on *Sartor Resartus*) the Society took up earlier calls for public libraries, with a view to the moral improvement of society. Idealism and Utilitarianism then were not so different—John Stuart Mill was a good friend of Carlyle's—but their emphasis was different, hence Carlyle's distrust of the “cheap methods of popularizing knowledge” (1977, p. 37, editor's note) put forward in the Society's treatises. Utilitarians, as opposed to Idealists,

believed that civilisation was enriched by industrialism. They were aware of the squalor and class disaffection which accompanied industrialism, but believed progress would eventually eradicate these problems. A maturing economy required attention to be paid to “useful” education and scientific culture, which was in itself, the utilitarians believed, a cultural pursuit of high worth. Education for material advance would secure social stability; not just because its result would “buy off” discontent, but because it taught the self-reliance and social atomism which negated radical cooperation. (Black, p. 43)

Sartor Resartus can be read, then, as an extended argument not only against the industrialized, laissez-faire, bourgeois society of the early 19th century, but against the view that said this society could be improved without radically, fundamentally, changing it.

To Carlyle (1937) the early decades of the century were the “Whirlwind of a departing Era;” the “old spiritual highways and recognized paths” were being torn up and then submerged under “oceans of Hypocrisy and Unbelievability” (p. xvii). The post-Napoleonic world was a world of cynicism, sentimentality, scepticism, reactionary dread of change, and Utilitarianism. Carlyle (1977) wrote in a letter of 1833, two years after *Sartor* was finished:

To *teach* any of the things I am interested in were for the present impossible; all is unfixed, nothing has as yet grown; at best it is but growing. Thus too the futility of founding Universities at this time: the only University you can advantageously found were a public library. This is *never* out of season; therefore not now, when all else in that kind is. (v. 13, p. 317)

Democratic Library Service

Following his own advice, Carlyle set himself to found a library of his own. By 1839, the plans for the London Library were well-advanced, and prospectuses were being sent out. “If we consider,” Carlyle said in a speech of 1840, transcribed in the 28 June 1840, “every human being has, by the nature of the case, a *right* to hear what other wise human beings have spoken to him. It is one of the rights of men; a very cruel injustice if you deny it to a man!” Wilson’s (1927) biography of Carlyle stated that “this was not rhetoric, the doctrine is in *Sartor*” (p. 212). For Carlyle, the transformation of society that he desired was possible through the establishment of public libraries.

From the beginning, the London Library did not wish to compete with the British Museum. “But,” said Carlyle, “supposing it to be managed with the most perfect skill and success, even according to the ideal of

such an Institution, still I will assert that this other Library of ours is requisite also” (*Examiner*, June 28th, 1840). Carlyle recognized the exclusive nature of the British Museum:

A great quantity of people are excluded altogether from the British Museum as a reading room. Every man engaged in business is occupied during the hours it is kept open; and innumerable classes of persons find it extremely inconvenient to attend the British Museum Library at all. But granting that they all could go there, I would ask any literary man, any reader of books, any man intimately acquainted with the reading of books, whether he can read them to any purpose in the British Museum? (Cheers.) A book is a kind of thing that requires a man to be self-collected. He must be alone with it. (Cheers.) A good book is the purest essence of a human soul. How could a man take it into a crowd, with bustle of all sorts going on around him? *The good of a book is not the facts that can be got out of it, but the kind of resonance that it awakens in our own minds.* (*Examiner*, June 28th, 1840)

The stage is being set, thirteen years before the fact, for Carlyle’s encounter with Panizzi. Carlyle went on to outline the future of the London Library as he saw it then:

I believe that if a man had the heroism to collect a body of great books, to get together the cream of the knowledge that exists in the world, and let it be gradually known that he had such a Library, he would find his advantage in it in the long run; but it would be only in the long run; he must wait ten or twenty years, perhaps a lifetime; he must

be a kind of martyr. (*Examiner*, June 28 th, 1840)

