THE IRON LIBRARY:
VICTORIAN ENGLAND AND THE BRITISH MUSEUM LIBRARY

A Thesis

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By

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“The British Museum Reading Room”

Under the hive-like dome the stooping haunted readers
Go up and down the alleys, tap the cells of knowledge---
Honey and wax, the accumulation of years---

Some on commission, some for the love of learning,
Some because they have nothing better to do
Or because they hope these walls of books will deaden
The drumming of the demon in their ears.

Cricks, hacks, poverty-stricken scholars,
In pince-nez, period hats or romantic beards
And cherishing their hobby or their doom
Some are too much alive and some are asleep
Hanging like bats in a world of inverted values,
Folded up in themselves in a world which is safe and silent:
This is the British Museum Reading Room.

Out on the steps in the sun the pigeons are courting,
Puffing their ruffs and sweeping their tails or taking
A sun-bath at their ease
And under the totem poles---the ancient terror---
Between the enormous fluted Ionic columns
There seeps from heavily jowled or hawk-like foreign faces
The guttural sorrow the refugees.

July, 1939

Louis MacNeice
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2 INTRODUCTION

The first century of the British Museum Library and its Reading Room (1753-1860) illustrates the political, economic, and social considerations that were changing the larger British society, both in small scale (as in purchasing changes in the wake of the French Revolution) and in large scale (as in the submerging of aristocratic authority in a democratizing period). I will investigate this evolution in order to trace three main movements and their larger relevance. Framed by the models of Jürgen Habermas’ and Mary Poovey, and following a roughly chronological line, I will examine the continued influence of the aristocratic interests in what was an increasingly liberal institution. This influence plays out in admissions policies as well as government financial support. Those permitted access to the British Museum Library under the parameters so created included many of the leading figures of the Victorian age as well as autodidacts of all classes. This conglomeration within the Reading Room constituted a unique type of crowd, and I end my paper with a discussion of the tension within such a gathering and its depiction in literature and art of the period.

Divisions were present in many aspects of the British Museum, and these divisions serve as signals to some of the larger social issues mentioned. One of the
defining characteristics of the British Museum as an institution was its distinction between the larger museum and the reading room; the Museum was geared more toward the viewer rather than the researcher. In addition, while the Museum had the role of preservation, display, and education, the Library also had the additional role of cultural regeneration. This role is described by David Lodge in his novel *The British Museum is Falling Down*:

He passed through the narrow vaginal passage, and entered the huge womb of the Reading Room. Across the floor, dispersed along the radiating desks, scholars curled, foetus-like, over their books, little buds of intellectual life thrown off by some gigantic act of generation performed upon that nest of knowledge, those inexhaustible ovaries of learning, the concentric inner rings of the catalogue shelves.¹

Lodge had grasped the sense of the Reading Room, particularly the Round Reading Room, as a womb for scholars. The emphasis here is on the role of the Library to feed its users, as well as to protect their own literary creations within its shelves. The rest of the Museum was less concerned with the contributions of the visitors to its own future; its purpose was to educate the masses, not be created by them.

To grasp the evolution and relevance of the British Museum, I will establish the overlapping nature of its history, the way in which vestigial sources of power such as the aristocracy are taken over or transformed in the face of emerging concerns regarding the Civil Service and accessibility. Habermas states, “The heirs of the humanistic-aristocratic society, in their encounter with the bourgeois intellectuals … built a bridge between the remains of the collapsing form of publicity (the courtly one) and the precursor of a new

one: the bourgeois public sphere.” He also explains that as the market economy grew, the new sphere that developed was required to break the “fetters of domination based on landed estate and necessitated forms of administration invested with state authority.”

Rather than presume a clean break between the old and the new forms, “bridged” by the public discourse, I contend that the old form remained through the nineteenth century, unforgotten, but metamorphosed into a new shape which was able to retain the respectability of the aristocratic system while moving forward in a more inclusive manner. In this, I follow Poovey’s ideas of aggregation and disaggregation--a breaking apart in order to redevelop into new bodies and groups. Poovey’s more flexible model allows for such layering as that which occurred in the British Museum. Her analysis of the residual history of disaggregation also explains the patchwork nature of the Library and its development, moving beyond a study of the intersection of various value spheres and the “implementation of specific rationalities.” She is primarily concerned with the “incoherence that results from the uneven process of disaggregation itself,” particularly since the domains that develop as a result naturally retain residue of their previous forms.

In this case, the British Museum, and the Library in particular, retained the physical location and donations of its privileged forebears, as well as the patrons’

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3 ibid. 141.


5 Ibid.

successors themselves: the Trustees. The move from the original location in Montague House (in the 1720s) to the new building built on the same lot was a step toward modernization, especially symbolically, but the attitude of some Museum-goers rejected such “progress.” Long after the move, the Museum and its visitors retained the sense of the aristocracy; far into the nineteenth century people recalled the “noble” feel of the Museum. Their desire for the past aligns with that model of uneasy separation and reformation that Poovey takes to characterize the contentious fragmentation of nineteenth century Britain.

There existed a volatile division of identity between research and education/entertainment missions within the Library: would-be readers were admitted or not according to assessments of their seriousness and social standing. This division was present in every combination of the Library with the larger Museum. As the facility grew in holdings and space, the incongruity of the different collections pushed toward separation. However, by the time the Museum was split (after the Select Committee hearings in 1860), the Museum had achieved public recognition and international respect. Scientists and patrons protested the splitting of the Natural History collections from the larger Museum into a new building in South Kensington. Fragmentation became as controversial as the original aggregation.
3 OVERLAPS: NOBLE MODERNITY

The history of the British Museum serves as a case study for broader British society; vestigial practices are submerged beneath, but concurrent with, modern ideas. The monarchy has been examined as one example of this, but British Museum history allows us to broaden the picture. The aristocratic and exclusionary origins of the institution, despite 1830s liberalization, continued to exist into the turn of the century. To trace this coexistence, I will delineate the role of the aristocracy at the origins of the Museum in 1753 and then the reorganization throughout the defining period in the Museum’s history, 1830-1860. This latter period encompasses the first Select Commission of 1835-36, the Royal Commission of 1848, and the second Select Commission of 1860. These investigations and their subsequent published reports provide a window into the public and political opinions concerning the Museum and Library, as well as showing how a competitive nationalistic and liberal rhetoric was used to push forward structural and bureaucratic changes while, at the same time, the influence of titled personages remained in order to keep the Museum before the “right people” in Parliament. In my account, I embrace a Foucauldian concern with the “the forms of

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power, the channels it takes, and the discourses it permeates” as the clearest manner in which to trace such changes.8

Library historians recognize the aristocratic origins of the Museum, noting that it was the product of royal donations alongside the purchase of items from auctioned country house libraries. Even the original location that housed the collections was the former home of Ralph, the Duke of Montague. However, the man often credited with the paternity of the Museum is Sir Hans Sloane, whose will led to the Act of Parliament founding the institution. He was the son of a County Down tax collector and came to London, making a name among physicians and botanists alike. He published *Voyage to the Islands*, cataloging, describing, and carefully collating the naming of the specimens he collected in Jamaica, Barbados and the surrounding islands.9 His collection was vast and included natural history and geological samples, as well as rare scientific manuscripts, drawings and books.10 The Prince and Princess of Wales visited Sloane’s home-cum-museum. The Prince declared the collection “an ornament to the nation, and that great honour would redound from the establishing of it for the public use, to the latest posterity.”11 Sloane, by this time a baronet, willed his collection to the nation, provided his daughters are paid £20,000. Despite his humbler beginnings, the former


10  Gertrude Burford Rawlings, *The British Museum Library* (London: Grafton & Co, 1916), 46. Sloane tried to return from his youthful travels with live specimens as well, but they all died on the boat returning to England. “A tame snake, seven feet long, which he kept in a jar, escaped one day before the voyage, went upstairs to the bedrooms, and was killed by the terrified servants.” Ibid.

11  Ibid. 47-48.
Royal Physician established the aristocratic Trustee system that both developed and hindered the Museum for the next two centuries. Three Principals headed the Board of 48 Trustees: the Archbishop of Canterbury, Lord Chancellor, and the Prince of Wales.\textsuperscript{12} It also consisted of fifteen Elected Trustees appointed by the Principals. Sloane's will began a controversy involving a reluctant George II, an enthusiastic Speaker of the House, and a rotting Cottonian Library. George II’s irritation is summarized in one of his letters:

Sir Hans Sloane is dead and has made me one of the trustees of his museum, which is to be offered for twenty thousand pounds … He valued it at four-score thousand pounds, and so would anybody who loves hippopotamuses, sharks with one ear, and spiders as big as geese! You may believe that those who think money the most valuable of all curiosities will not be purchasers.\textsuperscript{13}

This system of Trustees was unchanged for years, being supported by the Select Commission hearings and the Royal Commission. Even though the Trustees came under heavy scrutiny they were allowed to remain in the same form, mostly because of the influence they had with regard to donations. It was generally conceded that without such a system, the Library would have had far poorer collections and less influence with Treasury and Parliament.\textsuperscript{14} The election of some scientific and literary men to the positions of Elected Trustees after the Select Commission hearings was a concession to public pressure. In 1850, one writer praised this inclusion: “Now that Hallam, Hamilton, Herschel, Buckland, and Macaulay have been admitted to the elective trusteeship, the

\textsuperscript{12} Later, the Speaker of the House of Commons was substituted for the Prince as a Principal Trustee.

