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RICHARD OVENDEN, *BURNING
THE BOOKS. A HISTORY OF THE
DELIBERATE DESTRUCTION OF
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The book under review, published by The Belknap Press, an imprint of Harvard University Press, is Richard Ovenden's latest contribution, who has been the director of the Bodleian Libraries since 2014, the oldest and most prominent library at Oxford University. His academic interests focus on the history of libraries, books, and photography. He authored, among works, a study dedicated to John Thomson, a Scottish photographer, geographer, and traveller, who contributed to the development of photojournalism in Great Britain.¹

The reviewed book is composed of an introduction, fifteen thematic and chronological chapters, and an annex containing footnotes, bibliography, as well as indexes: of people, subjects, and geographic names. Apart from two works in German, the author exclusively quotes literature in English, displaying clear predilection for papers printed or published online over the last two decades.

1 R. Ovenden, *John Thomson* (1837–1921). Photographer, Edinburgh 1997.

In the Introduction, Ovenden declares that his goal is to analyse select cases related to the destruction of knowledge sanctuaries such as archives and libraries, the perpetrators' motivations, and defence mechanisms developed by archivists and librarians. This model dominates the narrative, whenever the author speaks of attacks on cultural institutions, he points to the individuals who protested against and opposed them. Nonetheless, the author does not provide the criteria that drove the selection of his examples, satisfied with the statement that the chosen cases are, on the one hand, interesting in themselves, while, on the other, they exemplify the era in which they happened. Furthermore, Ovenden emphasizes that his intention is to commemorate those individuals who opposed the destruction of books and archives over the centuries (p. 14). He also promises that, in due course, he will analyse digital archives and libraries to inquire as to the challenges that digital reality poses to the 'guardians of knowledge'.

In Chapter One, the author takes a closer look at the Nineveh Library of Ashurbanipal. Discovered by Austen H. Layard in the mid-19th century and boasting over 25,000 clay tablets, it is the largest known collection of literary, scientific, religious, and administrative works of the ancient Middle East. A substantial part of the collection was devastated by warfare during the attack of the Babylonian and Median troops on Nineveh in 612 BC. It remains unclear, however, whether the destruction of the library was a purposeful act.

In Chapter Two, the author takes us to ancient Alexandria. Ovenden emphasizes that little is known today about its book collection there and its daily operations. Our hypotheses stem from indirect sources. Such an incomplete picture has favoured the creation and consolidation of the 'Alexandrian myth' among the general public regarding the destruction of Ptolemy's collection. The author holds the opinion that myth was consolidated with the publication of the third volume of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* by Edward Gibbon (1781), which contains suggestive description of the library's destruction. In Ovenden's view, this scholarly fragment transformed the plundering of the library in Alexandria into

a symbol of the triumph of barbarianism over knowledge. However, the idea of a library as a knowledge sanctuary dedicated to scholars survived that conflagration in Alexandria. Alongside the beginnings of Christianity, books and libraries diffused throughout the Mediterranean, gradually reaching countries in Northern Europe. The Arabic world understand a library as a place dedicated to studies. Large libraries were established in Syria and Egypt: over 70 operated in Muslim-ruled Spain, with over 30 were founded in Baghdad alone. The Baghdad libraries were largely destroyed during the Mongol invasion in the 13th century.

Chapter Three focuses on English monastic libraries during the Reformation. Searching for legal titles to annul his marriage to Catherine of Aragon while avoiding the Holy See's decision, Henry VIII instructed the librarian John Leland to investigate all monastic and university libraries in the country. Over three years of preliminary research, Leland looked through the book collections of over 140 libraries, preparing an extensive report on his research. After the Church of England achieved independence from the papacy in 1534, bringing about secularization of Church property, many of those libraries and archives were irrevocably destroyed. Only 5,000 codices survived the Reformation in Great Britain; Leland's lists are in some cases the only source of information on ecclesiastical libraries in England we have today. As demonstrated by Ovenden, monks and priests forced to abandon their monasteries and parishes often saved those books. Leland himself managed to prevent the destruction of almost 200 codices.

Humanists, collectors, and antiquarians form another category of protagonists in Ovenden's study. Thanks to their efforts, a substantial quantity of knowledge produced during the Middle Ages was protected. Their work contributed to the establishment many of contemporary libraries and gave rise to the professions of librarian and archivist, the focus of Chapter Four. In 1549-1550, following the *Act for the abolishing and putting away of diverse books and images*, which stipulated the destruction 'books and images displaying superstition', the lion's share of Oxford University's library hold-

ings were destroyed, among them the priceless collection of manuscripts gifted by Humphrey of Lancaster, Duke of Gloucester, a younger brother of Henry V (1390-1447). Only eleven volumes were preserved. In 1598, the library was renovated thanks to Sir Thomas Bodley, and it has born his name since. It was enriched with numerous manuscripts, books, archival records, maps, coins, and other materials, some coming from the secularized libraries and ecclesiastical archives. The Bodleian Library was the first in England whose catalogue was printed and disseminated only three years after its opening to the public in 1605.

