



The *Assure* of the LONDON LIBRARY

above left:
Paul Raffety
Main Reading Room,
the London Library
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above right:
Paul Raffety
The London Library from
St James's Square, at Night
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Graeme Powell looks at an iconic British institution

The London Library was Roland's favourite place. It was shabby but civilised, alive with history but inhabited also by living poets and thinkers who could be found squatting on the slotted metal floors of the stacks, or arguing pleasantly at the turning of the stair.

Possession, the A.S. Byatt novel which won the Booker Prize in 1990, opens in the Reading Room of the London Library, one of the oldest and largest private libraries in the world. Roland Michell, a young research assistant, has retrieved a book that had once belonged to a nineteenth-century poet, Randolph Henry Ash, and inside the covers he discovers two letters written by Ash to an unnamed woman. Michell purloins the letters and thus begins a quest for the truth about the relationship between Ash and his correspondent.

I was a member of the London Library in the 1980s, when Byatt was writing her

book. I did not know her, but perhaps we were in the Reading Room at the same time, seated in the comfortable armchairs near the old fireplace. The room resembled a nineteenth-century club in some ways and, as in most clubs, one or two readers were usually asleep. I did recognise a few of my fellow-readers, as they were often on television. There was the provocative historian A.J.P. Taylor, the glamorous Antonia Fraser, biographer of kings and queens, and John Julius Norwich, who was writing books on Venice and Sicily. Another distinctive figure was my namesake, the maverick politician Enoch Powell. Powell was a classicist and an omnivorous reader. In 1978 he wrote that the London Library possessed three essentials: 'liberal borrowing rights, unimpeded access to the stacks, and a collection accumulated over several generations'.

To be precise, the collection has been growing over 165 years. The London Library was founded in 1841, largely on the initiative of writers. In particular, Thomas Carlyle, the historian, biographer and essayist, saw the need for a scholarly library that, unlike the British Museum, would lend books to its members. Free lending libraries did not exist at that time, while circulating libraries were limited to popular fiction. The London Library initially occupied rooms in Pall Mall and in 1845 it moved to Beauchamp House

in a corner of St James's Square. It has been there ever since. At the time, St James's Square was lined with the townhouses of dukes, earls and bishops. They have mostly been replaced by nondescript offices, but it is still a very exclusive area, close to expensive shops, galleries, clubs and royal palaces. Beauchamp House, which dated from the 17th century, was demolished and replaced by the present building in 1898.

The growth of the collection has been steady: there were about 90 000 books in 1880, 300 000 in 1920, and about a million today. The subject coverage was originally very wide, with books in many different languages, but in modern times it has largely focussed on the humanities. The Library has benefited from numerous gifts and bequests, occasionally of large formed collections. There have also been losses: some books were destroyed when a German bomb hit a corner of the building in 1944 and more recently a few of the oldest books were sold to raise funds. Space problems are endemic in libraries, but there have been several additions to the building in the last century and all the books are still held on-site. In 2004 an adjoining building was bought which will allow for collection growth for at least another 25 years.

The Library has always offered its members liberal lending rights. Early members like Charles Darwin, George Eliot and John Stuart Mill were regular borrowers, while Charles Dickens drew on the collection when he was writing *A Tale of Two Cities*. When I joined the Library I was pleased to find that not only could I borrow up to 10 books at a time but also that there were no overdue fines. Sometimes when I had kept a book for two months or more I received a very polite letter from the librarian, informing me that it was needed by another member. Membership is not limited to London residents, and boxes of books are despatched regularly to members in the counties and even overseas.

As Enoch Powell said, unimpeded access to the stacks is one of the great attractions of the London Library. At the British Library it has been common to wait two hours for a book, whereas in the same time dozens of books can be perused in the London Library. There are also long runs of periodicals and a *Times* Room, containing a near-complete set of the London *Times*. There are, however,

some challenges in the stacks. The Library has scorned Dewey and other numerical classifications; instead, books are assigned to large subject stacks, such as Biography or Religion, which are subdivided in varying degrees and then shelved alphabetically by author. It takes some time to master the system. Moreover, there are seven floors of stacks, with different configurations and with staircases that end abruptly. It is easy to get lost. I had some sympathy for Ruby Constad in Rose Tremain's novel *Letter to Sister Benedicta* (1970):

I don't go to the London Library very often and in consequence forget my way around its metal gangways and have to keep asking where things are ... It's a bit like playing 'Hunt the thimble' with no one to shout 'cold' or 'warm' or 'boiling!' and I feel like walking out again without a book.