\textsuperscript{13} Rawlings 50. Rawlings derides George II as a “diletante of Strawberry Hill,” referring to Walpole’s decorated pleasure house – perhaps a more stylish and relaxing atmosphere than a drafty mansion filled with rotting taxidermy specimens and ill-arranged books. Strawberry Hill was, in some respects, an aristocratic version of Salter’s museum, and helped begin the fascination with the Gothic. Also, despite his dismissal of Sloane’s bequest at the time, the King may have changed his mind, as he donated the Old Royal Library a few years later.

\textsuperscript{14} Philip John Weimerkirsch, \textit{Antonio Panizzi and the British Library} (Clifton, N.J.: Bookman’s Weekly, 1982), 12.
aristocracy of talent has no more contests to fear – and nature’s masterpieces may well follow where the Lansdownes, Spencers, Aberdeens and Stanleys have led.”15 One can only wonder how much impact five men could have on a board of forty-eight. Macaulay was undeniably frustrated. His notes during the meetings expressed irritation with the infighting among the officers and favoritism of his (mostly titled) fellow Trustees, “All boards [are] bad: & this is the worst of all boards. Ld. Northamton [is] a fool who thinks himself a wit. If I live I will see whether I cannot make a reform here.”16

The role of the Trustees was certified in 1850 in the Report of the Royal Commission: In “such an institution as the Museum many questions necessarily arise not well fitted for the ordinary executive department – questions…which from their delicacy and moment might be well referred to the Board at large, from whom…they would receive a decision carrying all the weight which their station, influence, and intelligence must impart.”17 Significantly, their assets are listed in the order of station, influence and then intelligence rather than the more egalitarian reverse. However, it is true that without the highly placed Trustees, the British Museum may have never received the funding or support of Parliament and the Treasury.

15 Quarterly Review, “Report from the Select Committee on the Condition, Management, and Affairs of the British Museum, together with the Minutes of Evidence.” 88.175 (1850: Dec.), 148-149.

16 As quoted in Weimerkirsch, Antonio Panizzi, 13-14.

Now that we have an idea of the tradition and responsibilities of the Trustees, I will move on to an investigation of how they, and the related upper-class institutional identity, affected the growth and admissions policies of the Library. With regard to admissions, one is tempted to assume that it was open to the “public,” partially because of the precedent of British Museum records. The term was used rhetorically from the earliest records in such a way as to underemphasize the role of the nobility and instead push forward the role of the nation or the “publick.” For example, in 1700, the Cotton Library was donated to the nation “for the benefit of the Publick.”\(^{18}\) The Act of Parliament that formed the Museum in 1753 named Trustees who were to find a repository for the collections where they are “preserved therein for publick use, to all Posterity,” and free access was granted to “all studious and curious Persons.”\(^{19}\) However, the term is misleading; the Library’s identification of a public was contrasted with the definition of the larger Museum.

While Sloane’s bequest was the impetus, the Museum could not have been founded without the publicly benevolent and nationalistic rhetoric of Arthur Onslow, the Speaker of the House of Commons.\(^{20}\) The King, after all, was not enthusiastic. Onslow, as well as other bibliophile Trustees, seized the opportunity to bring together the damaged Cottonian collection and the Harleian manuscripts. These manuscripts, gathered by two

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\(^{19}\) I will address this again when I discuss the admissions and the role of cultural property as regards the holdings of the Library, but the tactic was integral to the foundation of the Museum as much as to its later improvements.

\(^{20}\) Onslow was Speaker for the entirety of George II’s reign and was known for his integrity. After his retirement at the age of 76, he was appointed a Trustee of the British Museum. Philip Laundy, “Arthur Onslow (1691-1768)” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, September 2004) http://oxforddnb.com.
generations of the Earls of Oxford, were valued at £10,000 and represented unique aspects of English parliamentary history. Included were records from the Star Chamber and Chancery, as well as those of Parliament and correspondence to foreign countries. The Duchess of Portland, responsible for the auction of her father’s collection, was swayed by the high-minded goals of the proposed Museum. Upon their sale she wrote to the Speaker of the House of Commons:

I hope you do me the justice to believe that I do not consider this as a sale for an adequate price. But your idea is so right, and so agreeable to what I know was my Father’s intention, that I have a particular satisfaction in contributing all I can to facilitate the success of it.21

Onslow certainly appreciated the value of the “gift” and his pressure combined with the influence of the designated Trustees to bring about the Act of Parliament in June of 1753, purchasing the collections and establishing the Museum.22 While the Museum was successfully built, it did not reflect Sloane’s liberal intentions for decades.

Until late in 1845, the financial support of the Library was minimal, so growth was dependent on donations. Rhetoric and the power of royal example may have convinced people to will collections to the nation, but this meant that there were great gaps in the holdings.23 Arguably two of the most influential donors were George II and George III, who gave the Old Royal Library and Royal Library respectively. In addition, the Trustees regularly gave of their own collections. This fact was later used to support the continuance of Trustee system. Clayton Mordaunt Cracherode, Sir William


22 Rawlings 50. While there are rumors that George IV only donated his father’s collection provided he be paid its full value (or he would sell it to the Emperor of Russia), P.H. Harris, the most modern and thorough historian of the MUSEUML, declares the anecdote to be gossip.

23 These gaps were carefully documented in Panizzi’s 1845 report to the Trustees. The Trustees’ influence was credited with the improvement of the Museum in the 1836 Report, as I will discuss later.
Musgrave, and Sir Joseph Banks all donated large collections to the Museum between 1800-1820, but it was the gift of the Royal Library in 1823 that pushed the Library beyond its physical capacity. However, in 1811, Principal Librarian Joseph Planta submitted a report to the Trustees regarding these gaps. A year later, his petition was granted, and the library received an annual grant of £1,000 in addition to more leniencies with regard to special grants for specific purchases. These purchases would have been made from many of the county house libraries that were being put to auction.

The only other type of acquisition was through the right of Copyright Deposit that was transferred to the Museum with the George III’s donation. Had it been enforced, this right should have predicated the Museum’s purchasing any newly published materials; however, the unpopular task of pressuring the private publishers and Stationer’s Hall was not taken up until Anthony Panizzi was given the task in 1850. Thus a majority of the holdings of the Museum comprised gifts or former property of the upper or upper-middle class. The large grants of the 1840s combined with the mid-century copyright enforcement to fill in the gaps left by such a semi-random conglomerations. Therefore, until these changes, the Library was, truly, a county-house library transposed into the public sphere.

24 Harris, British Museum Library, 10-34.
25 Ibid. 32-34.
27 By the Press Licensing Act of 1662, the Royal Library was entitled to all new and significantly revised publications; this right was transferred to the Museum with the collection. See Louis Fagan The Life of Sir Antonio Panizzi, K.C.B. (New York: Burt Franklin, 1880) I.285-293.
28 Ibid.
Equally significant is the fact that this noble library was located in an aristocratic London mansion, Montague House, the former home of the marital profiteer Ralph, the Duke of Montague. The original funding of the institution—a lottery, organized by corrupt officials—did not improve its dubious aristocratic beginnings. After the officials’ nearly £7,000 cut, the Museum had £95,194; most of which went to the purchase of the Harleian and Sloane collections, Montague House, and the initial costs of renovating the space and moving the materials. When the Museum was finally established, they were left with only £900 per year as income, which explains the need for Planta’s 1811 petition for funding.

While Montague House was far from ideal as a location and the patchwork collections were ill housed in a patchwork network of rooms not suited to the purpose, some readers were unenthusiastic about moving into a new building. However, when the Royal Library arrived and new buildings were constructed to hold it in the next lot, there was no choice. Readers reflected nostalgically on Montague House, with all of its discomforts. Counter to Habermas’ expectations, the sentimentality of representatives of the bourgeoisie and middle class for the aristocratic feel of the Museum reflected a desire for a former power relationship as opposed to an enthusiasm for modernity. Rather than the inheritors of the public sphere being fully engaged in their political power, they express regret for the loss of the bygone era. G.K Peatling, in a short article on the modern state of library history, is skeptical of these “good old days” ideas in which

29 The King, upon hearing of Sloane’s bequest, states that, “he doubted if there was money sufficient in the Exchequer.” Admittedly, the country was in tight financial straits due to overseas expenditure. The Seven Years War started just three years later. See Miller, That Noble Cabinet, 43-48 for more on the lottery and the King’s objections.

current users and employees regard the past as a time of perfection. 31 Despite the dampness, poor ventilation, and cold, not to mention the general lack of space, Montague House held memories for many of the readers and workers in the Museum. Cowtan, a second-generation employee of the Library, calls the old building “noble” and “princely,” he gushes about its gardens and murals, and glosses over its defects: “When finished, Montague House was considered the most magnificent building, for a private residence, of any in London.” 32 Another writer laments: “Gone is the court air, which you trod with a conscious gentility, as you paced along it, and tried to fancy yourself some guest about to be ushered by lacqueys into the great hall of Montague house.” 33

The pleasure of having open access to one’s personal, if national, aristocratic mansion was gone; the aristocratic origins were now hidden in the personages of the Trustees and the names of the collections. Perhaps this was because new readers could not experience the same table-turning ownership of a noble’s home; they were relegated to a separate space built for them. In this sense, the new Museum was a withdrawal of power by the upper classes to the lower classes. However, the symbolism of patronage was also reaffirmed in new ways. Immediately after the Select Committee hearings of 1835-36, the King granted the servants of the British Museum the right to wear the

31 “Images of a golden age thus misrecognize ‘reverence’ of the past for fabrications, sometimes to political ends,” he states. As we have seen, those seeking to improve the library would call upon library history either as a positive or negative example that the current society should either recreate or improve. G.K. Peatling, “Discipline and the Discipline: Histories of the British Public Library,” Libraries & Culture, Vol. 38, No. 2 (Austin: University of Texas Press, Spring 2003), 121-126.

