



## Conclusion

**Abstract** This conclusion considers the roles that colonial public libraries played in a wider imperial context, focusing on their contribution to a global ‘civilising’ process and to the emergence of an economic world system of goods, capital, and people. Looking also at the role of public libraries in educating the working classes and the youth of the colonies, it argues that these libraries were part of a larger programme of civic education that sought to define a new type of egalitarian colonial citizenry. It ends by providing a comparative summary of the case study libraries under discussion, as well as contextualising these libraries within developments relating to library provision in nineteenth-century America, Britain, and British India.

**Keywords** Imperialism • Citizenship • Education • Public libraries  
• British India

The inauguration in 1860 of the neoclassical building that currently houses the SAPL took place against the political backdrop of the visit to the Cape Colony of Prince Alfred, Queen Victoria’s second son. Keen to exploit the symbolic capital embodied in the visit by the emissary of the ‘centre of Christianity and of civilization’ to ‘the extremity of this ancient continent, which was the cradle of civilization and art’, the Cape Colony’s Governor, Sir George Grey, used the occasion to argue for the centrality

of the SAPL in particular, and the Cape Colony more broadly, to the work of the British Empire on the African continent.<sup>1</sup>

Grey's historiographical framing of the SAPL in his address situates southern Africa's foremost nineteenth-century research library in a genealogy of civilising institutions on the African continent that dates back to the foundation of the first library at Alexandria as a 'seat of Christianity and civilization' in the midst of the 'ignorance, sloth, and barbarism' that, according to Grey, characterised the cultural and intellectual lives of sub-Saharan Africa's Indigenous populations when unmoored from the benevolent influence of Christian colonisers and their political and cultural institutions.<sup>2</sup> While in the Cape Colony this historical narrative followed the Manichean logic of hardening colonial racism, public libraries in the Australian colonies also framed themselves as 'institutions for the safety and security of our national progress' and 'tools for the spreading of civilization'.<sup>3</sup> In the Straits Settlements, the rhetoric surrounding the Singapore Institution, and its related free school and library, similarly imagined it both as a local 'source of information and enlightenment to the neighbouring states and stations' from Siam to Sarawak, and as a more general 'beacon' within a larger British Empire.<sup>4</sup>

The belief that a public library was part of a global 'civilising' process linked to the wider functions and practices of empire was in many ways associated with the special role that missionaries and evangelical groups had played in establishing reading and print cultures in the colonies, but it also reflected the evangelising tendencies of nineteenth-century imperialism more generally. Sir George Grey, whose gubernatorial career in the southern colonies was inseparable from the evangelically-inflected Anglicanism that underpinned it, explicitly argued that the SAPL was the symbolic manifestation of the attempt 'boldly entered' into by Britain 'of establishing civilization and Christianity in this continent, and of spreading their blessings through the boundless territories which lie beyond our [colonial] borders'.<sup>5</sup>

Grey's speech exemplifies how the inauguration ceremonies of colonial public libraries were seized upon by colonial administrators as public opportunities to present their emergent national narratives on a world stage. Addressing themselves to a global Anglophone audience, the oratorical performances of colonial governors on these occasions enabled them to argue for the central role of their colonies in the British imperial world system that, as the nineteenth century progressed, was characterised by increasing intra-imperial competition as each colony sought to capitalise

on the mass transfers of emigrants, capital, and goods that flowed across the British Empire.

At the laying of the foundation for a new public library building in Adelaide in 1879, Governor Sir W. F. Drummond Jervis, previously Governor of the Straits Settlements from 1875 to 1877 and future Governor of New Zealand from 1883 to 1888, was equally keen to emphasise the interconnection between the role of the public library as a publicly accessible reference library facilitating ‘the satisfactory pursuit of study’ and the broader economic life of the colony.<sup>6</sup> Drummond Jervis’s speech links the free diffusion of knowledge across the social world of the settler colony with the opening of new economic, geographical, and extractive frontiers:

It is most important that the Library should contain works bearing on discoveries in physical science and the industrial arts, particularly those referring most directly to the unfolding and opening up of the natural and artificial resources of new countries.<sup>7</sup>

In this rhetorical doubling, the industrious student in the reference library is as much a part of the economic fabric of the colony as the gold and copper mines that had, by 1876, sprung up in the hills and mountains surrounding Adelaide. This link between the intellectual and mineral resources of the colony is also mobilised by Grey through the metaphor of the mine. The SAPL is ‘a great mine for all South Africa, in which is treasured up the wealth acquired by many mighty minds of various races and of many ages, which may be consulted free of cost by all students who may resort to it’.<sup>8</sup> In both these cases, free access to knowledge provides the cultural capital and practical expertise that enables wealth creation and territorial expansion.

