

Book Review: *The Library: A Fragile History*

by Linda Silka

In this Maine Policy Review special issue you have read so much about libraries and their importance in Maine. Libraries continue to serve key roles throughout Maine: in small towns, in large cities, from northernmost Maine to the southern edge. Libraries are learning sites, they are gathering places, they are places where people of different ages, backgrounds, and experiences can feel at home and can have a sense of belonging.

Pettegree and der Weduwen's scholarly analysis, *The Library: A Fragile History*,¹ helps us think about libraries, understand their history, and the implications of the shifting roles they have played. Each of us can benefit from reading this book. Why do I say this? Libraries are so much a part of our culture that we need to understand that they have not always been there and that they may not make it into the future. They could disappear, and this book helps us understand their potential fragility. Over the six parts of the book the authors share with us key components of the fragile history we may not be familiar with: "Inception and Survey," "The Crisis of Print," "The New Collectors," "Between Public and Private," "Fictions," and "The War on Books," and finally the extended postscript: "Reading Without Books."

As the authors point out, "libraries need to adapt to survive, as they have always adapted to survive." The authors provide detailed analysis of this theme throughout the book: "The story of libraries does not offer a story of easy progress through the centuries," "while growth and decline are parts of the

cycles, so too is recovery." "This is a story, then, of many unexpected twists and turns." And the authors make an essential point: "If there is one lesson from the centuries-long story of the library, it is that libraries only last as long as people find them useful."

The authors call our attention to the complexities of usefulness:

The history of the library, it turns out, is a story with many such paradoxes, false dawns and laborious struggle to foster a reading public (13).

They point our attention to different views of what a library is or should be as well as to intriguing paradoxes: "What was a library; were books for display or working tools?" (27). They note, "A second key provision was the prohibition on borrowing books from the library. University libraries regularly struggled with the loss of books, often taken home by professors, sometimes by visitors, once they left they were rarely returned" (144). They point out that "changing university curricula and new models of thought were as great a threat to the success of a library as was destruction by fire or sword. How universities chose to navigate these issues would have a lasting influencing on the future of the institutional library" (145). The authors also discuss the roles that libraries may have served in communities and how this role differed across communities: "Communities were certainly proud of their libraries, and often provided with a prime location in the centre of town" (11).

The book also helps us learn about the varied places across the world that played important roles in the complex and fragile history of libraries (both where libraries were and who could use them), noting that large book collections belonging to European princes were for "public display but not for public use" (61) and that Timbuktu was once a center of book collecting. Through these examples, the authors help us understand the issues that might affect libraries in the future.

Finally, the authors point out that "the creation of libraries became an urban phenomenon: These new classes of book owners were largely city dwellers" (124). We might leave our reading of the book reflecting that Maine is a state largely of small and rural communities. How do we take what we have learned from this book and consider what it means to build a robust and resilient approach to libraries that will ensure their availability to people in the future?

NOTES

- 1 Andrew Pettegree and Arthur der Weduwen, *The Library: A Fragile History*, New York: Basic Books (2021)

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