32 Robert Cowtan, Memories of the British Museum (London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1872), 2. Cowtan also points out that it was within Montague Houses’ walled gardens that Lord Chancellor Eldon and his family took refuge as the anti-Corn Law rioters broke his windows and rushed his house.

“Windsor Uniform,” one very similar to that worn by the servants at Windsor Castle (Figure 1). 

Despite any efforts to the contrary, the aristocratic heritage of the Museum remained present, replacing one symbol with another.

While the system of Trustees remained, the employees of the Museum underwent a much-publicized modernization. The reasoning behind such modernization in the early 1830s highlights the direct relationship between movements in the larger British society and their repercussions in the Museum. When Panizzi began his work at the Museum in 1831, his co-workers “breathed, for the most part, the air of an earlier and more leisured day,” says one biographer. A more critical writer, however, states that during the Museum’s early history, “Funds were low and the staff, though scholarly and conscientious, were mostly elderly clergymen or physicians. Visitors and readers were few, and those grudgingly admitted, whilst, over all, brooded an air of self-satisfied stagnation.”

The next year, the Reform Act was passed, drawing attention to the need reform aristocratic strongholds in the government. In a Parliamentary debate regarding funding

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for the institution in 1833, William Cobbett, M.P. singled out the British Museum as one such wasted space. He vehemently asked:

> What use in the wide world was this British Museum, and to whom, to what class of persons, it was useful? … If the aristocracy wanted the Museum as a lounging place, let them pay for it. For his own part, he did not know where this British Museum was… even if he knew where it was, he would not take the trouble of going to see it. He should like to have a list of the salaried persons; he should like to know who they were; he should like above all things to see whether they were not some dependants [sic] of Government – some of the aristocratic fry. He wanted their names – the names of the maids who swept out the rooms, to see whose daughters they were; whether they were the daughters of the heads of the establishment or what other relation they bore to them.36

Only a year later, Peel printed his Tamworth Manifesto, which promised “a careful review of institutions, both civil and ecclesiastical” and “the correction of proved abuses and the redress of real grievances.”37 Partially as a response to this furor and partially because of concerns regarding the state of the Natural History collections, the Select Committee was called in 1835. Antonio Panizzi, then only an Assistant in the Department of Printed Books, was called upon to report. He made a list of three goals for the Library that would come to define it to the coming age and move it beyond the lax practices of the past. He stated that the British Museum “is a Department of the Civil Service, and should be conducted in the spirit of other public Departments.”38 He was demanding that, at least on the level of the Officers, nepotism was to be justified by technical merit.

However, Panizzi may have later regretted his hope to align the British Museum with the Civil Service as this prospect began a series of debates between the Library, the


Civil Service Commission and the Treasury during the second half of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{39} Even though the change was the result of his ideas, Panizzi claimed that the Civil Service examinations were not sufficient to test the specialized language and researching skills required for even the lowest-ranking employee of the Museum. The Library was therefore not closely bound by the hiring standards of the Civil Service Commission. This debate led into employees’ complaints about raises, benefits and promotions.

Leniency with regard to the examinations led to the continuance of the old practices of nepotism, albeit mediated to some extent. Consider the case of Edmund Gosse, author of \textit{Father and Son} (1907). Gosse’s first employment was as a copying clerk in the Library in 1867.\textsuperscript{40} This was the modern library, after the construction of the Reading Room and the ordeals of the Select Committee and Royal Commission hearings. However, the route to the position was familiar. Gosse’s father wrote to Charles Kingsley, who advised him to speak both with Lord Cranworth, who was Lord Chancellor at the time and therefore one of the Principal Trustees. Kingsley assures Gosse and his father, “This is one of the few places in the Civil service at all worth having which are open to a youth of seventeen – the examination is slight … and is not competitive.”\textsuperscript{41} With these assurances, many letters and introductions, and an interview with Panizzi, the Trustees eventually hired Gosse.\textsuperscript{42} While this may not have been the

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\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{40} Ann Thwaite, \textit{Edmund Gosse – a Literary Landscape 1849-1928} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 54-56.
\item \textsuperscript{41} As quoted in Thwaite, \textit{Edmund Gosse}, 55.
\end{itemize}
regular course for all employees, the fact that such introductions were still successful highlights the overlay of old tradition, partisanship, with the controversial modern move toward bureaucratic hiring standardization.

Professionalization and utilitarianism affected the collections as well. The Museum needed to recreate itself from a space perceived as unused into one that was welcoming for all in order to continue receive any funding from the new Parliament. Panizzi’s next point before the Select Committee characterizes this, “the Museum is not a show, but an Institution for the diffusion of culture.” Privately owned museums opened to the public were common in the eighteenth century in England, but often required an entry fee. There were two basic types of private museum: the educational and the entertaining. The publicly accessible collections of Sir Hans Sloane and John Salter exemplify, respectively, these two types. While Sloane’s museum, located in his home, was extensive and organized, containing natural history specimens, gems and antiquities, books and manuscripts, Salter’s coffee house museum brimmed with as many “curiosities” as “specimens.” The Salter holdings included: “the Queen of Sheba’s Fan and Cordial Bottle, Robinson Crusoe’s and his Man Friday’s shirt, the Four Evangelists cut on a Cherry Stone,” etc. While the British Museum’s origins were in Sloane’s museum, one intended for education rather than as a “cabinet of curiosities,” the two identities were not easily separated; even Sloane’s museum contained items of dubious

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42 Ibid.
44 Edward Miller, That Noble Cabinet – A History of the British Museum (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1974), 26. Salter may have been one of Sloane’s former servants, according to Miller.
A writer in 1850 recalls the Museum as it was in the early nineteenth century:

So many of our readers will remember the British Museum in its primitive state, that we may pass by the heavy porte-cochère of the prison-like exterior, the begrimed painted staircase and ceilings of the interior, the admired disorder of fish, flesh and fowl, set out – so said the frondeurs – less to instruct than to amuse by a raree-show of varieties of cats and mice, rats and rabbits, blue butterflies, black beetles, green parrots, Robin Red-breasts, and ‘small deer.’ Suffice it to say that the edifice itself had been planned for a private residence, not for a public repository; and chance, not design, presided over this cradle for the infant Museum.

This description aligns the Museum closely with a cabinet of curiosities, a Wunderkammer, rather than an institution for the purpose of cultivation. Two factors moved the Museum beyond the Wunderkammer identity. First, the quality of the donations that arrived at the turn of the century was of a higher caliber, particularly in the field of sculpture with the Townley and Elgin collections. Practically, these sculptures were useful as models for artists and architects, but they were also seen to serve a higher social purpose of cultivation; after all, sculpture was visually accessible to all, irrespective of educational level. The next step was the work supervised by Sir Joseph Banks: scientist, Trustee, and donor to the Museum. He and Dr. George Shaw, Keeper of the Natural History Department, purged the collection of the various “monsters in bottles” and items of highly doubtful provenance or in advanced state of decay. These were the types of items described as belonging to the Museum’s “raree-show.”

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45 Ibid., 100.
46 Quarterly Review, “Report from the Select Committee on the Condition, Management, and Affairs of the British Museum, together with the Minutes of Evidence.” 88,175 (1850: Dec.), 141. Based on the description, particularly of the painted staircase and ceilings, this dates to when the Museum was still in Montague House.
47 As late as 1807, the Department of Natural History was technically termed the Department of Natural History and Curiosities. Miller, Noble Cabinet, 105-106.
48 Ibid.
saw these “cremations” as necessary, but the neighborhood found the dust obnoxious and other scientists believed his efforts to be overzealous. In any event, the Natural History Department “lost its reputation as a place where obscure natural curiosities might be deposited and became the truly scientific department it was to remain.”

This will be the most time I spend discussing the evolution of the Museum as a whole; our concern is with its nucleic library. However, the change in the Natural History Department, from an oversized reliquary to a scientific institution, was integral to the entire Museum’s reputation as a respectable center of learning. Visitors were intended to come to the British Museum with an open mind, ready to soak in the good influences of seeing imperial spoils and homegrown genius displayed in glazed cases and on marble pedestals. In addition, the education of the masses also became a matter of national pride.

The British Museum was not the only such institution in London; Jonah Siegel calls the nineteenth century a “museal age” partially because people were coming to value their national past and partially because it was an age of “emerging social and political force [for the] powerful mass public.” London’s population passed one million shortly after the turn of the century; the city had paved walkways leading to various attractions, and it had a growing, politically invested, increasingly literate middle class. All of these factors led to the confusing, sometimes threatening crowds mingling at will in the streets. With these growing crowds, the diffusion of culture to channel their

49 Miller, That Noble Cabinet, 110-115.
51 John Plotz, The Crowd – British Literature and Public Politics (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). Plotz discusses the “agglomerations” of people that led the “agglomerations” of people Plotz discusses can be physically symbolized by the patchwork, “aggregation” of holdings in the
persons and interests was necessary. The growth of museums, libraries and theaters served to entertain the people away from the negative influences of the public houses, as well as unite them in appreciation of their nation’s history. Institutions were used to socially manage the people through attempts at moral (and therefore law-abiding) improvement. Patrick Joyce contends that Victorian liberalism controlled the growing population through the use of freedom itself. While he is most interested in maps and censuses, he also addresses libraries and museums as enculturating, and therefore controlling, “free” spaces: “The processes of which I speak are evident too in the dispersal of the historical and cultural material within a field of knowledge embracing not only the statistical, but also a Victorian view of knowledge as crucially instrumental in shaping the self-culture of the person.”

