



Libraries and War

Tom LaFarge and Wendy Walker

This piece is excerpted from *Libraries and Danger*, which began as a talking tour and slide show of burned, bombed, chained, stolen, and rotting libraries around the world. The tour was led by Tom La Farge and Wendy Walker at Proteus Gowanus, an interdisciplinary gallery and reading room in Brooklyn, for its 2005-6 themed show “Library.” The title of the talk suggests that books and archives are often in danger because they represent, through their contents and sheer physical beauty, a danger that arouses the impulse to control. The excerpt given here, about libraries caught up in modern wars, treats less the historical rationales for such destruction than how people feel about it and what it means for the culture at large.

To begin that investigation, Elaine Scarry, in her 1985 book *The Body in Pain* (Oxford UP), comments on the relation of pain to imagination:

[P]hysical pain is exceptional in the whole fabric of psychic, somatic, and perceptual states for being the only one that has no object.... Hearing and touch are of objects outside the boundaries of the body, as desire is desire of x , fear is fear of y , hunger is hunger for z ; but pain is not “of” or “for” anything—it is itself alone. This objectlessness, the complete absence of referential content, almost prevents it from being rendered in language: objectless, it cannot easily be objectified in any form, material or verbal. But it is also its objectlessness that may give rise to imagining by first

occasioning the process that brings forth the dense sea of artifacts that we make and move about in. (161-2)

Imagination, then, depends upon our being “extended out into a dense sea of constructs and artifacts, deeply immersed in made culture” (182). Books are made, and libraries are made to hold them; they are part of the sea we float in. As the products of imagination and the intellectual functions that follow from imagination, books and libraries protect us from pain by filling the world with objects. As literary artifacts they also give a voice, if not to pain itself, then to the imaginal states that pain induces, states that may move us to produce further artifacts.

The tour passed through the following stations:

Language Death and Uncaptured Libraries

Half the world’s languages will become extinct in the next 50-100 years. Language death occurs because “killer languages” such as English, French, Spanish, and Swahili provide more prestige and access for wage earners in the modern world. There is a saying: “Every time an old African dies, a library is lost.” If libraries can be found where there is no writing, and the language threatens to disappear, what can be done?

Writing the Lost Library

J.R.R. Tolkien made it his work to write the “lost library” of the non-extant branches of the Germanic language stemma. Tolkien’s *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings* cycle began in philological reconstructions of lost languages, such as Gothic, and the literature they formed, all of which has vanished. Tolkien started this project while a soldier in the trenches in World War I, when he saw his own world crumbling around him.

Libraries as Bodies and Living Memory

Libraries are like bodies; they can be healthy, wounded, healed, killed. The mortality of libraries, and what it means to each of

us, can be seen very clearly in the fate of Sir Robert Cotton's collection of rare manuscripts. When the Cotton Library caught fire in the 18th century, many of the manuscripts were damaged or lost. Among those rescued were the only known copies of *Beowulf*, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and the Lindisfarne Gospels.

Libraries Destroyed by Natural Disaster

The quintessential example of the library destroyed by natural disaster, the Villa of the Papyri at Herculaneum, is, paradoxically, the sole library to have survived intact from the ancient world. Burned and buried by the eruption of Vesuvius, the 1800 scrolls, 400 never unrolled, have recently become readable through multi-spectral imaging technology, which distinguishes tiny variations in the chemical composition of substances, such as ink versus blank papyrus, though the entire scroll is charred.

Dangerous Books

Books are not only endangered, they are often perceived as dangerous in themselves. Contemporary institutionalization of the fear of books is embodied in the Patriot Act, which has successfully monitored which books Americans buy online and remove from the library. Books are routinely challenged by school districts and banned from school libraries across the country—such that the American Library Council has established 'Banned Books Week' to celebrate such prohibited volumes as *Black Boy*, *To Kill A Mockingbird*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *In the Night Kitchen*, works of Shakespeare and Chaucer, and *Huckleberry Finn*. In 2006 the Environmental Protection Agency shut down its libraries not only to the public but to its own staff. The Vatican Secret Archive contains endless documents, including transcripts of criminal trials such as that of Beatrice Cenci, and heresy trials, such as that of Galileo.

