

Burning the Books: A History of Knowledge Under Attack

By Richard Ovenden. London: John Murray Press, 2020. 368 pp. Hardcover and EPUB. £20.00. Hardcover ISBN 978-1-529-37875-7; EPUB ISBN 978-1-529-37878-8.

In the novel *The Pages*, Irish-German novelist Hugo Hamilton tells a story about a book that survives a public book burning held in Berlin in 1933. An edition of Joseph Roth's 1924 novel *Rebellion* was rescued from the flames by an onlooking professor. Hamilton's novel is told through the voice of that book, as a witness to history: "What does time mean to a book?," the novel asks of its reader, as much as of itself, before stating that "A book has all the time in the world. My shelf life is infinite. . . . The sole purpose of a book is to live another day and tell the story ascribed to it by the author."¹

Richard Ovenden, Bodley's librarian at the University of Oxford, is perhaps better placed than most to try to answer Hamilton's question. What does time mean to books (and their readers) and to the libraries and societies that manage them? Ovenden's *Burning the Books: A History of Knowledge Under Attack* is an ambitious and forensically researched survey of libraries, archives, and society across three thousand years of recorded history and writing, from stone tablets to cloud data stores; of the occasions that saw unique collections lost, destroyed, or exploited; and of the resulting effect of the loss of knowledge in society through time.

Ovenden begins his book by recounting the events of the public book burnings by Nazis in Berlin in May 1933. Accompanied by a photograph of the book burning in Berlin (which is reminiscent of a lynching in Jim Crow-era United States—both brutal acts fueled by violence and prejudice), the gathered crowd has come to see and cheer (or in a few cases, perhaps silently resent) the assault on "dangerous books" of science, art, and literature deemed so unnatural by the Nazi regime that they needed to be destroyed.

The alarming accounts of targeted destruction of libraries within the book, from the burning of the library of Louvain University by invading German forces in 1914 (it was founded in 1425) to the systematic destruction of the National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992, examine moments of assault on human learning. As the world wept for the loss of humanity and beauty of Sarajevo in the 1990s, the wider targeting of libraries across the country saw a deliberate erasure of Muslim culture by Serb militias. It is a sobering reminder of how the erasure of documented culture can equate to the erasure of people's existence.

The argument laid out in the book is articulate and accessible on just why information and libraries matter, but it does not waver into hagiography.

Ovenden recognizes that “libraries and archives themselves destroy knowledge daily” (p. 9), where professional decisions made on appraisal, acquisition, cataloging, and exhibition shape the public’s engagement with records and books. These are “never neutral acts”; they are subject to human action and reaction. Marginalized communities, women, children, people of color, and others can be further victims of institutional biases. Much work still remains to be done within the archives and library professions to ensure these silences are given voice, so that collections are decolonized, that provenance is made clear, and that libraries do not function as further gatekeepers against rather than for public records. As James Lowry advocates in his edited book, *Displaced Archives*, “there is a role for archivists in all countries to play in resolving disputes over archives” and in the work to shift, subvert, or indeed, maintain, political will.²

Ovenden places broad but focused attention on the historical and contemporary power that records play in challenging or maintaining political regimes. “The issue of archives as central to the social order, the control of history, and the expression of national and cultural identity continues to be a pressing concern in the twenty-first century” (p. 184). The records of the ruling and brutal Ba’ath Party in Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, for example, reside today in the United States, held in trust for when they can be transferred back to their country of origin, so they can afford at least some transparency to Iraqis in understanding their country’s recent past. Also included here is discussion of the extraordinary work of truth-telling and archival reconstruction ongoing in Germany since the early 1990s and through the painstaking sorting, cataloging, and opening of records created by the Stasi in the operation of its state surveillance network within the GDR. The book makes clear the latent geopolitical power of records as evidence to support the US-led Gulf wars of the 1990s and 2000s using information gathered through military intelligence, but also the potential and impacts of records for postconflict transitional justice and social reconstruction for people within healing societies.

The rapid and unfettered spread of online disinformation has escalated at an alarming rate in recent years, largely owing to the uncontrolled and unregulated forums of online social media (as well as many print and broadcast media, of course). Information has become weaponized; in recent examples, the 2018 controversy involving Facebook and the mass data breach of over 87 million user accounts by the political data-analytics firm Cambridge Analytica, and the Trump presidential campaign of 2015–2016, which fixated on Hillary Clinton choosing not to use a federal email account and an “official” email server while serving as secretary of state. (Other recent writings in the media by Ovenden make clear the risks by governments that use unofficial messaging services, such as WhatsApp, for official work communication which then cannot be traced, verified, or archived within government archives.)³

Moving into present times, Ovenden outlines the critical questions around social media and wider web archives. “Access to knowledge on the web is now a social necessity” (p. 202). The “digital deluge,” as he calls it, has shaped how (dis)information spreads instantly today and has influenced major global issues, from Brexit to climate change. Resourcing the archiving of the Web in its entirety may be an impossibility (and unnecessary), but Ovenden makes clear that a primary battle must be waged to sustainably preserve online knowledge from attack and, in doing so, “protect society itself.”