Chapter Five discusses the destruction of the Library of Congress building and an extensive part of its collection of the Library after British troops set it on fire in August 1814 during the war against the United States (1812-1815). The author claims that the destruction of the Library, housing materials essential to the operations of the American Congress, was a purposeful act intended to weaken the British enemy. Ovenden does not provide convincing evidence to demonstrate his analysis, only mentioning that the Library of Congress was revived from the ravages of war due to the books taken from Thomas Jefferson's collection.

The key question of Chapter Six: 'How to Disobey Kafka' is matched by considerations regarding the attempts by some authors to annihilate their own literary output. Writers and poets have historically been tempted to destroy their own writing, from literary works to correspondences, such as Franz Kafka. Kafka's friend Max Brod, who was determined to secure a place for Kafka in the literary canon that he had not been able to achieve during his lifetime, thwarted Kafka's plans to destroy his works. Regardless of Brod's true intentions - he has been accused of seeking fame and substantial income for himself - had it not been for his effort to publish Kafka's literary legacy, the writer's oeuvre would have been irrevocably lost.

Chapter Seven considers the library of the Catholic University in Leuven. That book collection was burnt for the first time in August 1914. International public opinion compared its destruction

to the burning down of the library in Alexandria. The need to rebuild the library was even included in the provisions of the Versailles Treaty: German parties were obliged to provide the Leuven Library with manuscripts, incunabula, books, maps, and other items whose number and worth would equal those destroyed during the war. In May 1940, the Library again suffered war-related destruction. Ovenden admits, however, that it remains difficult to ascertain whether the attacks on the Library in 1914 and 1940 were purposeful acts. Nonetheless, he holds the opinion, without providing any examples to prove his point, that this story continues to frustrate public opinion both in Germany and Belgium, since ‘one community still feels a sense of guilt and responsibility, another continues to try to understand the motivations for what happened’ (p. 117).

The next chapter recounts the history of Jewish book collections during World War II. Ovenden writes that not only was persecution targeted at the ‘people of the Book’, but also at their books (p. 119). Based on his own estimations, the author claims that in 1933–1945, over 100 million books from Jewish libraries were destroyed. Those historic works were either burned in public or confiscated and looted. At the same time, Ovenden emphasizes that the Germans tried to amass select manuscripts and printed works. These were collected to help them better understand the culture the Nazi state wanted to eradicate. To this end, the Institute for Research on the Jewish Question (*Institut zur Erforschung der Judenfrage*) was established in 1939. By April 1943, it had collected over 550,000 volumes, initially seized from Frankfurt-am-Mein, but later from libraries in France, the Netherlands, Poland, Lithuania, and Greece. When the Nazi war machine was rolling across Poland, Russia, and the Baltics, Ovenden says that Jews became the main target of homicide. The author claims that Eastern European countries (not specifying which territories he is referring to) had long persecuted Jews. Yet he does not analyse why Jewish representatives chose to settle in this part of Europe, and why their culture could flourish in these regions. He does not mention the tradition of tolerance

prevalent in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. He says nothing about the policies enacted in the 19th century against harming Jewish communities; in Eastern Europe decisions were made inside the offices of great monarchies (Russia, Prussia, and Austria) without taking into account the voices of national political and social elites. According to the author, Jews were particularly vulnerable to pogroms in Eastern Europe, and were also forced to assimilate with Christian communities. He subsequently argues that such processes intensified at the turn of the 20th century. Meanwhile, he does not illustrate his claims with any definite examples, additionally failing to admit that assimilation was also favoured by Jewish representatives (e.g. among Haskalah). Without providing any data sources, Ovenden claims that in 1918-20, hundreds of thousands of Jews perished because of pogroms in Central and Eastern Europe. Nonetheless, despite those hostile circumstances, Vilnius became a location where Jewish culture thrived. Still, the author does not mention what state the city was part of in the 18th and 19th centuries, as well as in the 1920s and 30s. He only speaks of Soviet troops entering Vilnius in late 1939 (p. 126) in passing. The Yiddish Scientific Institute, YIVO, played a special role in the Vilnius Jewish community. After the city had been seized by the Germans in 1941, the occupation administration decided to take a closer look at the Institute's book collection. Jewish librarians and writers, such as Herman Kruk and the well-known poet Abraham Suckewer, were employed for this task. The team of librarians was to conduct a preliminary selection of books and manuscripts from the YIVO Library, as well as from the closed Jewish libraries in Riga, Kaunas, Vilnius, Minsk, Kiev, and many other cities. They established the 'Paper Brigade', a clandestine organization whose goal was to save at least a part of the collections from destruction. Between March 1942 and September 1943, they succeeded in bringing thousands of books and manuscripts into the Vilnius Ghetto. A substantial part of the materials hidden in the Ghetto survived. Discovered after the World War II, they were partially catalogued. However, the Soviet regime began to persecute the Jewish com-