The sense of books' value and danger was reified in the "chained libraries" of 15th-19th century Europe, where books were secured to their shelves or pews by chains to prevent their being

stolen.



[Chained Library in Wimborne Minster,
courtesy of <http://www.simondemontfort.org/>]

Such a library often creates the impression that the books themselves are imprisoned. So felt Stephen Blumberg, who became the book world's most famous thief and is still serving a sentence for illegally removing thousands of rare books, mostly from university libraries.

Healing Libraries

The tour ends with a series of libraries that continue to hold out some kind of promise through their durability in extreme locales, or their architectural distinction: the Islamic desert libraries of Tamegroute, Morocco, and Timbuktu, Mali; libraries in concentration camps and prisons; exceptionally beautiful libraries, such as the Laurentian, designed by Michelangelo.

Libraries Destroyed in Modern Wars

When the Spanish invaded Mexico and conquered the Mayan kingdoms of the Yucatán, Diego de Landa, first bishop of that province, gathered together all of the priestly writings he could lay his hands on and burned them on the foundation stones of a razed pyramid at Izamal. Only four of the Mayan codices survived that conflagration. Fray Diego's heaping of codices, which had to be gathered from temples all across the Mayan region, was said to have become a library by being burned.



[A fragment of the Grolier Codex, courtesy of Kerr Associates]

In May of 1933 *Einsatzstab Reichsleiter* Alfred Rosenberg, who also built impressive collections of art (from occupied France) and valuable musical instruments (taken from Jewish homes by the *Sonderstab Musik*), followed Diego de Landa's example and created libraries, about 25,000 books' worth, in public squares around Germany. Books were sorted with

particular care by the members of the *Deutsche Studentenschaft*, as these libraries accepted only books showing “an un-German spirit,” which as Germans the students naturally felt to present a danger. A photograph shows the dedication of one such library in Berlin, presided over by Dr. Goebbels:

The student-librarians chanted *feuersprüche*, “fire speeches,” that served as an informal catalog showing authors and subjects: “Against the debasing exaggeration of man’s animal nature. For the nobility of the soul. Freudian school. The Journal *Imago*” (Battles, 166, quoting Louis P. Lochner, Associate Press correspondent in Berlin); and with these incantations the named writings were entered into the stacks.

Modern wars of conquest have more normally found in their path libraries already assembled and housed, but the examples of Fray Diego de Landa and Alfred Rosenberg reminds us that all libraries, institutional as they seem, are collections, the result of generations, sometimes centuries, of choices by individuals who, however else they may disagree, share a sense of the power of books.

One collection that narrowly escaped Rosenberg was created single-handed by Aby Warburg, a member of a Hamburg banking family. Living in Florence between 1898 and 1902, Warburg built up a library around his idea that art should be studied as a manifestation of the whole culture that produces it, not simply evaluated stylistically for its beauty or refinement. An early statement of this idea grew out of his visit to the Pueblo cultures of the American Southwest and his study of their pottery and kachinas. But his library assembled the writings of the rich subculture of the European philosophical occult: neo-Platonists and neo-Pythogoreans such as Plotinus, Porphyry, Proclus, Iamblichus; their students in Florence such as Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, Giordano Bruno; the texts of the *Corpus Hermeticum* that were studied by Bruno and after him the German polymath Athanasius Kircher. Often based on misreadings or outright forgeries, these texts still indexed a coherent system of beliefs that brought the Gnostic mysteries forward into the Renaissance and beyond. Warburg

was one of the first to propose an iconographic reading of the paintings of Botticelli and the Florentine school, to show how much they owed to these writings. Using his library, the art historian Edgar Wind was enabled to write *Pagan Mysteries of the Renaissance*, showing this debt in detail. Fritz Saxl, Ernst Cassirer, Henri Frankfort, Ernst Gombrich, and Erwin Panofsky – in effect the founders of twentieth-century art history – all found the material for their most important research at the Warburg Library; so did the intellectual historians Frances Yates and Anthony Grafton.

