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Books on Fire: The Destruction of Libraries throughout History

Lucien X. Polastron
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A near-encyclopedic history of the fires, looting, and other assaults that have destroyed or damaged many great libraries—public and private—may not strike many as a "must-read" book. But those who work through *Books on Fire* will find the richly detailed narrative amply rewarding. The French scholar Lucien X. Polastron analyzes the contexts and policies behind both the assembly and the destruction of libraries, starting in the third millennium BCE with Sumer and Egypt, and ending with Iraq in 2003 CE. A specialist in Chinese and Arab studies, Polastron has not stinted in addressing book production, collecting, and destruction in these two cultures.

Books, he points out, have near-sacred value; the Jewish, Hindu, Nordic, and Islamic traditions held that pre-Creation libraries existed—a food of divinity. Sadly, the mission-driven Noah threw his books ("the most ancient, the ancient, and the most recent") off the Ark to allow more animals to board. But the nurturing role of books and concern for their survival—two of Polastron's major themes—are, he notes, well-expressed by Ramesses II (1279-1213 BCE), whose "sacred library" bore a plaque stating: "House for Care of the Soul." It was situated within the Ramesseum of Thebes, the pharaoh's "Castle of Millions of Years." Invaders, rulers of other faiths, or even a hostile successor, decided the "soul" must be destroyed and time must start anew. Hence the worldwide record of library-wrecking. Qin Shi Huangdi ("First Emperor") burned all non-scientific works in 213 BCE; two centuries earlier, one Yang Shang had advised Duke Xiao to "burn the books so that the laws and ordinances can emerge."

Book-burning as policy never slackened, despite admonitions: the Arab historian al-Tabari (838—c. 920) wrote, "No matter what the case, one should never destroy a book without knowing what is inside it," and in 1510 the Protestant humanist Reuchlin opposed papal exhortations (frequent since 1210) to destroy Jewish doctrinal books by asking "How can we oppose what we do not understand?" In a shocking regression, when Charles V's army sacked Rome in 1527, von Burtenbach's troops bedded their horses on the Holy City archival documents. Ironically, only two years later in Mexico City, Bishop Zumárraga celebrated the burning of virtually all known Aztec codexes.

Polastron's account of events in the Islamic world, where the book was especially revered, is tragic. The worst blows came after orthodoxy had lightened its hold on thought: the great libraries of Baghdad and the region were utterly destroyed by Mongol conquerors; Hulagu in 1258, Tamerlane in 1401. Baghdad never recovered; we must be thankful for the survival of the libraries of Cairo and Cordoba.

Chinese libraries fared little better. Emperor Yongle (1360-1424) commissioned the *Yongle da dian* (The Grand Canon of Yongle). This colossal encyclopedia ran to 370 million characters in 22,877 scrolls. The sole copy was destroyed during the fall of the Ming Empire in 1644. However, in 1726, the Manchu emperor Kangxi commissioned a second encyclopedia (a mere 100 million characters in 5,020 books). A complete copy survives. In 1772, Kangxi's grandson Qianlung created the immense Siku Quanshu (The Totality of Books, In Four Sections). Typically, in keeping with imperial ideological concerns, in 1778 he arranged a gigantic pyre of Ming-era books ("a dynasty opposed to our house").

As Polastron coolly reminds, the European nations have a deplorable role as book-burners in China. In 1860, during the Taiping Rebellion, the Anglo-French forces burned the Summer Palace—and priceless libraries were destroyed; then in 1900 the great Hanlin Academy library ("the quintessence of Chinese scholarship") caught fire during Chinese-British fighting in the Boxer Rebellion.

In addition to an intensive survey of book destruction as policy, *Books on Fire* provides a splendid education in book collecting as a passion—as well as book production, library management, and great bibliophiles and their collections. Polastron also explores numerous byways; corrects popular misconceptions about the fate of the Library of Alexandria, notes the *Iliad*'s first appearance in authoritative written form, explains the intellectual intransigence of Byzantine emperors, and comments on the destruction of "unauthorized" versions of the Koran—among much other bibliographic lore.

Polastron fully addresses the fate of libraries in WWI and WWII—and the current ruthless "de-accessioning" enthusiasm of many librarians. He notes that every stage of the book's evolution, from clay tablet to papyrus, to paper, to electronic formats makes the "written" record more fragile. Jon E. Graham's masterful translation and the author's helpful chronology enhance this book.

PETER SKINNER (August 8, 2007)

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