munity, demonstrating hostility to their books as well. Antanas Ulpis, head of the Lithuanian Book Chamber, undertook the task of saving Jewish books and manuscripts, hiding the volumes he found in different places. Incidentally, Ovenden fails to mention that Ulpis was not merely interested in Jewish manuscripts and books, but also in those originating in private and ecclesiastical collections. Interestingly, two Polish references in the discussed chapter. The author adds a few words about the Oneg Shabbat, an organization operating in the Warsaw Ghetto that founded the Ringelblum Archive, which, as is known, collected materials and documents illustrating life in the Warsaw Ghetto. He fails to cite, however, that these materials are being investigated by scholars of the Polish Jewish Historical Institute who have also published several works on the topic. The second Polish reference is connected to Jewish cultural life in Cracow. According to the author, 'The Library of the Jagiellonian University in Krakow became one of the sources of change in that city, thanks to a library of English language materials managed by the British Council' (p. 135). Ovenden does not point to what the character of such a change. The fate of Jewish books could have *pars pro toto* illustrated the tragic vicissitudes of book collections during World War II. A commentary on the general principles of the cultural policy of the Third Reich is missing from the author's analysis, as the Author does not focus on the fact, or is perhaps even unaware, that German authorities, and to some extent Soviet ones, intentionally destroyed archives and libraries, not only Jewish ones, and not only in Poland.

The next chapter is dedicated to the question of the legacies of writers and poets. Many authors understand that their archives are of important research value, and some anticipate that scholars will want to investigate them well into the future. To this end, according to Ovenden some writers intentionally shape their archives to influence how they are perceived after their death. Furthermore, some authors conceive of their legacies as an additional source of income. Naturally, both materials eliminated from an archive and those that remain equally can be meaningful. The fo-

cus of the author's analyses is the figure of Philip Larkin, an English poet and the University librarian of the University of Hull who dedicated his career to safeguarding writers' legacies. When on his deathbed, Larkin himself asked his long-time lover Monica Jones to burn his diaries. The poet's last will was finally executed by his devoted secretary, who took his notebooks to the university boiler room where they were burned. However, some materials illustrating Larkin's private and literary life have been preserved, namely over 7,000 pages of his correspondence with Monica Jones, today held in the Bodleian Library. Larkin's example is interesting. Why did he want to destroy his diaries, being aware that many details from his life and activity could be revealed through correspondences? Maybe he aimed to draw researchers' attention to his letters to Monica Jones, and to his broad literary activities? The burning of his diaries attached a mystery to the life of the poet and librarian, increasing the interest of the academic circles in his oeuvre.

The next chapter is dedicated to Bosnia's National Library in Sarajevo. On 25 August 1992, during fights over Sarajevo, the library was intentionally bombed and entirely burned down by Serbian forces. Ovenden reflects on the motivation of Serbian political and military leaders. He is of the opinion that the symbolic destruction of the library and its multitude of precious manuscripts and old printed materials was intended to annihilate Bosnia's culture. Libraries and archives throughout Bosnia suffered the same fate. Ethnic cleansing throughout the Muslim-inhabited areas was accompanied by the destruction of archival records as well as of land and mortgage registers. It is estimated that over 81 linear kilometres of files were lost.

The subsequent chapter tackles the theft of archival materials and books, the transfer of entire archives and libraries, as well as of the role of colonial archives. The motivation for the author's considerations is found in one of the collections at the Bodleian Library, namely the books looted in 1596 by Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex, from the Library of the Faro Cathedral in Portugal. Oven-

den poses the question as to when the acquisition of knowledge resources, such as the library of the Bishop of Faro, become a justified political goal. The transfer of the library was a political symbol, to a degree symbolizing the moral domination of the London court over Catholic Europe. Considering the situation from an Anglican perspective, it could be argued that the heretical institution was disarmed by its transfer to the headquarters of the orthodox faith. As the author argues, the theft of libraries and archives is motivated not only by a desire to gain wide access to knowledge, but also to win control over history and dominate cultural and political identity. Ovenden, however, fails to mention one more important factor, most clearly relevant to archival records: economic dominance by gaining information on property ownership or fiscal relations. With reason, theorists of bureaucratic systems in the late 16th century claim that next to arsenals and granaries, archives constitute one of the foundations of a state (nonetheless, Ovenden seems to be unfamiliar with this literature).²