After Warburg's death in 1929, Fritz Saxl incorporated his library into the University of Hamburg, from which it was expelled in 1933. That was the year of Rosenberg's book-burnings, and it did not take much prescience on the part of Aby's banker brother Max Warburg to reckon that the collection would be safer out of Germany. In that year Professor W. G. Constable visited and suggested moving it to the Courtauld Institute in London. Negotiating the transfer with the Nazis was a delicate business. The Warburg Institute requested permission to "visit" London for three years. After it donated to the Party two thousand books relating to the First World War, the Nazis decided to turn a blind eye, neither granting nor refusing an export license. Sixty thousand books and thousands of photographic slides were loaded aboard the steamers *Jessica and Hermia*.

In December of 1933 Aby Warburg's widow gave a tea for those who had helped in the lading, on trestles in the now empty Reading Room.

The Warburg Institute, still in existence as part of the University of London's Institute for Advanced Study, now holds 350,000 books, many of them irreplaceable. It has preserved Aby Warburg's color-coded cross-indexed card catalog, the record of one man's reading of the books that he collected. In wartime London the Warburg Library found itself a second time at risk Blitz, but it survived.

Holland House was less lucky. The ruins stand in Holland Park, Kensington, most of which formed the grounds

of Cope Castle, built in 1605. Its handsome gates are thought to have been designed by Inigo Jones. It served as Oliver Cromwell's headquarters during the English Civil War, was the home of the essayist Joseph Addison in the early eighteenth century, and later, in the nineteenth, prominent political and literary figures gathered there; in short a house fully woven into the dense tapestry of English history.

The web was ripped – or finished – on September 27th, 1940, when Holland House, according to one laconic source, “received some bomb damage”; as if bombs were another sort of social figure dropping in to call. The ruins of the house, parts of which are being rebuilt, now serve as a backdrop to performances by Opera Holland Park.



[The Library of Holland House in 1940, courtesy of National Monuments Record, English Heritage]

The folios lining the shelves look very correct, like complete sets, perhaps of Scott and Dickens (both regular visitors in their day) or perhaps of tedious parliamentary white papers. These three men are not doing research; or if they are, the knowledge they are after is of a special kind. In this roofless library, the books have become the walls. The man in the soft

hat who stands balanced on the rubble and studies his book has never read a page like this before, will never read another like it again. His book, until then locked up in a nobleman's collection, has been returned to circulation.

If the Warburg library twice escaped, the library at Leuven (Louvain) in Belgium was shelled and burned twice in the twentieth century. We follow the account of Matthew Battles in *Library. An Unquiet History* (NY: Norton, 2003). Leuven, which the German army reached on August 25th, 1914, is the home of the oldest university in the Low Countries, founded in 1425. Erasmus was based there. The early book trade flourished under the university's protection and enriched the library with incunabula; it also housed a holograph manuscript of sermons by Thomas à Kempis and an important collection of Judaica. All these texts spoke from outside the domain of ideas received in their day. We grow impatient sometimes with libraries and what they preserve, until we remember that literature is nothing but the record of ceaseless experimentation that excites cultures first to resist and then to grow.

Leuven was not a military target and was quickly occupied, the Germans taking hostages. But as "the son of one of the hostages, a boy of 15 or 16 years old, stood talking to the German commandant, [he] suddenly drew a revolver and shot the German dead" (*New York Times* 8.30.1914, quoted in Battles, 158). In reprisal the Germans shot their hostages and burned down Leuven and its library, using petrol and "incendiary pastilles." A week later, one witness reported, "leaves of manuscripts and books fluttered about, half burned, at the mercy of the wind" (Battles, 159).

Americans were particularly outraged and subscribed \$150,000 to the rebuilding of the library after the war; the Carnegie Endowment, appropriately in view of Carnegie's building of libraries, gave two-thirds of the sum (*New York Times*, 6.26.21). The library was designed by an American architect, Whitney Warren of Warren and Wetmore, designers of Grand Central Terminal in New York, and the cornerstone was laid by Nicholas Murray Butler, president of Columbia University.



