FOREWORD

PUBLIC LIBRARIES: A VERY SHORT PERSONAL HISTORY

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My hometown, Manchester, England, is famous for football, *Coronation Street*, and lugubrious rock music. It is also the site of three great book collections. Chetham's Library, founded in 1653, calls itself the oldest public library in the English-speaking world. When Karl Marx visited his comrade Friedrich Engels in Manchester, the pair are reputed to have plotted world revolution in Chetham's cozy Tudor reading room. The John Rylands Library (1889), a neo-Gothic treasure house of the book founded by the widow of a cotton magnate, houses the oldest known text of the New Testament in the shape of the St. John Fragment, an eight-and-a-half-square-inch scrap of Egyptian papyrus. And the enormous, circular Manchester Central Library (1930), modelled on the Pantheon in Rome, is a monument to the civic ambition of the English provincial metropolis. On a school tour, we seven-year-olds held hands tightly as we filed through the gloomy labyrinth of the book stacks, haunted by the ghosts of lost librarians.

What underlies Mancunian bibliophilia? A product of the industrial revolution, the city's mentality is that of the secular, radical,

and future-oriented upstart. London was unchallengeable as the headquarters of the monarchy, church, and government. Manchester, then, would be the capital of the common people. In Victorian times, democratic values lay not in football or soap operas but in self-improvement through education. Manchester economics was free trade; Manchester education meant free access to books. To the London establishment, such ideas were dangerous. If allowed leisure and opportunity to ponder their condition, the working class, encouraged by Marx and his bearded ilk, might rise up and overthrow their masters. In the event, opportunities for self-betterment cooled revolutionary fervour, and the Manchester way would eventually prevail almost everywhere in the Anglosphere.

The promotion of literacy was the most efficient means of increasing the market for books. In this way capitalism, for all its flaws, conduced to universal education and (more indirectly) to the freedom of thought that comes from access to many books. And freethinkers tended to support the economic system that had facilitated their enlightenment. Manchester cotton magnates were well aware of this feedback loop, as was the Pittsburgh steel baron Andrew Carnegie. Carnegie's 2,500 modest-sized public libraries from Dunfermline, Scotland, to Dunedin, New Zealand, have almost certainly done more than the great research collections of the Vatican and the U.S. Congress to illuminate the lives of common people.

Several English towns had "public" libraries by the seventeenth century, though books were usually chained to shelves to prevent their disappearance. The first institutions allowing patrons to borrow books were the "circulating" libraries, which normally required an annual subscription fee and thus excluded the poor: Canada's first was established in 1779 in Quebec City. The Toronto Public Library, the world's second busiest, originated in a circulating library founded in 1830, when muddy York had a population of nine thousand. Half a century later, the (Ontario) Free Libraries Act of 1882 allowed municipalities to fund public libraries through taxes, though not everywhere was quick to follow the precedent: Montreal had no comprehensive free public library system until 2002. Still, by the turn of the twentieth century, the free public library had become the *sine qua non* for

any settlement that aspired to civilization. Regina's, founded in 1908 and opening its doors on January 1, 1909, is arguably the city's oldest major cultural institution.

Those who find rapid and perpetual social change difficult to embrace and who want to be told how to think and behave will find little solace in the free public library's promiscuous plurality of texts. Some public library books may give encouragement to those seeking the violent overthrow of liberal society, while the library buildings themselves have often given shelter to wild-eyed revolutionaries. Today, however, the Internet would seem to pose the most severe threat to the public library's existence. In a situation barely imaginable a generation ago, ordinary people of modest means have access at home to little less than the entire breadth of human knowledge.

Already, the lumpen analogue encyclopedia has been entirely supplanted by the digital database as the primary source of up-to-date information. In the future only rare and beautiful books may survive, the preserve of the wealthy collector—just as they were in the beginning. Yet the public library—with or without physical books—must be maintained as a place where the least privileged in society can improve their literacy and have free access to information and entertainment. The library building, architectural embodiment of civic pride, is also the natural forum for the community to meet and freely exchange ideas. It is the crucial task of today's public librarians to ensure that good information is not overwhelmed by a tidal wave of its antithesis—what communications theorists call "noise." And the rest of us must share in this responsibility, for in the age of the wiki, we are not only cardholders of the greatest public library in history—we are also its gatekeepers.