

In October of this year, barring divine intervention, the vast circular Reading Room of the British Museum will shut down, to be reopened, if at all, as a sort of museum of itself, a place where people can come and see what the famous Reading Room of the British Museum once looked like. Whereas it is now open only to ticket-holders (not that it's so very difficult to get a ticket), it will soon be made accessible to all the six million people who visit the Museum itself every year. They will have the chance to admire its soaring painted-and-gilded dome, through which light streams down on the battered blue-leather desktops below. They can see for themselves how much it resembles a huge, shabby cathedral, and will be told, presumably, that not only Karl Marx—its most famous denizen—but Matthew Arnold, Yeats, Ruskin, Swinburne, Gissing, and all sorts of other writers virtually lived here for long periods of their lives. (The historian S. R. Gardner spent just about every weekday in the Reading Room for almost fifty years, and read all 23,000 pamphlets from the English Civil War. George Bernard Shaw, who also put in his time here, made it one of the three residual beneficiaries of his will: imagine how many books were bought with the profits from *My Fair Lady*.)

Nobody in England seems pleased with the decision to abandon the Reading Room in favor of the giant new British Library, half a mile away. The new building has been variously likened in the British press to a dog food factory, an oversized public lavatory, and a “Babylonian ziggurat seen through a fun-fair distorting mirror.” The most expensive public construction project ever undertaken in the British Isles, it has been denounced in the House of Commons as “a colossal waste of taxpayers’ money” and “one of the ugliest buildings in the world.” Committees have been formed to look into the disaster—originally due to open in 1980, the building is still not ready for use; a recent inspection showed up over 230,000 defects in its construction; despite being immensely scaled down from its original plans, it has already gone wildly over budget, and the end is not yet in sight.

Nor is the need to have shut down the Reading Room entirely clear. True, it was no longer possible to store the entire collection on the premises, which meant some books were warehoused miles away, and could not be “accessed” for several days. But this problem could have been handled by keeping the Reading

Room for the humanities, and building a separate facility for the other disciplines. Alternatively, it might have been solved by amending an antiquated law under which the Reading Room was awarded the Crown's privilege of receiving a copy of every publication issued in the British Isles: this has made it necessary to find room not only for countless vanity press books but for knitting magazines, parish newsletters, and local council reports on public toilet facilities in Northwest Wales.

Those few defenders of the new library try to justify its existence on the grounds of superior efficiency, yet it is already clear that it is not after all as efficient as they want to pretend. Its electronic shelving system, its computer system, its fire alarm system have all been shown to be defective. Even its storage space is rumored to be inadequate. The real question would seem to be, is it actually necessary for a library to be so very efficient? How quickly do most of us need access to what we now choose to call information rather than knowledge? How disastrous is it if we can't get hold of a particular book for two whole days? Nobody any longer seems willing to admit that whatever he or she is doing is not terribly urgent, that it really doesn't matter if the book or the letter or the proposal arrives today or three days from now. Because we can get things to each other in two seconds via fax or email, we are suddenly persuaded that it is absolutely necessary to do so. Or we are persuaded that the very fact of feeling under pressure, and feeling frantic about it, is proof of our own importance.

In fact, there is something very salutary about the leisurely process of ordering a book in the Reading Room, of trotting around to the various windows where the various bits of paper have to be handed in and then waiting two hours or two days for a book to arrive on one's desk. It restores the old sense of time, a contemplative rather than harried awareness of its passing. It

makes the arrival of the awaited volume into a significant and pleasurable event. It can even confer serenity: to sit under that dome, reading a paperback to while away the time, and then to glance up and catch sight of a pink-and-white old man snoozing gently several seats down, is an oddly dignified experience. One feels sunken into deep time; one does not feel hurried or harassed or even normally impatient. That is what the tourists who will visit the restored Reading Room are not going to understand: the different sense of time, which, as much as the physical beauty of the place, was the great legacy of its Victorian past.

—EVELYN TOYNTON

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