Further on, the author moves to the question of colonial archives. The materials produced by colonial administrations cases were in many either destroyed or transferred to the headquarters prior to independence being granted to new states. Ovenden suggests that such materials may have shed light on practices of improper administration or abuses of the colonial power. Therefore, he poses the question as to who exerts control over the history and identity of colonial states: the people who won their sovereignty or the former colonial powers. However, he however overlooks the fact that archives amassed documents related to the administration of real estate: land and mortgage registers, tax receipts, technical documentation etc. Such analyses, dealing mainly with French and Dutch colonies, and British ones to a lesser degree, manifest the shortcoming of Ovenden's historiographical research. He

2 I.a. J. Althusius, *Politica methodice digesta*, Herborn 1614; B. Bonifacio, *De Archivis liber singularis*, Venetiis 1632; Albertino Barisoni, *Commentarius de archivis antiquorum*, in: *Utriusque thesauri antiquitatem Romanorum Graecorumque*, Venetiis 1737, cols. 1077-1125.

holds the opinion that European archival practices developed following the English archivist Hilary Jenkinson (1882–1961), whose approach shaped the methods of contemporary archivism. He does not mention the principles of provenance and territorial pertinence formulated by the Dutch archivists Muller, Feith, and Fruin. Instead, Ovenden is certain that the principles developed on the British Isles were also adopted in continental Europe. Due to such oversights, Ovenden presents quite naïve conclusions in this chapter, namely that when local communities have no access to their own history, the narration of their past is controlled and manipulated to a much greater degree, while their cultural identity is severely endangered. Many of the former colonies of the European powers have been independent for decades, yet some of them have not been provided with the access to their archives. The author calls for such communities robbed of their archival records to regain control over them and shape the narratives on their own past.

The following chapter provides Ovenden with an opportunity to revisit the issue of archives as a central element of social order, control over history, and means to express national and cultural identity. The author reaches the conclusion that, over the course of history, archives granted oppressive regimes worldwide the ability to maintain their dominance over groups of people. He provides several examples to illustrate his point, recalling that in ancient Mesopotamia documentation was kept to boost fiscal income, or that after the Norman conquest of Britain in 1066, new rulers immediately focused on local property ownership relations. Finally, the author claims that regimes started to spy on their citizens to control them. If we were to follow his train of thought, we would reach the conclusion that any entity responsible for running a country is oppressive; after all, administrative, fiscal, or judiciary documentation is also gathered and produced by democratic states. These considerations are to a great degree detached from specific conditions if only that the Author seems to move to the archives of East German Stasi following his anecdote on ancient

Mesopotamia without any historical or cultural differentiation. However, at the same time he tackles the issue of Iraq's archives, whose substantial part is now held in the United States.

The following two chapters consider digital archives and libraries. According to the author, digital information saturates our life. The amount of information created every day, stored, digitized, and available online, has been fast growing. Following Ovenden, in 2020, about 134 million graphic files were dispersed at different places in the Bodleian Library. Ovenden's asks whether and how this digital turn changes the tasks of archives and libraries. He also inquires into the costs of maintenance and conservation of digital materials. Should libraries and archives continue to play the role of memory guardians, as they had in ancient civilizations? The author points to the fact that digitized knowledge has been created and managed to a growing degree by a relatively small group of powerful companies, so powerful that the future of history depends exclusively on them. He argues that for many years, archivists and librarians were not aware that they had ceded a substantial part of their agency to large corporations. These considerations climax with an appeal to libraries and archives to take control of those digitized knowledge resources to prevent their destruction, and thus protect a society from losing its identity.

Ovenden's book is structured as a set of essays, or loosely connected anecdotes on the histories of libraries. His restrained geographic framework is to a greater or lesser degree connected to the Bodleian Library. I would not consider it a fault of the book, had the author announced in the Introduction that his intention was to focus on select aspects of the history of this particular library collection. However, according to the author's declaration, his thesis was to focus on a much broader question. The historiographic reach of the book is limited by the author's use of literature published almost exclusively in English. Such limited primary sources have led him to reinvent the wheel more than once. Recently, significant work has been published on exchanges of knowledge and the relation between power and knowledge. The work by the

German historian Markus Friedrich, translated in English though uncited by Ovenden, has quickly acquired a canonical status.³ Furthermore, it seems that, owing to limited knowledge of the literature, the Author was tempted to assume that Nazi repressions were targeted exclusively at Jewish culture during World War II. The example quoted by Ovenden, citing the, most likely unintentional, burning of the Library of the Catholic University in Leuven, completely disregards the systematic destruction of Polish cultural heritage. This significantly distorts the cultural reality of the period, since it creates the impression that only Jewish book collections were looted, while all the other archives and libraries destroyed during World War II were but incidental victims of the ravages of war.