[Library at Leuven University, 1914,
courtesy of Mark Derez, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven]



[Leuven University Bell-tower,
courtesy of Mark Derez, Katholieke Universiteit Leuven]

Warren's design included a bell tower built to "dominate the surrounding countryside." It was to have featured, among other nationalistic motifs, an inscription composed by Cardinal Mercier: *Furore Teutonico Diruta/ Dono Americano Restituta* (destroyed by Teuton rage, rebuilt with an American gift), a motto whose poetic energy is all in its first line. In the event, it was left off the tower, but the controversy surrounding it had been widely reported, and so, when the Germans came again in May of 1940 and found Leuven occupied by a detachment of British soldiers awaiting evacuation, they used the library's bell-tower as a target in order to sight their guns correctly. Tracer bullets, which mark their own trail with burning phosphorus, entered the roof and burned the books in the attic, which then melted the glass roof of the main gallery; the molten glass ran into the rooms holding rare books and manuscripts and set them aflame (Battles, 161). According to one witness, the officers directing the fire were convinced that the *furore-Teutonico* inscription was still on the tower (Battles, 163).

Furor is real enough and lends itself to all sorts of nationalisms. During the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 90s, furor targeted several libraries and archives: Zagreb, Osijek, Vinkovci, and Dubrovnik.

Buildings smouldering, wounded ledgers, charred document cases, and sometimes, as in London, with books still standing on the buckling shelves. At Sarajevo as at Louvain everything burned: a fury of flames to answer the fire directed down from the hills near the Olympic Stadium by Ratko Mladic on August 25th, 1992. "Residents of the neighborhood of the Vijecnica reported that the evening's blanket bombardment of the city suddenly gave way to shelling focused on the library" (Battles, 185), with the results that you can see. Here is the Vijecnica after the fires stopped:

Matthew Battles lists some of the other libraries that were destroyed in the Bosnian conflict: the National and University Library of Bosnia lost most of its 1.5 million books, including 150,000 rare ones (188); the Oriental Institute in Sarajevo, attacked "with incendiary grenades," lost

5,263 bound manuscripts in Arabic, Persian, Hebrew, and *adzamijski* (Bosnian Slavic written in Arabic script); 7,000 Ottoman documents, primary source material for five centuries of Bosnia's history; a collection of nineteenth-century cadastral registers [land surveys establishing property rights]; and 200,000 other documents of the Ottoman era. (Battles, 187)

According to Battles a witness of the Vijecnica fire told a reporter that "even on fire the building is very beautiful" (185), while the poet Goran Simic wrote:

Set free from the stacks, characters wandered the streets,
mingling with passers-by and the souls of dead soldiers.

I saw Werther sitting on the ruined graveyard fence; I
saw Quasimodo swinging one-handed from a minaret.

Raskolnikov and Mersault whispered together for days in
my cellar; Gavroche paraded in camouflage fatigues;

Yossarian was already selling spares to the enemy; for a
few dinars young Sawyer would dive off Princip's bridge.

("Lament for Vijecnica"; Battles quotes the first two lines
on 187-8, but see also <http://www.haverford.edu/relg/sells/vijecnica/25August2002.htm>)

What is it that we find so exciting about the spectacle of pages torn loose from their books, burning or burned, then spreading through streets that are also being shelled? Is it the transformation of the formed into the formless? Libraries, books themselves, sometimes amuse or annoy or infuriate us by the excessive orderliness with which they classify and arrange the world. Maybe we resent the amount of reading that libraries, confronting us with so many books, require of us, or maybe it's the degree of tension needed to organize such a structure, so

tight that it's hard to enter or to find our way around. We don't like to need librarians in order to read. A degree of chaos may strike us as a release. Complex palaces make the most haunting ruins, opening room for the kind of reverie that overtook Goran Simic as shells exploded in his library and pages drifted into his cellar. But reverie, a word with a strong literary flavor, requires libraries and books to direct it. A reverie is an explosion set off by an image. We go to the library for the controlled detonations that move us forward.

Ratko Mladic's shelling was directed upon the libraries in Sarajevo by the resentments of Nicola Koljevic, an academic (he taught Shakespeare) who served as vice-president of the Bosnian Serb republic set up at Pale by Radovan Karadjic, now in the dock in The Hague (Battles, 186-7, citing Janine Di Giovanni's reporting in the *Manchester Guardian*; see also her *Madness Visible* [NY: Vintage, 2005]). To Koljevic, who committed suicide after the Dayton accords, the Vijecnica "represented everything he hated about the city; it contained its diverse history and embodied its Ottoman legacy" (Battles, 186). Muslim reveries, even spent ones that history has detached from any actuality of power, still have some power to threaten us.



