

Book Reviews

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Richard Ovenden. *Burning the Books: A History of the Deliberate Destruction of Knowledge*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020. Hardcover/Paperback, 308p. \$29.95/\$17.95. (ISBN: 978-0-674-24120-6/978-0-674-27110-4).

In the realm of libraries and archives, where knowledge is safeguarded and curated, *Burning the Books: A History of the Deliberate Destruction of Knowledge* by Richard Ovenden delves deep into the historical tapestry of the destruction of knowledge, heroic acts of preservation, and the individuals who have played pivotal roles in the safeguarding of our shared cultural heritage. Ovenden explores the profound significance of libraries and archives, not just as repositories of information but as institutions that have shaped the evolution of societies, ideologies, and identities.

In this insightful exploration comprising fourteen chapters and a coda, Ovenden presents distinct case studies and themes, interweaving historical accounts with personal narratives and philosophical reflections. His work excels in highlighting the myriad ways in which knowledge has been both threatened and preserved across history. Each chapter presents at least one case study (typically more) that examines a specific event or type of event that has shaped the trajectory of knowledge. From the ancient libraries of Ashurbanipal to the burning of the University of Louvain's library in 1914, Ovenden masterfully captures the emotional weight of these episodes while situating them in their historical and cultural contexts.

He begins by noting the differences between libraries and archives and points out that the act of selecting material and curation is not and never has been neutral as it shapes the narrative of history itself. Subsequent chapters are in chronological order, beginning with the library of Ashurbanipal and ending with the current world of data. Each chapter touches on a theme—the need to combat complacency, the consequences of the suppression of knowledge, the horrors of cultural genocide—as well as difficult decisions regarding curation, the preservation of personal archives, and the construction of archives. By drawing connections between seemingly disparate events, Ovenden illuminates a thread of continuity running through time, reinforcing the critical role of libraries and archives in preserving humanity’s collective memory.

Particularly notable is Ovenden’s meticulous research, which spans from classical antiquity to the digital age. He deftly navigates through historical records, weaving anecdotes of antiquarians, scholars, and librarians to underscore the significance of knowledge preservation. His ability to humanize historical figures, such as John Leland and his role in the Reformation in England, allows readers to empathize with the challenges faced by those who sought to safeguard knowledge during times of upheaval. One of the most emotional chapters focuses on World War II Germany and the extraordinary efforts of individuals such as Herman Kruk, Moshe Abramowicz, and Dr. Antanas Ulpis to save as much Jewish culture and knowledge as possible through the preservation and smuggling of books and manuscripts.

The chapters on the destruction of libraries during wartime, such as the burning of the Library of Congress (twice), and the destruction of the National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992, are powerful reminders of the cultural genocide that occurs when knowledge is targeted. Ovenden points out that archives are often targets of attack because they house the records of the people living in the area and, especially for former colonies, can be embarrassing or troublesome for the colonizers. Alternatively, the successful preservation of at least some part of these archives can help heal. An example of this healing aftereffect is the manner in which Germany handled access to the records of the Stasi after the fall of East Germany. By exploring deliberate acts of destruction and their aftermath, Ovenden highlights the symbolic weight of libraries and archives as bearers of identity and heritage.

The main weakness of *Burning the Books* is its focus on Western libraries, archives, and case studies. While the book briefly discusses cases from Iraq, Algeria, and other regions, these examples are supplied in connection to European or American involvement. In one chapter, Ovenden discusses Iraq and the devastation wrecked on the country’s records. However, the claim being asserted revolves around migrated archives. The various archive collections from Iraq are currently being “temporarily” housed in the United States. Although this case study covers Iraq and its archives, the

main point is that the archives are held in the U.S. This geographic focus limits the book's range and neglects multiple examples from around the world. The destruction of knowledge and the need to preserve cultural heritage is not unique to the U.S. or Europe. In fact, the deliberate destruction of knowledge may even occur more frequently in other parts of the world due to the aftereffects of colonization. The narrow scope of the book has the potential to leave readers with an incomplete understanding of the global network of knowledge.