The centrality of scientific and industrial knowledge to the colony’s economic survival was framed by Drummond Jervis in the Darwinian language of global and regional intra-colonial competition. Recognising that ‘technological movement is greatly extending its influence in all civilized nations’, he views the public library as a means of placing responsibility for technological innovation, and working-class education, in the hands of an (implicitly middle-class) colonial citizenry rather than state institutions: ‘it behoves you to use every reasonable effort to place at the disposal of your artisans information bearing on the industrial occupations which are so intimately connected with your present and future welfare’.<sup>9</sup> Only by collectively disseminating knowledge and technological innovations to an industrious artisanal class can South Australia be adequately equipped

to win the ‘race’ ‘you will have to run in the future—not only with foreign countries but with even your neighbours on this continent’.<sup>10</sup>

That Drummond Jervis viewed South Australia as ready to compete not only with the other Australian colonies but also with industrial Europe indicates the accelerated pace at which the southern colonies had modernised during the period 1820–1880. With their unique opportunities for upward social mobility and their relatively high levels of literacy, the motivation for the establishment of public libraries in colonial societies was not confined to the need to replicate and ‘keep pace’ with the institutions of the ‘old country’. Such libraries were also seen as a way of promoting and maximising the potential of emerging ‘young countries’ by disseminating knowledge and encouraging life-long learning.

Reporting on the ceremony opening the Sydney FPL on 30 September 1869, the *Sydney Morning Herald* printed verbatim the Earl of Belmore’s inauguration address, which argued that the FPL would help to remedy the ‘disadvantage’ of those ‘whose early education has been neglected, or whose means of purchasing books have been limited’:

In these colonies the highest positions are open to all who are qualified by education and ability to fill them; and, although it may rarely happen that a total want of early education can be in after-life supplied, yet it cannot be doubted that this institution may be the means of doing much in furtherance of the endeavours of those who may be trying to remedy such a want, as well as of those more fortunate persons, who only seek to keep up and increase that knowledge which they have acquired in the period of youth.<sup>11</sup>

Of particular interest here is not just the implicit invocation of a continuous life-cycle of learning, but also the sense of how a specifically colonial egalitarianism could aid in that continuous learning. Yet for all its rhetorical commitment to what appear to be meritocratic principles of universal access to education, it must also be borne in mind that the FPL’s utilitarian imperative towards self-improvement and continuous learning was balanced by a strategic policing of the boundaries between improving and frivolous knowledge. At the same moment that the Earl of Belmore acknowledged that the Sydney FPL was an integral part of the colony’s education system, John Dunmore Lang, a former proprietor of the ASL, noted that the FPL would focus upon acquiring non-fiction books ‘likely to afford instruction to the public at large’ rather than fiction which was deemed ‘of little use to the community’.<sup>12</sup>

Library committee men throughout the southern colonies and Straits Settlements therefore conceived of the role of a public library as both an

opportunity to aid the progress of the ‘march of the intellect’ across the colonies through the free diffusion of knowledge and as a means of directing the young and the working classes towards educative information that would further the economic and cultural agendas already set by their social superiors. At the opening of the SAI, Rowland Rees, chairman of the Board of Governors, defined the purpose of the continuous learning facilitated by free public libraries as ‘the utilization and development of all the powers of men for the best purpose, adding to the productiveness of industry ... the wealth-producing power ... the improvements in inventive skill ... [and] the fostering of character, economy, morality, and social influence’.<sup>13</sup> In this marrying of egalitarian idealism and economic instrumentalism, the patrons and administrators of the public libraries of the southern colonies positioned their institutions at the centre of a capacious programme of civic education that aimed to mould the intellectual, social, and economic lives of an increasingly assertive colonial citizenry.