Cultivation also served a nationalistic purpose; the English were falling behind in the arts and manufacturing of fine goods, particularly as compared to the French. While explaining his observations in France, Sir John Bowring, editor of Bentham’s posthumous publications, stated his opinions regarding the general culture of the French people. He held that the French were more artistically-minded because of their easy access to art and culture; in England, he claimed, one usually had to pay for the privilege, such as with the private museums and galleries. “What the [French] Government has done is to make art universally accessible; all collections of art, whether in painting, statuary, or engraving, in fact every thing which is likely to form the national taste, is

BM and the BML, which I discuss later. This was an era of gathering both haphazardly and, perhaps later, purposefully.

52 Patrick Joyce, Rule of Freedom: Liberalism and the Modern City. (London: Verso, 2003), 49. Here, the library and Museum work as dispensaries for self-sought knowledge.
opened to the people.” Bowring demands that England attend to the cultivation of its citizens, particularly as it is inconceivable that the population of France is in any way superior to that of England. Henceforth, the British Museum recreated itself to have two purposes: education and inspiration.

These two purposes, however, were not easily assimilated in the Library. Panizzi’s final point before the Select Commission in 1835 was that the “Museum should be managed with all possible liberality.” At this point, I will divide the next part of my argument along two lines, both of which tie to the phrase “possible liberality.” First, I will argue that due to the increased attention and funding given to the Library, it was able to create a national treasure of such value that its protection became nearly as important as its public utility. Second and following along the same line of reasoning, I maintain that this demand for protection, when taken alongside the institution's submerged aristocratic classism, led to complex and often admissions policies.

53 Extract from the Evidence of Dr. Bowring before the Select Committee of the House of Commons on the Silk Trade. (14 June 1832), 532. Included in Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, Papers, etc. 1832-1841. Collected by Sir Henry Ellis. This statement was included in the papers of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, of which Sir Henry Ellis, Principal Librarian of the British Museum, was a member.

54 Ironically, many of the most popular sculptural exhibits were those acquired by England after the Treaty of Alexandria with France in 1801. These Egyptian antiquities arrived in 1802. (Harris 29) Jonah Siegel comments that “objects tend to enter the museum when their world has been destroyed” – a fact that is particularly true in the case of these and the Elgin marbles. (Siegel 5) A study of the power networks that not only form the Museum, but also the individual objects and their methods of acquisition places the institution in a nebulous space. Jordanna Bailkin tries to pin some of this down in her study of the repatriation of the Irish Broighter Hoard. See her The Culture of Property. (University of Chicago Press, 2004).

4 PROTECTING CULTURAL PROPERTY

The British Museum Library Trustees and Officers were responsible for the designation of items, either purchased or donated, as either trash (such as the items “cremated”) or treasure. They controlled the books that were available to the public and were therefore the national mint for what Pierre Bourdieu and John Guillory have termed “cultural capital.” This capital was also “cultural property” as defined by Jordanna Bailkin, property that involved a complex relation between item, owner, and society.56 Ownership is further complicated when claimed by the “nation” as a whole, as it was with the Library.

As an example, consider the debate about the purchase of “rarities” for the Library, a somewhat subjectively defined category of items deemed valuable. Panizzi was especially concerned with the collection of such items for the library. Panizzi was rigorous with regard to the quality of books he purchased from auction and angered by the previous policy of the Museum to sell duplicate copies of books.57 Panizzi, in the aforementioned hearings not only wanted a “liberal” library, but he wanted a scholarly library. In one of his oft-quoted statements before the Select Committee, he says that,

> It is of less importance of the library of the British Museum to have common modern books, than to have rare, ephemeral, voluminous and costly publications, which cannot be found anywhere else, by persons not having access to great private collections. I want a poor student to have the same means of indulging his learned curiosity, of following his rational

56 Jordanna Bailkin, *Culture of Property*, 1.

57 On this point, he is most particular. Panizzi was careful to explain that numerous books sold as duplicates were, in fact, different editions, bindings, printings than the ones perceived as “duplicate.” At one point, he purchased back books sold decades earlier as a duplicate from the Library. See his testimony in the *Report from the Select Committee on the British Museum* (1836), 387-409.
pursuits, of consulting the same learned authorities, of fathoming the most intricate inquiry, as the richest man in the kingdom, as far as books go, and I contend that the Government is bound to give him the most liberal and unlimited assistance in this respect.58

If he was to defend his position on rare books, he had to be certain that he was working with a similar definition to the Trustees. Panizzi had precedent for his own ideas from Dr. Johnson in his advice to Sir Francis Barnard, King George III’s librarian. Johnson advises Barnard to buy things “of which the mere rarity makes the value” as well as to look for rare items in their country of origin. Barnard was to be particularly careful with the purchase of old books, “inquire with great caution, whether they are perfect. If the first edition, the loss of a leaf is not easily perceived.”59 There was also general understanding among bibliophiles concerning the idea of “rare” books since the eighteenth century trend of country house libraries going up for sale. By the end of the nineteenth century particularly, the avid collectors were often the nouveau riche looking to further justify their social standing through symbolic property, such as an impressive library, and the language of this hobby was more commonplace and generally understood. 60 The sales of country house collections and the developing mania made Panizzi’s efforts all the more important on a national viewpoint – to keep the rare books within the country. His purchasing work was now viewed in a protective spirit. However, both Panizzi and Winter Jones were operating on unsteady ground. Panizzi had declared that the Museum was not to be a cabinet of curiosities, yet he defended the need to buy unique pieces of


59 Dr. Samuel Johnson to Francis Barnard (May 28, 1768) Collected in Tracts on the British Museum, 80.

printing and binding history. He, the Trustees, and his fellow Keepers were defining what the nation would be able to consider worthwhile to own. They were creating their own concept of cultural property, a concept defended through claims of utility, nationalism, and duty.

Once the items came to the Library, they became part of a national trust to protect them. Acts of violence against the collections were punished increasingly severely and were viewed as anti-patriotic. Books, however, were expensive and could easily be slipped under one’s overcoat. Despite the outrage expressed in the periodicals regarding those who committed such crimes, they were fairly common. As early as 1779, John Brooke confessed to stealing from the Library. In 1806, Robert Dighton was convicted of stealing prints from both the Manuscript and Printed Book Departments. Two crimes in 1836 and 1837 respectively highlight the differences in punishment dependent on motivation. Robert Haish cut articles from books simply because he did not want to copy them; he was fined the value of the articles, £1, and barred from the room. Edgar Roberts on the other hand, stole 30 volumes and sold them, warranting transportation for seven years.61 The items thus stolen were easily traced, as they were stamped and pressmarked with the British Museum impression.62 Any bookseller found to have trafficked in a stolen book was liable for charges as well, if the sale was intentional. Often the booksellers were responsible for the charges brought, as they would inform the Museum authorities of anyone trying to sell such property. Samples of mutilated books were


62 Stolen books could not be confused with duplicate books that had been legally sold by the Library. Duplicated were stamped as such the very day that they were sold.
displayed outside the reading room in a case, with instructions not to remove or damage
any book in the Reading Room.\textsuperscript{63} In 1845 the “Act for the Better Protection of Works of
Art, and Scientific and Literary Collections” was passed, requiring any offender be
punished with a maximum of six months imprisonment and hard labor.\textsuperscript{64} Public pressure
to punish those who were found to have stolen must have reached a fairly high point,
because in 1916 \textit{Punch} published a cartoon depicting the hard labor sentence given to a
boy who simply breathed on the glass of one of the antiquities’ cases. The Museum was
unique in the fact that the nation was employed in protecting its contents more from its
own populace than from any outside threat (until the air raids of the twentieth century, in
any event).

During the Chartist uprising in 1848, despite any political affiliations on the part
of Panizzi and nearly all of the subordinate employees, the Museum was to be protected
against the demonstrators.\textsuperscript{65} Two hundred and fifty special constables were sworn in and
a watch kept until ten that night. The Museum was never threatened.\textsuperscript{66} However, the

\textsuperscript{63} Harris, 88-89. One of Harris’ most delicately relayed anecdotes regards the disappearance of
Haydn’s \textit{Dictionary of Dates}. Suspicions were raised regarding the fact that they may have disappeared
into the water closets, “…the pages were so roughly torn out that they were obviously not taken for the
information in them – Winter Jones speculated no further on what the missing leaves might have been used
for. The Trustees ordered that a notice should be displayed in the Reading Room asking readers to help
prevent such incidents. The next month they gave instructions that two books which had also been
mutilated should be put on display.” (Harris, \textit{The British Museum Library}, 283)

\textsuperscript{64} Cowtan, \textit{Memories}, 228.