The London Library was a success. More than a lifetime later, 160 years, in fact, the London Library “remains true to its founding principles as set down by Thomas Carlyle and his supporters”. Carlyle’s view of his library was that it should be democratic, but not demagogic. He felt it should provide, according to Christopher Phipps, London Library’s Development Librarian, “the richness of a national reference collection for use by people in their homes or workplaces” (personal communication, January 4, 2007). While he criticized the British Museum’s exclusionary quality, Carlyle was equally critical of the circulating libraries, with their “eye to the prurient appetite of the great million, [furnishing] them with any kind of garbage they will have. The result is melancholy—making bad worse—for every bad book begets an appetite for reading a worse one” (*Examiner*, June 28 th, 1840).

In 1841, Carlyle (1977) noted in a letter that “the lamentable want of Books in London ... has now brought about some beginning of its own remedy” (v. 13, p. 134). The result of his endeavors, as he saw it, was “a democratic Institution called ‘London Library’ where all men, in payment of a small annual sum, can now borrow Books; a thing called here ‘Subscription Library’ which in such a city as London, appetite growing by what it feeds on, may well become one of the best Libraries extant” (v. 13, p. 136). Carlyle was not unaware that his library was not, as yet, capable of effecting the kind of social transformation he was looking for: “We are democratic, as I said, or rather we *mean* to be; for as yet only the elect of the Public could be interested in the scheme,” (v. 13, p. 136) or could pay the subscription fee for that matter.



The London Library today, with a bust of its founder in the background

Photo courtesy of the London Library

Conclusion

The confrontation with Panizzi was not simply a question of privilege, nor of “rules and regulations,” but a clash between two distinct world views. The connection of Panizzi with Lord Brougham, recognized not only by Carlyle, but Panizzi’s biographer, Louis Fagan, place Panizzi firmly in the Utilitarian camp. Yet Utilitarianism was not the gravest sin Carlyle could lay at Panizzi’s door; in his speech inaugurating the London Library Carlyle held the peaceful and private contemplation of a book to be sacrosanct. Panizzi, “sitting on the throat of the Muses” (Wilson, 1927, p. 478), was guilty of stifling education, not furthering it. Panizzi’s actions earned Carlyle’s enmity because he clung to strict regulations which was advised against by prominent members of the library (that is, privileged) community.

Panizzi is remembered as a great innovator in library history, Carlyle is not. However, Carlyle’s library has been running on the same principles he endowed it with for over a 150 years. His view of librarianship was different from Panizzi’s; indeed, it is different from many librarians today. But the issues he discussed— copyright, collections development, and cultural elitism, for example— are still with us, still hotly debated within the library community. Carlyle, though not a professional librarian, criticized library service in the wider context of his society. What he had to say on these issues were vital questions of librarianship at the time, and remain important today.

References

Black, A. (1996). *A new history of the English public library: Social and intellectual contexts, 1850–1914*. London: Leicester University Press.

Carlyle, T. (1937). *Sartor resartus: The life and opinions of Herr Teufelsdröckh* (C. F. Harrold, Ed.). New York: Odyssey Press.

Carlyle, T. (1977). *The collected letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle* (C. R. Sanders, Ed.). Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Carlyle, T. (1840, June 28) The proposed London library, *The Examiner*, p. 408.

Fagan, L. (1880). *The life of Sir Anthony Panizzi, KCB*. London: Remington and Co.

Habermas, J. (1989). *The structural transformation of the public sphere*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Norton, C. E. (Ed.) (1972). *Two note books of Thomas Carlyle from 23d March 1822 to 16th May 1832*. Mamaroneck, NY: Paul P. Appel.

Rapple, B. A. (1996). Coping with catalogues: Thomas Carlyle in the British Museum. *Contemporary review*, 269(1571), 302.

Wilson, D. A. (1927). *Carlyle on Cromwell and Others*. London: Kegan Paul

Author's Bio

Originally from Winnipeg, A.S. Popowich is in the second year of an MLIS degree from Dalhousie University's School of Information Management. He is interested in library history, book history, information technology and typography.