The rhetorical and ideological similarities between these three speeches are suggestive of shared attitudes towards early public library culture and provision across the southern colonies. At the same time, however, this study has shown that the specifics of that provision differed considerably in each jurisdiction. In the case of the Cape Colony, the example of the free-to-access Dessinian Collection, which followed a relatively well-developed tradition of freely accessible reference libraries in Joachim Nicolaas von Dessin’s native Germany, is likely to have been influential in the establishment of the SAPL.<sup>14</sup> In the decade preceding the granting of limited self-rule to the Cape Colony in 1854, the SAPL committee foregrounded the library’s role as part of a cluster of colonial educational institutions aimed at honing the intellectual and moral sensibilities of its citizens.

In the same period, the MPL was similarly linked to a ‘consortium’ or ‘loose confederation’ of institutions—including the Supreme Court and University of Melbourne—celebrating the colony of Victoria’s independence after its separation from New South Wales in 1851 and the achievement of responsible government in 1854.<sup>15</sup> At the joint laying of the foundation stones of the MPL and the University of Melbourne in 1854, the Speaker of the Legislative Council, Dr Palmer, identified these institutions as the ‘quarry’ from ‘which students would draw the material with which to store their minds with useful and varied knowledge’, making explicit the link between the intellectual improvement provided by the MPL and the civic development of the colony as a whole.<sup>16</sup> In New South Wales, on the other hand, the establishment of the Sydney FPL in 1869

was hindered rather than helped by a notoriously elitist local government. While from the 1870s onwards municipal rate-funded libraries were established in greater numbers in the Australian colonies than elsewhere, relatively few survived into the twentieth century.<sup>17</sup> The TPL is an outlying example of a comparatively large, rate-supported municipal library in nineteenth-century colonial Australia.

In Singapore and the rest of the Straits Settlements, library development was more haphazard and uncoordinated. From 1833 until 1867, the British administration in Calcutta actively pursued a policy of non-intervention in the Straits. Until the establishment of the RLM in 1874, libraries and schools were funded primarily by a combination of private initiatives, missionary interventions, and small ‘grants-in-aid’.<sup>18</sup> In contrast, public library provision in British India has been described as ‘far [a]head of contemporary thinking on these issues worldwide’.<sup>19</sup> By the first half of the nineteenth century, the three presidency towns each had a public library of sorts. While the Madras Literary Society (est. 1818), the Bombay General Library (est. 1820), and the Calcutta Public Library (est. 1836) all retained membership fees, they also had a policy that permitted free access to students and ‘respectable strangers visiting the City’.<sup>20</sup> Early nineteenth-century library provision in India was therefore characterised by a relative openness that was increasingly replicated in the southern colonies. While library management committees in all jurisdictions were primarily composed of white, male, middle-class professionals, access provisions and opening hours were notably more relaxed than in Britain.

Priya Joshi’s list of available authors of British fiction held across libraries in nineteenth-century India suggests a significant overlap with the best-stocked authors in the SAPL and RLM, including Bulwer-Lytton, Scott, Dickens, Marryat, and James.<sup>21</sup> These authors were also popular in Britain, reflecting not only the provenance of most of the books in the public libraries of the southern colonies, but also publishing distribution practices and agents’ selection policies.<sup>22</sup> By the 1850s, the SL, for example, was getting its books primarily from Mudie’s Circulating Library, which itself stocked books (mainly fiction) intended for conservative middle-class audiences. Experienced colonial agents and/or publishers based in London, such as J. M. Richardson and Smith, Elder & Co. tended either to promote their own books or to distribute books and series from publishers such as Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, themselves prevalent on the shelves of British circulating libraries.