\textsuperscript{65} Edward Edwards, self-made man and son of a bricklayer, refused to be sworn in as a special
constable. Panizzi and Edwards were already at loggerheads after Edwards’ report to the Special
Committee years earlier. He was aghast at Edwards’ refusal, “What! not defend the place from which you
get your living’ he declared. Edwards dismisses it in his journal, “Mr.Panizzi asked me if I was willing to
be sworn in as a special constable!” Edward Edwards, \textit{Diary}, April 4, 1828 as quoted in Miller, \textit{Noble
Cabinet}, 169-170.

\textsuperscript{66} Panizzi apparently enjoyed his role as master and commander of his own army. Perhaps this was
due to his time as an Italian Carbonari; he had a fiery temper and was ready for a battle. See Miller, \textit{Noble
Cabinet}, 167-172 for a wonderful description of the day’s events.
rising up in defense of something higher than politics was revealing. The Museum was protecting the national heritage, even if much of its contents were the creation of other countries rather than their own. The natural history collections contained specimens from around the world; the Library was proud of its extensive foreign language holdings (the £10,000 grant had been in place for three productive years now); and the Antiquities collections were known more for their imperial discoveries than for their English productions.

Protection of property for the sake of the nation in spite of the nation is part of Bailkin’s considerations as well. She looks to the Holbein portrait of Christina of Denmark that was being sold by its owner, the Duke of Norfolk. The painting had been on loan to the National Gallery for so long that most people were unaware that it was still privately owned. The Duke’s announcement outraged the nation, and Bailkin’s question is, why? The painting was not of an Englishwoman or by an English painter; Christina was not even strikingly beautiful. The arguments were illogical. Bailkin’s conclusion identifies the positioning of feminism within the sphere of masculinized museum history. What her argument makes clear is the need to see the combination of factors outside simple nationalism with regard to protecting cultural property. Therefore, when trying to understand the protection of the British Museum, we must look beyond (but not ignore) nationalism as well.

Library security was both a national and global aesthetic duty; the Library’s international importance was reflected in its collections, employees, and readers. The British Library could therefore be seen as reification of the imperial nature of Britain.

67 Jordanna Bailkin, The Culture of Property, 118-158.
Panizzi sought to have the best holdings of every country’s literature outside its country of origin, and he succeeded. Today, the marketing campaign for the Library still reflects this goal: “The World’s Knowledge” is plastered on the homepage. In addition, comments made regarding the belligerent Panizzi’s “foreignness,” the British Museum employed foreign officers and assistants throughout its history. Panizzi was the third “foreign” Principal Librarian, Matthew Maty (Dutch) and Joseph Planta (Swiss) having preceded him. Yet these men, Planta and Panizzi especially, were as fervent in their dedication to the Museum as any of the native Englishmen.

Richard Bentley, in 1697, first characterized the sense of a global duty with regard to the Library. He said that “‘Tis our publick interest and profit, to have the gentry of foreign nations acquainted with England, and have part of their education here.”

Bailkin redefines duty to property as stewardship rather than ownership. “In this tradition, the public interest in works of genius is grounded in duty – that is, our collective responsibility to future generations to protect these works…” Panizzi expressed this sense of stewardship mixed with nationalism and sheer belligerence when he quoted Nelson to the special constables in 1848: “England expects that every man will do his duty.” Of course, when no duty was needed and the regiments were found to have been more danger to the Library, with their smoking and muskets in the Manuscripts room, the excitement of the day seems anti-climactic, but the sentiment remains valid.


69 Bailkin, Culture of Property, 2. I note here that the BML is an institution founded on tradition and this tradition of stewardship is carried on even today in the efforts to digitize endangered collections across the world. Supported by the British Library, it is called the Endangered Archives Project, sponsored by Arcadia.
In addition, the affection with which many readers held and still hold the British Museum and the Reading Rooms links to something apart from solely national pride. Scholars leaned toward the Round Reading Room with a sense of belonging. It serves as a landmark to any academician or autodidact, if only because his or her favorite author probably studied there or has a manuscript preserved there. The institution is revered as a safe hold for the future, and the practice of admitting all legitimate scholars makes it uniquely welcoming in a way many national institutions are not. The British Museum Library sought to be recognized and utilized by foreigners, a fact that made its protection as much a global as an English duty.

As an extension of this duty to protect, I return to my earlier quotation regarding “possible liberality,” as the idea pertains to admission. The Library was the property of the nation and should therefore have been available to the citizens of that nation. However, the books were to be protected, particularly from those people who would harm them. The best way to ensure this protection was to only allow in those people who were most in need of the resources provided. Even the most basic limitation of literacy meant that many people were not a permitted access. As the holdings of the Library increased, so did the number of people seeking access, and the admissions standards had to evolve as well. I will contrast these standards with those of the larger Museum and with other libraries.

First, I will analyze the applicability of the word public as it applies to admissions. When compared with the non-exclusive policies of the larger British Museum and the Free Public Libraries, the users of the British Museum Library do not constitute a universal type of public. Nor does Habermas’ definition completely align, as
it was limited to the bourgeoisie and excluded the lower-class autodidacts and upper-class aristocrats that used the Library. What I propose is that the Library admissions patterns illustrate an “increasingly inclusive society.” Here I rely on Pam Morris, who uses the term “inclusive society” because it “aims to allow conceptual space for the whole spectrum of Victorian people’s imagining that brought about the transformed view of social relations.” However, she posits her inclusive society as an imagined entity. Valuable though her reconsideration is, the example of the British Museum Library shows the concrete rather than “imagined” genesis of an inclusive sphere. The inclusive society was continuously emergent, always verging on existence. “Imagined” implies, as Morris says “the always-uncompleted process of collectivity” but not necessarily the progressive aspect of it. The inclusive society increasingly overlaid the exclusive society with thin tiers of changed regulations and increased opportunities. Therefore, I prefer to leave the term “inclusive society” modified by such qualifiers as “developing” or “evolving.”

There were two main distinctions between the Library and the Museum. First, those in the Museum were allowed to speak. The presence of open speech connects to Habermas’ theories of the public sphere as being dependent on discourse. His public sphere is “made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state.” The Library, on the other hand, offers a medium through which one can extend the Habermasian model; the Library possesses many of the aspects he addresses – discourse, reason, the role of the press, and social change.

71 Habermas, *Structural Transformation*, 176
However, other aspects, such as the rule of silence, reconfigure the model. While the Library and the Reading Room are gathering places for private individuals together as a public, the rule of silence precludes the discourse that Habermas values. A discourse took place regarding the library, but not within it, as the readers were asked to keep speaking to a minimum. There are descriptions of conversations taking place, but often the narrator, annoyed at the interruption in his study, silenced the interlocutors. In fact, in 1861 a blind scholar was not allowed to use the Reading Room because his aide would have to read to him aloud; he was insistent and Panizzi suggested a separate space be set aside for his use instead; the main Reading Room was not an option. Discourse would not be officially sanctioned within the Room for any reason. The Library, related but not contained within the public sphere, therefore operated as a topic of public discourse, a resource for social change, and a unique forum for the inclusive society.

The second distinction hinges on the need to protect the works in the Library, which are handled on a daily basis, versus the untouchable items in the Museum. The Library, for its own protection and purpose, therefore limited the access to those who would, hopefully, know how to use books properly and to the best effect. The Reading Rooms were constructed so that scholars would have access, without being disturbed by the Museum visitors. However, “For nearly the first hundred years the Reading Room of the British Museum was certainly not a ‘popular’ institution, the space was very limited, and it was regarded by the officials and the public as a place administered by scholars for scholars.” Originally, in 1758, anyone wanting to access the books had to have

permission from the Board of Trustees. The Library never allowed books or manuscripts
to leave the facility, unless required for a government hearing.74 In 1760, at a Trustees’
meeting, the role of the library with regard to the greater Museum is outlined: “the liberty
of studying in the Museum is the part of this Institution from which the Publick is like to
reap the greatest benefit; and that therefore, admission into the Reading Room should be
made as convenient as possible.”75 Why did they acknowledge the Library as the hub of
the Museum?

There could have been a number of reasons. First, the natural history collections,
as previously described, were disorganized and more “curiosity” than educative. Second,
as Jevons has said, this library was to be a source, in one way or another, of much of the
literature and scholarship produced in nineteenth century England, a fact established
before the turn of the century. Within its first forty years, Thomas Gray, James Boswell,
Edmund Burke, David Hume, Catherine Macaulay, and Samuel Johnson, among others,
all applied for and received readers’ tickets. By the time Jevons wrote, the list included
nearly every leading literary, political, philosophical, and historical light of the age.

Related to the demand for admission was the fact that the Library was the only
department that was self-regenerating; it was the cultural factory of the nation.
Washington Irving, who describes the poor writers that intellectually abuse the Library,
not simply the leading names of the time, characterizes this power. “I have often
wondered at the extreme fecundity of the press” his narrator begins in “The Art of Book-
Making,” a segment of The Sketchbook of Geoffrey Crayon. Seeing the “manufactory” of

74 Ibid., 21-22. Even then, a representative of the BM would accompany the requested item,
returning with it at the end of the proceedings.

75 Ibid., 30.
the Reading Room, at that time still located in Montague House, disillusions him.\footnote{At the time of composition, Irving was touring England during what became a seventeen-year stay, and came to know well other frequenters of the reading rooms, particularly Sir Walter Scott. Jacqueline Steck, Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 73: American Magazine Journalists 1741-1850, Ed. by Sam G. Riley (Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University: Bruccoli Clark Layman, 1988), 197-206.} He describes the old reading rooms, complete with “a great number of black-looking portraits of ancient authors.”\footnote{Washington Irving, The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Chaucer, (New York: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1906), 122-129.} The dark shapes of the readers and their mysterious ability to conjure books through slips of paper and ringing of a bell, made them appear “a body of magi, deeply engaged in the study of occult sciences.” There is a sense of magic, ineffable industry, and deep shelter.