Moreover, while Ovenden discusses the significance of each case study, some chapters could benefit from a more explicit connection to the broader theme of libraries and archives. While many chapters delve into the destruction of libraries, it would be enriching to explore the methods by which these libraries were organized, curated, and used, tying these practices to broader notions of knowledge preservation. One of the few libraries that is discussed in great depth is the Bodleian Library, which Ovenden directs.

Burning the Books addresses a profound need to recognize the historical and contemporary importance of libraries and archives. In an era marked by digital information overload, loss of personal data, "fake news," and misinformation, Ovenden's work serves as a rallying cry for the preservation of truth, culture, and identity. By highlighting the destructive forces that have targeted caches of knowledge throughout history, Ovenden underscores the urgency of preserving these repositories as anchors of truth in a sea of uncertainty. He also underscores the importance of personal archives and an individual's right to choose what happens with their work and/or data. This is especially prevalent in the final chapters as Ovenden delves into the modern digital age and the subsequent need for continued open access to information and data.

Ovenden's book is a powerful reminder of the importance of the preservation of information and knowledge. It reveals the intricate interplay between knowledge, power, and preservation, and is a helpful resource for educators, historians, archivists, and librarians seeking to illuminate the role of libraries and archives in society. The book's unique strength, however, is its ability to engage a general audience. Ovenden does not use any jargon without providing an explanation of its meaning. Moreover, he gives the historical background for all of the events and information about all of the individuals involved. This in turn makes the complex topics Ovenden addresses easy to read and understand. This text is an effective tool for educating the public about the critical importance of libraries as bastions of culture and memory.

This work is exceptionally well suited for classroom settings, in which discussions of history, culture, and the preservation of knowledge are paramount. Its detailed research and engaging narrative style make it accessible to both academics and a general readership. Additionally, *Burning the Books* serves as a clarion call for governments

and societies to recognize the indispensable role of libraries and archives, urging them to allocate resources to sustain these vital repositories and ensure the continuity of human knowledge and understanding.

In conclusion, Richard Ovenden's *Burning the Books* masterfully encapsulates the intricate dance between knowledge, destruction, and preservation throughout human history. By examining diverse case studies and drawing parallels across time, he reminds us of the weight libraries and archives carry as beacons of truth, culture, and identity. The book's strengths are its evocative storytelling, meticulous research, and overarching message that knowledge preservation is not only a historical endeavor but a moral imperative for a society seeking to understand its past, navigate its present, and shape its future. — *Ruthann E. Mowry, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*

Audra Eagle Yun, editor. *Archival Accessioning*. Chicago, Illinois: Society of American Archivists, 2021. Paperback, 170p. \$55. (ISBN: 978-1-945246-56-2).

Audra Eagle Yun's *Archival Accessioning* is an excellent introductory text for any archival practitioner looking to build an accessioning program or understand the distinction between accessioning and processing. Yun fills a notable gap in the literature by elevating the labor behind accessioning work and providing clear guidance on what accessioning entails. The work is divided into two parts: part 1 outlines the history, principles, and labor aspects of archival accessioning; the second section comprises case studies that apply these workflows to a variety of institutional types and material formats.

The first part provides a detailed overview of accessioning practices, from brief entries in logbooks to current emerging practices. This section excels at demonstrating how accessioning has always existed, although it has been on the sidelines of archival praxis and discussion rather than a core practice in an archives program. It distinguishes accessioning as its own collection management function and centers it as vital to an extensible processing program. Yun then proceeds to detail each stage of accessioning a collection, from pre-custodial interventions to provision of minimal access points. Yun also details the range of functions that a well-rounded accessioning program can contribute to, from broader collections assessments to reappraisal and deaccessioning work.

Part 2 is composed of a series of case studies from several practitioners that demonstrate how accessioning practices may differ across institution types, material formats, and different contexts such as deposits, retrospective accessions, and additions to existing collections. Far from being repetitive, these case studies capture the complexity of this labor and are necessary for understanding the practical application of accessioning practices. These case studies show how to approach a variety of collec-