Given the popularity of fiction among subscribers, libraries that retained the user-pays subscription model were more likely to hold higher proportions of fiction and lower proportions of science, history, and biography. As a subscription library with demanding members, the SAI defended its level of fiction holdings and its role as a provider of entertainment, arguing more forcefully than the other libraries for the utility-value of fiction. The SAPL, MPL, and FPL, on the other hand, held significantly less prose fiction, reflecting their status as serious reference libraries. The MPL and FPL went further than the other colonial public libraries in limiting their novels to 'edifying' authors such as Edgeworth, Scott, Disraeli, and Richardson. By 1871, the Melbourne *Age* reported that the MPL contained 'only about 300 volumes of light literature and fiction' and relatively few periodicals.<sup>23</sup>

Attitudes towards archiving local print and manuscript material differed considerably across the southern colonies. In Singapore and Cape Town, where there were either significant Indigenous populations or large non-white diasporic populations from China, India, and the Malay Archipelago, there was a more concerted effort to collect the results of ethnographic field work. In the case of both the RLM and the SAPL, large donations and bequests of ethnographic materials by the gentleman ethnographers James Richardson Logan and George Grey were important catalysts for both the collection of ethnographic knowledge and its production. Grey's appointment in 1856 of the eminent German comparative philologist Wilhelm Bleek as the librarian and cataloguer of his collection at the SAPL was a conscious effort to put African philology on the disciplinary map of the European scientific establishment. Meanwhile, the RLM's 1878 purchase of Logan's ethnological and philological book collection, and its close relationship with the Straits Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, gradually transformed the RLM into a regional centre for the collection of ethnographic material on the Indigenous peoples of Southeast Asia.

Despite Redmond Barry's interest in comparative philology and Aboriginal languages, this archiving of Indigenous knowledge production was not replicated either at the MPL or any of the other public libraries in colonial Australia in the 1850s, 1860s, and 1870s, pointing to different attitudes towards so-called salvage ethnography, as well as to diverse understandings of the role of the public library in fostering colonial 'national self-purpose'.<sup>24</sup> Collections of local settler pamphlets, books, and manuscripts, and of material relating to particular regions, were also more assiduously pursued in Cape Town and Singapore between 1840 and 1880. In contrast to these libraries and to libraries in Britain, the collection and

archiving of local material was more haphazard in the Australian colonies. In Melbourne, the first purchase of Australian manuscript material by the library (as opposed to donations or bequests) did not occur until 1913, and it was not until the mid-twentieth century that a real commitment to the archiving of Australian materials was established.<sup>25</sup>

In terms of library users, attitudes towards women and the working classes were consistent across all the libraries in the southern colonies, but the most trenchant was the MPL, which perceived its opening hours and open access policy to be particularly attractive to loafers and loungers, and hence imposed high standards of dress, behaviour, and cleanliness. While the number of loafers who frequented the MPL was probably small, the library was nonetheless frequently ridiculed by colonial newspapers for becoming a haven for vagrants, who wished simply to escape inclement weather. The creation of a ladies' room in 1859 was mostly viewed in a positive light as encouraging respectable behaviour within the library's walls and consequently discouraging the disreputable loafers. Women readers were nonetheless frequently associated with light and frivolous reading. The RLM was the only library to explicitly contemplate its use by non-white readers in the nineteenth century, and had at least one prominent Chinese businessman on its management committee, as well as a small number of Malay, Chinese, and Indian subscribers. In Cape Town and the Australian colonies, on the other hand, Indigenous readers were mainly served by mission libraries. The lack of involvement of Indigenous populations in the establishment and use of public libraries in the southern hemisphere colonies differs considerably from the example of British India, where, as Joshi has noted, the Calcutta Public Library was 'expressly set up with the fiscal, political, and ideological collaboration between Indians and the British'.<sup>26</sup> While to some extent this was the result of the demographic profiles of the Presidency towns with their large Indian populations and small British administrative class, such collaborations were not always realised in other franchise colonies with large Indigenous or non-European populations, such as the Cape Colony.