The spell is broken when he discovers where he is, in “the reading-room of the great British Library – an immense collection of volumes of all ages and languages, many of which are now forgotten, and most of which are seldom read….” At this point, in the second decade of the nineteenth century, he is touching on one of the paradoxes of the Library: known, yet perceived as unused at the same time. Poorly funded, it became a haven simply for the over-specialized scholar. Other writers mention that the researchers in the reading room were rescuing forgotten knowledge, but not to the advantage of modernity. Rather, these researchers further emphasized the perceived creative desolation of the contemporary writers. Among other figures was a “getter-up of miscellaneous works” gathering all of the wisdom he will reprint in collections of aphorisms. There are also clergymen copying old sermons wholesale. The readers are snitching and snatching from different books, recreating and reviving them. Crayon soon falls to sleep and has a dream, which, like other dreams in Irving’s stories, is more revelatory about reality than
any waking observance. The distinguished personages come down from their paintings and being ripping the “stolen clothes” from the pilfering readers of today. They reclaim their misquoted works and leave the thieves in tatters. Crayon awakens and is ejected from this “literary ‘preserve’, subject to game-laws, [that] no one must presume to hunt [without] a special license and permission.” He quickly leaves, fearing the wrath of a “whole pack of authors let loose upon me.”

Still, the recognition of the library’s centrality may have been due to the high demand for readers’ tickets both by scholars and foreign researchers. After all, at the same meeting the Trustees transferred the power to approve the tickets to the Principal Librarian when there was not a quorum of Trustees (which was often) or no upcoming meeting. However, liberality of admissions was again restricted at the turn of the nineteenth century during war time, an unfortunate change since more readers’ tickets were requested by foreigners seeking asylum in Great Britain. The atmosphere of the whole institution was tense; guards were stationed at the main entrances in order to protect against any mob activity. In 1806, the Trustees instituted a new rule: every potential reader must accompany his application with a letter from a reference of high standing. In fact, only the people of highest standing, a Trustee or an Officer of the Museum, could recommend a reader until as late as 1814. Without such a reference, a

78 Ibid., 127-128.

79 Ibid., 129. Crayon does give some credit to a few authors who, in his dream, “only helped themselves to gem or so, which sparkled among their own ornaments, without eclipsing them” and others who simply examined the “costumes of the old writers, merely to imbibe their principles of taste.” Jevons says the Reading Room is “the national literary laboratory, whence no small part of the literature of the country directly or indirectly draws its material and inspiration.” Irving, The Sketch-book, 127; Jevons, Methods of Social Reform, 43.

80 Harris, The British Museum Library, 55.
reader receives a letter expressing regret at not being able to allow the applicant admission:

The Principal Librarian cannot take the recommendations of parties unknown to him or not in ostensible official positions. The recommendations of Peers of the Realm, Members of Parliament, Judges, Queen’s Counsels, Aldermen of London, Rectors of parishes in London, eminent physicians and surgeons, and heads of public offices are considered satisfactory.  

These recommendations were not foolproof. While they should have ensured that the reader was a serious scholar, they could just as easily serve as proof that the reader simply had well-placed friends. Plus, there would be scholars who, not knowing any recommender of requisite standing, could not gain, or thought they could not gain, a ticket. Jevons saw the difficulty with which the Trustees and Officers had to grapple regarding admissions:

The privileges of the reading-room are to some extent abused by loungers, students reading the commonest textbooks, or others who like the soft seats and rather warm atmosphere; but it is impossible to draw the line with perfect accuracy. If any change is to be made, more restriction rather than more freedom of entry to the Museum Library is desirable.

The compromise was to slowly open admissions to a broader range of people, an increasingly inclusive society. By 1856, the recommendation for admission need not be by such a notable personage, a head of household was sufficient. Even under the strict admissions standards, attendance in the older, less spacious reading rooms averaged 230 per day between 1837-1846. The number may have been higher had space allowed, as

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81 Barwick, The Reading Room, 87.
82 Jevons, Methods of Social Reform, 43.
83 Barwick, The Reading Room, 98.
84 Harris, The British Museum Library, 158.
evidenced by the sharp rise in tickets issued after the construction of the Round Reading Room.

If any one building can represent the age in which it was built, that structure is the Round Reading Room at the center of the British Museum. By virtue of its placement, building materials, and arrangement, the new Reading Room was the product of an industrial, practical, yet modern age. Shortly after the Royal Commission of 1848-1849, while the limelight was still shining brightly on the British Museum, Panizzi had pressed for this new space. He sent numerous reports to the Board and stopped his purchase grant because he was stacking books on the floor for lack of shelf space. The debate stalled at the cost of buying more property but gained new impetus when Panizzi proposed building within the quadrangle of the existing Museum. The resultant Round Reading Room was an architectural wonder, as much for the beauty of the dome as for the ingenuity of the stacks surrounding it. The dome, nationally praised for being second in size only to the Pantheon, was lit with skylights and windows, and constructed out of iron arches. The stacks were iron as well and spiraled out from the center room in two stories, hidden behind the interior bookcases. They provided miles of needed shelf space. Within the room itself, heated water pipes ran along the base as warming footrests. There was enough room for 350 readers, each with his or her own large desk. The center of the Reading Room held a desk for the Librarians and attendants, with the shelves for the catalog inscribing concentric circles moving away from this center.

The impressive architecture of the Room and its influence on the readers has been depicted in literature since the original construction. For example, Lodge’s protagonist ends up on one of the high gallery walkways and admires the organization: “The
disposition of the furniture, which at ground level created the effect of an irritating maze, now took on the beauty of an abstract geometrical relief – balanced, but just complicated enough to please and interest the eye.”85 The eye is particularly pleased as it looks at a reflection of its own iris below it. The shelves around the base of the interior of the room, above which Adam is standing, held general reference volumes that the readers were allowed to access without tickets. Every effort had been made to ensure fireproofing and protection for the books as well as comfort for the readers. All “possible liberality” had been exercised. The contemporary periodicals were often praising the space, such as in The *Leisure Hour* in 1857: “Within the space of little more than two years there has risen …the largest circular-domed edifice in the whole world [aside from the Pantheon] – a building which men of science will com from far to see, and which may be the admiration of generations yet unborn” (See Figure 2). 86

![Figure 2: The Reading Room under construction.](image)

The opening of the room was another occasion upon which the past and future of the room, exclusivity and inclusivity, were delicately balanced. For example, the

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86 “New Reading-Room at the British Museum,” *The Leisure Hour* (1857), 519.
aristocrats, notable personages, Trustees and Officers were invited to the May 6th, 1858 opening day breakfast party hosted by Panizzi in the room itself. However, the overlap of the two spheres took place when the Queen and Royal Consort came to visit weeks later. They entered through the King’s Library rather than the main entrance so as not to disturb the readers who were now allowed access. “Accordingly,” wrote the Times, "their presence was scarcely noticed, perhaps by not more than three or four of the readers.”

Even the Royal Family was required to respect the rule of silence. They declared themselves “gratified” by the beauty, dimensions, and accommodations of the room. The general public was originally admitted to see the room only for a couple of days, but the demand was so high that the room was opened to them from the 8th to the 16th of May.

Eventually, they would be permitted access during certain hours of the day during which they would not disturb the readers.

Finally, the Reading Room had become as open a space as practically possible. Even those not able or desirous of reading were able to see the literature of their and other countries being written. The Library was now as much the property of the larger nation as it had once been a reflection of aristocratic philanthropy. John Winter Jones comments a few years later:

A great change had come over the frequenters of the British Museum library. In former years, when admission was more formal, and the library comparatively poor, readers were content with the books they found there, but as admission became more easy and the number of students increased, they made their demands, not with reference to the contents of the library, but to their own wants. They were right in so doing – the public library of Great Britain ought (as far as such a term can be used with propriety) to be

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88 Cowtan, Memories of the British Museum, 220.
complete, and this principle, strongly urged by Mr. Panizzi, was fully
admitted by the Trustees.89

The Round Reading Room was the culmination and beginning of this change. It solved
many of the problems, but it also made the importance of the readers all the more explicit
to the Trustees and the nation. When, in 1860, another Select Commission was called to
decide whether or not to split the Natural History collections off into a separate building,
the concern was not money as much as it was accessibility. Repeatedly, the
Commissioners ask questions such as, “Do many of the lower classes coming from the
country visit the Museum for the purpose of examining the collections of natural
history?” and “Have you many intelligent persons of the working classes, who come to
examine the plants in the herbarium?”90 In 1834, Ellis had claimed that because they had
decided to have the Museum open on Saturdays, there were more readers and some were
less respectable.91 Thirty years later the Commissioners were ensuring that more people
of all classes (many of whom Ellis would not have considered respectable) were able to
access the Museum.92 Not only had the visitors gained a voice in the public sphere, but
they were also seconded by some of the holders of public office and members of the
aristocracy.


90 Report from the Select Committee on the British Museum (Ordered by the House of Commons London, 1860) 63,101. As a sidenote, the answer to the first question was “very many” and the answer to the second question was “No.”