[The Bayt al Hikma, a twelfth century building, before it was bombed, courtesy of Nabil al-Tikriti]

When coalition forces entered Baghdad in early April, 2003, they moved swiftly to protect the Oil Ministry but did nothing to protect the museums and libraries that housed what had come down to us of Mesopotamia, where our writing was invented, and the Abbasid caliphate, to mention only the most important pre-Islamic and Islamic cultures. The Abbasids presided over the golden age, five centuries' worth, of the Muslim world. The "House of Wisdom," *Bayt al Hikma*, founded in Baghdad in the ninth century by al-Ma'mun, housed the scholars who, besides their own original research in mathematics and other fields, translated and thereby helped to preserve Pythagoras, Aristotle, and Galen.

The looting of the National Museum of Iraq, a sort of library since it contained thousands of cuneiform tablets, and of the most important archaeological sites proceeded directly and without any interference from the occupying forces. Less well known is the fate of the libraries and archives. The Bayt al Hikma was bombed.



[Bayt-al-Hikma, courtesy of Nabil al-Tikriti]

So was the national library. And the National Archive burned.



[Maktabat al-Awqaf central library, courtesy of Nabil al-Tikriti]

Fernando Báez, a Venezuelan historian and a PhD in Library and Information Science, was sent to Baghdad in 2003 by UNESCO to see what had become of the libraries and archives. His findings form a large part of his *A Universal History of the Destruction of Books* (trans. Alfred MacAdam; NY: Atlas & Co); he was denied a visa to enter the United States to launch the English translation of this book in 2005 and has also been refused permission to revisit Iraq. According to Báez one million books, 10 million documents, and 14,000 archaeological artifacts have been lost since the invasion, many of them sold by members of coalition forces. By failing to protect the cultural heritage of Iraq, those forces are in violation of the Hague Convention of 1954, which specifically enjoins such protection in time of war. The day that Báez began work, May 10th 2003, marked the seventieth anniversary of Rosenberg's book-burnings. He visited and took notes on conditions at the Archaeological Museum and at the National Library. Báez writes:

As I walked through the halls [of the library], I found that the lecture halls and the bookshelves had been

leveled without reverence. Almost immediately I concluded that it would be impossible to determine whether the manuscripts were hidden, stolen, or destroyed. The stairs were burned.... It is presently thought that 800,000 volumes along with thousands of periodicals have disappeared, including the first journals printed in Persian anywhere in the world. I was told that the looting of the National Library began on April 14, when the dictator had fled, and a group with the use of tools ... proceeded to select items at will, almost as if they were shopping. The first group of looters knew the location of the most important manuscripts, which they hurriedly took, and ... sprayed gasoline throughout the stacks and set fire to everything.... [T]he heat ... had been so intense as to have damaged the marble floor....



[Bayt-al-Hikma, courtesy of Nabil al-Tikriti]

{T}he same act of vandalism destroyed the National Archives of Iraq, housed in the same structure as the library... Millions of documents disappeared, including some dating from the Ottoman period....

It is important to note that the destroyed books were not only those that had been in the National Library. Sumerian clay tablets, some 5300 years old, were left in ruins and the majority stolen from the Museum. This center housed texts from Sumer, Acadia [Akkadia], Babylonia, Assyria, Chaldea, Persia, and various Arabian dynasties. ...[I]n this museum were guarded the tablets of the Code of Hammurabi, the first registered set of laws in the world. ... Tablets inscribed with the Epic of Gilgamesh were stolen....

During two meetings, I was surprised to observe that the true preoccupation of the Americans was not the actual destruction, but the cleansing of the image of the military with the end to prevent giving cause for the accusation of soldiers' complicity in crimes relating to the theft of cultural property,....

<http://oi.uchicago.edu/OI/IRAQ/LostTreasures-BurntBook.htm> (this translation by Maria Gonzalez)

It is not required, for a library to be destroyed, that it stand in a place that's being bombed, that its bell-tower be thought to bear an insulting inscription, that its books be anti-German or pagan. The exchange-value of a book is enough to offset its use-value and put it in danger. If it's worth enough, it's worth stealing, and the other books housed with it will burn to cover up the theft.

Where can we put our books to keep them safe?