The vast stacks, with their cast-iron grid floors, flickering lights and tunnels of books, have intrigued readers for over a century. They are usually very quiet and dark, but through the gaps in the floors another reader may be seen, in a small pool of light, standing or squatting in the aisles one or two floors above or below. Some readers think the stacks are scary, others consider them to be erotic, and claim that amorous encounters have taken place in the remoter corners of Religion or elsewhere. I always thought the stacks would be an ideal place for a murder, as have others. John Julius Norwich regretted that Alfred Hitchcock or Carol Reed had not made a film in the stacks. In Roy Fuller's novel *The Second Curtain* (1953), a book borrowed from the London Library is a

top:
G.W. Wilson & Co.
Portrait of Thomas Carlyle 1870s
b&w lantern slide; 8.2 x 8.2 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an2439329

bottom:
G.W. Wilson & Co.
Portrait of Charles Dickens 1870s
b&w lantern slide; 8.2 x 8.2 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an24393283





above:
G.W. Wilson & Co.
Portrait of Lord Tennyson 1870s
b&w lantern slide; 8.2 x 8.2 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an24393312

below:
Sylvia Lewes
Loans Desk, the London Library
c.1935
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of the London Library

clue to a murder. Following this lead, George Garner goes into the stacks and suddenly senses that he is being stalked by someone on the floor below. He escapes from the hit-man by quietly descending from Music into History and then into the Issue Hall, but on a later occasion he is less fortunate.

The literary associations of the Library are immediately apparent to a visitor. There is a bust of Carlyle in the Art Room, while the stairs to the

Reading Room are lined with portraits of presidents of the Library. Among them are Lord Tennyson, Leslie Stephen, T.S. Eliot and Tom Stoppard. E.M. Forster was Vice-President for many years and in 1960 he helped raise funds by donating the manuscript of *A Passage to India*. It fetched a world record price for the manuscript of a living author. Committee members have included the novelists Rebecca West and Anita Brookner, the historians R.H. Tawney and Veronica Wedgwood, the biographers Harold Nicolson and Claire Tomalin, the travel writer Paul Theroux, the bibliophile Nicolas Barker and the polemicist Germaine Greer.

Among the 8000 or so members of the Library are people who have been using its collections for 50 years or more. They are devoted to the institution and are

suspicious of change. Some of the staff have also stayed for long periods. The extreme example was Frederick Cox, who worked on the issue desk for almost 70 years, retiring in 1951 at the age of 86. It is not surprising that, in the words of a former librarian, the London Library 'is an institution where changes have to be introduced so tactfully as to be almost imperceptible'. It is said that the introduction of a photocopying machine aroused fierce debate among members. I was surprised that in the 1980s the system for lending books was still completely manual and was painfully slow. A card catalogue had been in use since the 1950s, but for older books it was necessary to look up a series of folio volumes containing pasted sheets from the published catalogues, marked up with locations. But changes have taken place. The catalogue is now partly online and members can make use of computers with internet connections, or benefit from free wireless internet access when working on their laptops in the Reading Room.

From time to time there have been funding crises, but the future of the London Library seems assured. It has a staff of 50, a growing membership willing to pay increased subscriptions, and an investment portfolio of 15 million pounds. Above all, it retains the support and affection of its members, many of whom probably agree with Roland Michell that it is their favourite place in London. They may even empathise with Mr Hutton in Aldous Huxley's story 'The Gioconda Smile' (1922), who is contemplating death for a murder that he did not commit:

Death was waiting for him ... Others would walk down the obscure and narrow lanes between the bookshelves in the London Library, sniffing the dusty perfume of good literature, peering at strange titles, discovering unknown names, exploring the fringes of vast domains of knowledge. He would be lying in a hole in the ground.

GRAEME POWELL was for many years Manuscript Librarian at the National Library