91 Harris, The British Museum Library, 93.

92 Admittedly, they often inserted the caveat of the “intelligent” working man, but the sentiment was certainly more open than Ellis’ fear of “dockworkers and their girls” visiting in the 1835 Report.
Morris and Poovey both attend to the aggregate nature of their “social bodies” and “imagined inclusive societies” for good reason: they are concerned with “heterogeneity and inclusiveness—with the instabilities of differences within sameness…differences remain crucial.”93 As a national organization, the British Museum was an aggregate *par excellence*. Unlike similar continental museums, the British Museum combined an array of different collections in one building with one administration, all stemming from the original haphazard collections. Since Sloane collected natural history specimens, gems, art, manuscripts and printed books, so did the British Museum. “No other national library of any size was part of a larger museum complex.”94 Today, this complex has grown and divided exponentially. Not only is the Library now at St. Pancras, its holdings are stored in buildings across London. Natural History was split from the Antiquities, and the decorative arts (among other collections) are in the Victoria & Albert Museum.95 The original Museum gathered all of these under one roof, leading to dissension among the Keepers competing for funding, as well as creating an internal divide in the institution itself.

93 Ibid., 6
95 The Victoria & Albert was originally called the South Kensington Museum. The division of the British Museum after the 1860s was as controversial as any other discussion of the institution(s).
5  EMPOWERED OGLING: READERS IN THE ROOM

Thus far, we have identified the history of the British Museum Library and Reading Room as it relates to the broader history of England socially and politically. However, perhaps the most integral part of the Room was its day to day operation, how it was experienced by the readers within it. These experiences, impacted and conditioned by the aforementioned frameworks of power and influence, are what is usually expressed in literature related to the Reading Room. Writers, journalists and artists repeatedly turned to the Library for not only print resources, but also for the human contact, the unique ambiance created by the aggregates of disparate people. Once within the Reading Room, particularly the Round Reading Room, the senses were overwhelmed, not simply by the various readers, but also by the sheer immensity of the space and the impressiveness of the books surrounding the readers.

The bodily experience of the Reading Room is mentioned repeatedly in the records of the Library and in literature. Up until the turn of the nineteenth century, changes to the library and Reading Room were minimal in general, but those that did exist were often for the comfort of the Readers as a result of their complaints. The movement from one reading room to another was more often at the request of the patrons. The Round Reading Room was actually the seventh in the history of the British Museum. Complaints against the previous rooms (and against the Round Reading Room as well, in time) were often somatic or aural, as would be expected from people spending hours in
one space, silent, concentrating, and often without moving. For example, in 1809, readers complained of noisy Museum visitors permitted to see the display space adjoining the Montague House reading rooms. The connecting door was promptly soundproofed with green baize.\textsuperscript{96} In 1819 a reader named Hellyer complained that the room was so cold, he sustained frostbite.\textsuperscript{97} In 1827, the Readers were accommodated in the first rooms built specifically for their use; attendance rose steadily. In 1832 water closets were added, but the ventilation was insufficient and the smell was terrible. (The smell of the reading room remained a contentious matter for the next twenty years.) During the Royal Commission hearings of 1848, Thomas Carlyle’s complaints were as much about the unpleasantness of being in close confines with such diverse people as they were about the infamously unwieldy and out-of-date catalog.\textsuperscript{98}

Carlyle was angry because Panizzi had not granted him a separate space in which to do his research. When called before the Royal Commission, he groused about the ventilation, atmosphere, noise, space, being jostled by other readers, the books taking too long to arrive, the complexity of the catalogue system, and particularly the quality of the other readers. He claimed to be “thin-skinned” and unable to work in such conditions. He also said that the mentally deficient were sent to the Reading Room when their relatives wished to do errands in town. “He did not enjoy being treated on a level with imbeciles when Macaulay and other privileged trustees were admitted to the silence of the King’s

\textsuperscript{96} Harris, \textit{The British Museum Library}, 50-53.

\textsuperscript{97} Ibid.

Library.” He also complained of the sneezing and coughing of those around him. All these horrible conditions combined to produce his inevitable “Museum headache.”

Similarly, another reader, Turner, complained of a “flea” he swore inhabited only the Museum to torture the readers. Panizzi withstood the volley of complaints, defending both his catalogue system and refusal to accommodate Carlyle.

Discomfort had essentially two causes and two results. Physical unease was caused by poor conditions, which were then remedied by new construction or conveniences. Social discomfort, on the other hand, was caused by the close proximity of people who would probably never associate outside the Reading Room. While the comfort of the readers was a great concern for the Trustees, even the most comfortable chairs and warmest atmosphere could not always force the reader to focus only on his books. However, the room was designed to both inspire the readers both by providing necessary resources and by exhibiting in a forceful, visual way the achievability of their literary goals. Ansell in E.M. Forster’s The Longest Journey retreats to the Reading Room:

In that book-encircled space he always could find peace…There he knew that his life was not ignoble. It was worth while to grow old and dusty

99 Ibid.

100 In light of the difficulties of the British Museum Reading Room, Carlyle organized the London Library, the topic of Nowell-Smith’s article. This was a lending library, which Carlyle preferred, as he could read the works at his leisure at home. Unfortunately, any rare works he needed were still only to be had at the Museum.

101 The ability of the readers to look at each other defeats the common identification of the Reading Room with Foucault’s panopticon. The panopticon presupposes that all of the power emanates from an unseen center. The librarian of the room was often too distracted to properly survey the readers, as evidenced by the problems with theft mutilation of books. While the organization of the room makes the model tempting, it is simply unsupported by the actual facts. Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish – The Birth of the Prison. Trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 195-230; Alistair Black, “The Library as Clinic: A Foucauldian Interpretation of British Public Library Attitudes to Social and Physical Disease, ca. 1850-1950” Libraries & Culture. Vo. 40, No.3, (2005), 1.
seeking for truth though truth is unattainable, restating questions that have 
been stated at the beginning of the world. Failure would await him, but not 
disillusionment. It was worth while reading books, and writing a book or 
two which few would read, and no one, perhaps, endorse.102

The defining visual aspect of the Reading Room was continuity; even the backs of the 
doors leading to the stacks were carefully covered in false spines; they disappeared into 
the surroundings. The books and dome also served to muffle the sounds – any minor 
discussion or movement was lost in the space or absorbed by the books themselves, 
reversing the perceived power structure of the books-reader relationship. The books 
protected and absorbed the readers’ words at the same time that the readers took 
knowledge from them. Also, the silence of the room served as a retreat from the 
“everlasting din of trade and commerce.”103

The habit of mental and visual wandering must 
have been common to many of the readers. Literature 
about the room either mentions the space as a resource 
where a character goes to investigate (such as Sherlock 
Holmes, who lived just down the street) or uses the room 
as a scene in which to make a character sketch. The most 
popular sketches of this type were Dickens’s *Sketches by 
Boz* (1836) and Washington Irving’s *The Sketch-Book of 
Geoffrey Crayon* (1819), but there were also numerous

Because of the copyright deposit, all books published in England would eventually arrive in the Library, 
irrespective of quality.

103  W.I. Bicknell, “The British Museum” in *Illustrated London; or, A Series of Views in the British 
Metropolis and Its Vicinity*” (London: E.T. Brain, 1847) reprinted in Siegel, *Emergence of the Modern 
character sketches in nineteenth-century periodicals, as well as cartoons and drawings, such as those by G. Lawson.\textsuperscript{104} Such literary and artistic depictions are evidence of the importance of the silent, yet communicative gaze. As the only means of interpersonal interaction, the gaze was a means through which the gazer could exert power on the oblivious object.

By “power,” I mean the manner by which gazers created narratives and identities for the other readers. Lawson names the readers he sketches, Dickens analyzes the “shabby genteel” man across the desk from him. The relationship is related the one typified by George Bernard Shaw in \textit{Pygmalion}. Higgins defines people geographically and socially based primarily on their speech, a library observer creates an identity for the subject based on numerous classifying characteristics, but \textit{not} speech.\textsuperscript{105} For example, Dickens’s Boz closely watches the clothing of the shabby-genteel man, its momentary improvement and then tragic destruction in order to understand the man’s embarrassment of his own poverty. Bakhtin examines these visual interactions more

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{Figure_4.png}
\caption{G. Lawson, "A Scholar," circa 1888}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{104} Two works which deviate from these patterns are: Max Beerbohm’s “Enoch Soames,” told from the viewpoint of a “character” and David Lodge’s \textit{The British Museum is Falling Down} because the majority of the action takes place within the British Museum and Library. Further knowledge about the artist Lawson is uncertain, but his sketches are preserved in the \textit{Dictionary of British Book Illustrators and Caricaturists, 1800-1914} including “A Change to Lighter Literature” and “A Scholar”, © Trustees of the British Museum, (1888).

\textsuperscript{105} George Bernard Shaw so appreciated his time spent in the Reading Room that he donated his library and the rights to some of his works, \textit{Pygmalion} included, to the institution. (Harris, \textit{The British Museum Library}, 592-593.)
closely, emphasizing the role of vision and voice in order to develop intersubjectivity. Esther Pereen interprets his work in a way that explains the relations between readers in the Room. “The subject emerges wrapped in the other’s consciousness, named and delineated only through the other’s voice and vision, but because of the ongoing nature of intersubjective relations, there is no solidification into an enduring state of selfsameness.” One reader creates a story for another reader simply from the information he or she gathers visually.