Ovenden points out the risk to public records when the digital becomes ephemeral. The preservation of tweets (some 46,000 of them up to February 2020) by President Trump, for example, is largely based on an act of faith that they will even reach the National Archives from the presidential office under the remit of the Presidential Records Act (p. 204). History cannot judge, and the public cannot know, what it cannot access.

Not all archival and library losses are the result of conflict. Recent examples show human error and environmental incidents can have catastrophic results. In 2009, construction work on a nearby subway line caused the collapse of the Historical Archive of the City of Cologne.⁴ Ninety percent of the records were buried in the rubble. While materials were destroyed, much was salvaged through skilled restoration and rescue efforts to records dating back to the tenth century. In April 2021, a fire at a nearby woodland spread to the campus of the University of Cape Town, where its library suffered devastating material losses.⁵ The fire destroyed much of the library’s special collections, including rare books, films, photographs, and archival records. Libraries will always be at risk, but how we respond to those threats speaks to how we function as open societies.

Ovenden, as a library worker for over thirty-five years and today as a holder of one of the most important roles in international information governance and learning, reminds us that he has been a user of libraries for far longer than his working life. It is a reminder of that precious place of a library in a community. One of the first pieces of “official” records to bear one’s name as a child is a library card. Most of us can remember as children wandering into our own favorite nook of the local library for the first time and approaching the desk with a towering stack of library gems, carefully selected like sweets from a jar, to bring home and devour.

Throughout *Burning the Books*, Ovenden meticulously charts the role of records in shaping society’s engagement with its governance and thinking, across the three thousand years of the book’s scope. It concludes by outlining five treatises on why we will always need libraries and archives (p. 225) in a coda presenting future steps for preserving our written, printed, digital, and intangible knowledge.

As a global community, we are in the midst of myriad crises—from humanitarian to ecological. These factors are not disparate phenomena, nor are they

isolated in their respective impacts as to how we will (or can) continue to live as a species and how our knowledge is produced and governed. Deep in the Norwegian Arctic is another library—a vast seed library dug into the permafrost in which millions of seeds are preserved as a failsafe for the survival of human food crops.⁶ Within a decade of the seed library's opening in 2008, a rise in Arctic temperatures caused melting of the permafrost, flooding segments of the building. While not damaging the collection, it was still an urgent warning to our preserved future and living present. From burning the books to burning the planet, we have a lot to learn, but we have (for now) through our libraries and archives, a record of why such collections, libraries, and archives matter to us all.

Books are themselves remarkable objects. Their technology is so engineered to such efficiency of function and form to carry and share information that it has survived against the rise of myriad rival technologies and devices. Books, records, and libraries are symbols of rejection of narrow-minded and ignorant ideology, a reminder that the beauty of art in the printed and written word, as well as the record of who we are as a people, can survive despite the violent actions of others. The prescience of Ovenden's message also comes with a warning. The lingering effects of conflicts, from the physical to the psychological, and from the personal to the political, also leave fissures in our national and personal histories. Ovenden's great achievement in this fascinating and important book is to remind us just how fragile that record is and why we need to act now to safeguard what we currently have so we can continue to learn and prevent the mistakes of the past from happening again. As Hugo Hamilton made clear in *The Pages*, "A book has all the time in the world." Humanity, our environment, and our records do not.

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¹ Hugo Hamilton, *The Pages* (London: 4th Estate, 2021), 3–5.

² James Lowry, "Introduction: Displaced Archives," in *Displaced Archives*, ed. James Lowry (Oxon: Routledge, 2017), 7.

³ For example, see Richard Ovenden, "Ephemeral Messages Remove Scrutiny from Government," *Financial Times*, October 13, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/d7f10eb2-895e-4a7e-9522-2d365e7a205b>, captured at <https://perma.cc/LN6C-V4JL>.

⁴ Dora Osborne, "'Alas, Alas. House, Oh House!': The Collapse of the Cologne City Archive," *Journal of Urban Cultural Studies* 1, no. 3 (2014): 395–416, https://doi.org/10.1386/jucs.1.3.395_1.

⁵ Nora McGreevy, "Why the Cape Town Fire Is a Devastating Loss for South African Cultural Heritage," *Smithsonian Magazine*, April 20, 2021, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/cultural-heritage-historic-library-destroyed-south-africa-blaze-180977539>, captured at <https://perma.cc/EE3J-3XCP>.

⁶ Marte Qyenild, "Svalbard Global Seed Vault: A 'Noah's Ark' for the World's Seeds," *Development in Practice* 18, no. 1 (2018), 110–116, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09614520701778934>.