On the whole, the conclusions presented by the author are quite banal, boiling down to the observations, reiterated many times, that alongside the destruction of books were noble acts toward their preservation, carried out by communities and individuals who put their lives at risk, sometimes losing them, in order to save the most sublime expression of their culture: a book. At the same time, Ovenden fails to observe that these efforts were not merely made to save book collections, but also, and possibly first of all, to spare objects of religious worship and art works. The Author displays a predilection toward the excessive simplification of cultural realities, paralleled by a tendency to go off topic. Almost every chapter contains long passages that only insignificantly refer to the topic. To quote one example, let us recall the anecdote on the destruction of the public library in Jaffna, northern Sri Lanka, as a result of a conflict between the Tamils and the Sinhalese (1981). As much as the author was ready to dedicate several lengthy paragraphs to national and religious relations in the Balkans, he limited himself to a few sentences on the topic Sri Lanka whose problems are less known in Europe, not presenting the essence of the conflict nor the Library's history.

3 M. Friedrich, *The Birth of the Archive. A History of Knowledge*, Michigan 2018.

However, despite the above-stated issues, Ovenden's book is overwhelmingly charming, particularly in the sections related to the history of English culture. Yet, while reading his book one cannot help thinking of the destruction of Polish archives and libraries. Several generations of Polish historians recalled the legendary story of the loss of the oldest books of the *Metrica Regni* on the battlefield of Varna (1444), stained with royal blood. Mention could also be made of the looting of archival records and Polish book collections in the 17th century by Swedish troops. The following book collections were transported to the northern coast of the Baltic from the Royal Castle in Warsaw as well as from the Jesuit colleges in Poznan, Torun, Bydgoszcz, Ostroń, Łuck, Malbork, Grudziądz, Jarosław, Lublin, Sandomierz, Vilnius, Radom, and Cracow. Furthermore, Swedish ships transported northwards books amassed in the Cathedral Libraries in Gniezno and Poznan. Library and archival collections from Royal Prussia were also looted. The archives and library of Warmia Bishops containing the book collection of Nicolaus Copernicus and many other precious collections of kings, magnates, and churches were taken to Sweden. Swedes also looted the books of the *Metrica Regni*, yet these were fortunately regained following the Peace of Oliwa (1660). In 1794, on the eve of the third partition of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Empress Catherine II of Russia decided to close the Załuski Library of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the first Polish national library and one of the largest and grandest book collections of 18th-century Europe, and instructed for its collection to be brought to St Petersburg. Some tens of thousands of manuscripts and prints were irrevocably lost during their transport to Russia, while several hundreds of thousands of works that reached St Petersburg formed the Russian Tsarist Public Library, founded in 1795. Furthermore, it is almost symbolic that following the death of Poland's last king Stanislaus Augustus, his archive, which contained not only private materials but all the files illustrating the state's history under his reign, was dispersed. Thousands of manuscripts and books were destroyed during the partitions: the monastic suppression advanced by all

the partitioning powers caused enormous destruction, as did the Tsar's decision to confiscate private property as a mode of persecution following the Polish uprisings. However, Polish archives and libraries suffered the greatest hecatomb during World War II. The destructive power of Nazi invaders targeted archives and libraries from the first days of the war that archives and libraries. Already in September 1939, enormous damage had been inflicted on them by bombing and shelling. In the subsequent months and years of the German occupation, many libraries were closed, their collections having either been looted, displaced, or exposed to destruction. Warsaw archives and libraries suffered the most. The efforts of dedicated librarians who sacrificed a lot in their attempts to preserve the Polish and European heritage collected in Warsaw's archives and libraries were thwarted by occupation authorities in the last weeks of the World War II. The deliberate action to destroy the most precious literary heritage amassed in libraries was unprecedented in world history. The urban now kept in the National Library, containing ashes of the treasures of Polish and European heritage set on fire in the building of the Library of the Krasiński Entail, stands as mute witness to the September and October actions in 1944 when hundreds of thousands of archival records, library manuscripts, and books, were burned.

Translated by Magdalena Iwińska