As a result of the limited information that a viewer can gather from such relatively unsubstantiated observation, the identity created for the object of the gaze can be misleading. Ernest Dowson, the Decadent poet, writes to Arthur Moore in 1889 regarding a “character” Moore has seen in the Reading Room, a palmist whom they call the “Vicious Camel.” He mentions her again a year later, having seen her in the room himself, conversing with Herbert Williams. He expresses surprise in his letter to Moore, having found out from Williams that the Camel is none other than the niece of T.P. O’Connor, the Irish Journalist and MP. His surprise is the key; he and Moore have created the character of the Camel and are discomfited when they discover her true identity.

The gaze could be disconcerting, not only when it leads to incorrect suppositions, but also when it is unexpectedly returned, when one is “found out.” This was particularly true for women in the Room. The Room was a public place in which men and women

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were on an equal standing and could have equal access to intellectual resources. Until the new Reading Room was built in 1858 with its special section for women, there was no distinction between the genders. Even after the desks were so designated, women were free to sit outside of them. Ruth Hoberman describes the ways in which women used the space, with particular attention to Virginia Woolf. Woolf senses the development of exclusivity in the favor of men when a band of male names was added just below the dome at the turn of the twentieth century. The golden names inscribed around the Reading Room’s dome recreated the space as one for men, only permitting women. Regarding the gaze, Hoberman is particularly insightful with regard to the visual presence of women in the room. The number of women in the Reading Room was small enough that women there were represented regularly in literature and periodicals as something of an oddity. They are often “typed” – the serious writer, the lady novelist, the giggling girl:

Many of the ladies who visit the reading-room, however, are conscientious workers, and are easily to be distinguished, not alone by their spectacles. Others, who are apparently amateurs suffering from a literary craze, are to be recognized by their aesthetic costumes and towzled hair.

Here, the appearance of the women is what characterizes them; they are defined by their spectacles, costumes and hair. The other characteristics, which prove them to be “conscientious workers,” are glossed over. Hoberman states that the women often intentionally projected their images to the rest of the room; it became a stage upon which they could self-create, they engaged in what Pereen/Bakhtin classify as “spectacle.”

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Their presence was both “moralizing” and “distracting.” A writer in The Times comments on their disconcerting influences, especially as they move beyond the boundaries of the “ladies only” section:

[They] mingle with us male students to our very great discomfort, for they gossip not a little, and flirt and ogle a good deal. I do not think, speaking both as a literary man and a ‘paterfamilias,’ that it is a desirable thing that young ladies should frequent the Museum at all as readers.111

This writer seems unappreciative of the opposite claim: that the female readers exert a “moralizing” influence. In addition, the writer’s self-understanding as head of a family and therefore keeper of the proper conduct of women is undermined by the fact that the young ladies easily distract him. The offenses they have committed—gossiping and “flirting”—are mild and have been committed by numerous young men in the past. In fact, the list of offenses by young men stretches far longer: there existed a black book of all the people expelled from the room with reasons ranging from “strange behaviour at King’s Lynn” and “using a reader’s ticket as a handkerchief,” playing chess, or smoking in the water closets.112 Fighting was also commonly listed, along with bragging and unseemliness. One pugilist argued that, as a real writer, he shouldn’t be expelled simply for fighting with a hack journalist.113 Young men were specifically singled out by Ellis in 1836; they were no longer allowed to read “French novels” without special permission,

110 Pereen, Intersubjectivities, 74-75


112 Marjorie Caygill, The British Museum Reading Room (Published for the Trustees of the British Museum, 2000), 23. Also, Harris, The British Museum Library, 286-7.

113 Regarding the writers in particular, this is a good example of the difficulty in cross-class aggregation in the Reading Room. More broadly, the librarians were as much keepers of morality as women; the librarians would keep a close watch on the newspapers for readers who had been in trouble so that they could strike their ticket. One assumes that Oscar Wilde’s name would be found in the book as he was barred from the Museum in 1895 following his imprisonment for homosexual practices. Caygill, The British Museum Reading Room (appendix). Harris The British Museum Library, 92, 230.
this idea was renewed by Panizzi in the 1840s when he accused R.H. O’Byrne of immoral conduct for reading the *Memoirs of le Chevalier Faubles*. As for simple distraction, a periodical writer of the previous decade complained of three young men who disturbed his study with their loud ways and disrespect for the books and personal space.\(^{114}\) With all of these problems regarding men, women’s “distracting” presence pales in comparison. The problem with the women seems, as Hoberman points out, to be their femininity, particularly as they refuse to contain it within their “ladies only” section; they insist upon placing it in the center of the male areas, crowing the men, distracting the men. While Hoberman does not address the fact in her article, the women (along with every other reader) are guilty of the “gaze.” In the article, they “ogle”; they dare to return the looks of the men (including this “paterfamilias”).\(^{115}\) Perhaps this is in contrast to the readers with properly downcast and studious eyes, particularly appropriate to women.

Consideration of the gaze reorients the conception of a community within the reading room. Early in the century, readers were more likely to know each other outside the room. The admissions qualifications meant that many of them would have been recommended by the same limited group of people. As the literate population grew and travel to the capital became easier, the room was made larger and admissions more “liberal.” Increased holdings meant that the resources appealed to a broader variety of people. The sense of a community was less dependent on knowledge of each other outside the library. Regular readers came to know each other by *sight*, if not by name. The readers valued this nameless recognition; they came to feel at home in their

\(^{114}\) *Bentley’s Miscellany*, “The Reading-room of the British Museum,” 32 (1852), 528

\(^{115}\) This is all the more ironic when read against Lodge’s feminized description of the room itself. What Woolf describes as a massive, masculine forehead, Lodge sees as an intellectual womb.
anonymity. The character of Jasper in Gissing’s *New Grub Street*, for example, goes home to visit his family and recognizes the Yules from the “valley of the shadow of books,” readers’ term for the Reading Room. However, their social connection must be awkward, since it can no longer be based on the same security of polite silence. Jasper recreates the community of recognition immediately: “‘I have seen you several times, Miss Yule,’ he said in a friendly way, ‘though without knowing your name. It was under the great dome.’ She laughed, readily understanding his phrase.”116 They speak a select language, one that excludes the Milvain women, but puts Marian Yule at her ease. The community has been recreated, if awkwardly. Jasper contemplate whether he wants to “know” the Yules when he returns to town, despite the fact that he has known them for more than a year as fellow readers.

This recreation of a new community within the agglomeration of many different external communities recalls historical points offered in Benedict Anderson’s work. While earlier I rejected Morris’ use of his term “imagined” to describe the people permitted access to the Reading Room, here I embrace it to describe the community once they are in the space.117 I realize the fluidity of these terms, but in describing the many layers of power intersecting the Reading Room, the terms must be allowed some flexibility. Where the actual demography of the room may have been an increasingly inclusive sphere, the community formed between readers was one based on the imagined

117 I am particularly focused on Anderson’s contention that the artefact of nationality was the result of a mixing of historical forces that, once combined, could be transposed into “a great variety of social terrains, to merge and be merged with a correspondingly wide variety of political and ideological constellations. I will also attempt to show why these particular cultural artefacts have aroused such deep attachments.” I hold that the Reading Room became such a cultural artefact, but one that was able to move beyond the simple affiliation of nationalism, as mentioned earlier, into a more global sense of duty and respect. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 2nd ed. (New York: Verso, 2006), 4.
character of the observed individual, generally without any real confirmation from that character him or herself, beyond what could be observed. As in Jasper’s case, this could lead to a confusing internal division when these characters met in another social setting. Without books and a desk in front of them, they become nearly unrecognizable.
6 CONCLUSION

The second half of the nineteenth century saw the division of the Museum into separate buildings, but the overarching mission of the Museum was complete by 1860. The Library was to be a resource for the serious scholar, to provide the best and rarest works available while simultaneously preserving them for the future. It would always carry the aristocratic identity of its founders in the names of its collections, but the entire nation had now claimed ownership of it as evidence by the varied patrons of the Reading Room.

One of the first readers in the Library was Thomas Gray, the poet. While he appreciated the resource and enjoyed the atmosphere, Gray could not envision the future of the Museum. “I find that they printed one thousand copies of the Harleian Catalogue, and sold fourscore: that they have £900 a-year income, and spend £1,300, and that they are building apartments for the under-keepers, so I expect in winter to see the collection advertised and set to auction.”118 Yet, a century later, in Max Beerbohm’s “Enoch Soames,” the Library has taken on a reputation of solidity, as though it had always been and would always be there. The British Museum Library has such prestige of name that the doomed title character sells his soul simply to see his name recorded in the catalogue a hundred years in the future:

118 Cowtan, Memories, 194-195.
A dead man can’t read the books that are written about him. A hundred years hence! Think of it! If I could come back to life then – just for a few hours – to go to the reading room, and read! Or better still: if I could go be projected, now, at this moment, into that future, into that reading-room, just for this one afternoon! I’d sell myself body and soul to the devil, for that! Think of the pages and pages in the catalogue: “SOAMES, ENOCH” endlessly – endless editions, commentaries, prolegomena, biographies’ …

Unlike the library itself, Soames was not in control of his own history. He finds himself as only a fictional character listed under Beerbohm’s name, but his faith in the Library is rewarded; the library and its Round Reading Room still existed in his 1997, in some form. As repository for the history and knowledge of “the world,” the British Museum Library held the most cultural capital globally. Like the monarchy, the British Museum Library, its catalogue and Reading Room, had become a complex, somewhat contradictory, Victorian institution. It finally justified the patriotic rhetoric of its foundation.

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