While the effect of the British *Public Libraries Act* was palpable on the emergence of public libraries in the southern colonies in the 1850s and 1860s, in many ways early public library provision in colonial Australia, Southeast Asia, and South Africa more closely follows developments in British India than in Britain or America. As in India, many of the most important public libraries in the southern colonies evolved from volunteer or community attempts to amalgamate or extend subscription libraries (for example, the FPL and RLM) and mechanics' institutes (for example, the SAI), or from



government grants canvassed by prominent community members (for example, the MPL) rather than from centralised municipal legislation, which was enacted in Australia, the Cape Colony, and Singapore in the 1860s and 1870s with mixed results. In America, on the other hand, legislation in the 1850s enabled free libraries on a town level in a handful of states, rising to around 188 municipal libraries by 1876.<sup>27</sup>

Like their metropolitan counterparts, colonial public libraries in the British southern hemisphere and Straits Settlements in the 1870s and 1880s were important but still relatively isolated examples of a new liberal emphasis on the provision of ‘civilising’ and self-improving educational opportunities for the working classes and, to a lesser extent, Indigenous populations. Despite claims that libraries like the MPL were more like ‘a magnificent library of a private mansion’ than ‘an institute for the people’,<sup>28</sup> these libraries were a source of pride and civic empowerment for their communities, feeding into debates about self-governance, federation, and responsible government, as well as being part of the growth of a wider publicly funded civic infrastructure that reflected the developing maturity of colonial states. Most obviously, such libraries were influential in shaping questions of incipient ‘national’ identities, but they were also important communicative institutions, influencing and regulating public discourse by deciding what information was made available to the public and which groups were involved in their participatory mechanisms. They therefore played a formative role in shaping colonial public discourse in the nineteenth century, contributing to broader public-sphere debates on questions of race, self-governance, and imperial citizenship, and helping to instantiate ideologies of productive work and improving leisure that were increasingly central to the self-definition of the ‘modern’ colonial states in which they were situated.

## NOTES

1. *Inauguration of the New Buildings Erected for the South African Public Library and Museum, by His Royal Highness Prince Alfred. 18th September 1860* (Cape Town: Saul Solomon, 1860), 4.
2. *Inauguration*, 5–6.
3. *The South Australian Institute: Comprising the Public Library, Art Gallery, and Museums. Addresses Delivered at the Laying of the Foundation* (Adelaide: W. K. Thomas and Co., 1879), 11.
4. *The Report of the Singapore Institution Free Schools for the Year 1856–57* (Singapore: Straits Times Press by G. M. Frederick, 1858), 10.

5. *Inauguration*, 6.
6. *South Australian Institute*, 14.
7. *South Australian Institute*, 15.
8. *Inauguration*, 8.
9. *South Australian Institute*, 16–17.
10. *South Australian Institute*, 17.
11. *Sydney Morning Herald*, October 1, 1869, 5.
12. *Sydney Morning Herald*, October 1, 1869, 5.
13. *South Australian Institute*, 6.
14. See Hans G. Schulte-Albert, ‘Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Library Classification’, *The Journal of Library History (1966–1972)* 6, no. 2 (1971): 133–152.
15. Sue Reynolds, ‘Libraries, Librarians, and Librarianship in the Colony of Victoria’, *Australian Academic and Research Libraries* 40, no. 1 (2013): 50–64 (59).
16. *Argus* (Melbourne), July 4, 1854, 4.
17. See, for example, David J. Jones, ‘Public Library Development in New South Wales’, *The Australian Library Journal* 54, no. 2 (2003): 130–137.
18. Edward Lim Huck Tee, *Libraries in West Malaysia and Singapore* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Library, 1970), 12.
19. Jashu Patel and Krishan Kumar, *Libraries and Librarianship in India* (Westport CN: Greenwood Press), 9; *Singapore Free Press and Mercantile Advertiser*, August 24, 1843, 2.
20. *East India Company Board’s Collection 1838–1839*, 20, quoted in Priya Joshi, *In Another Country: Colonialism, Culture and the English Novel in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 46.
21. Joshi, *In Another Country*, 64.
22. For popular authors, see Richard Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public, 1800–1900* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), Appendices B and C. For importation and distribution practices in the Australian colonies, see Graeme Johanson, *A Study of Colonial Editions in Australia, 1843–1972* (Wellington: Elibank Press, 2000).
23. *Age* (Melbourne), June 17, 1871, quoted in David McVilly, ‘“Something to Blow About”?—the State Library of Victoria, 1856–1880’, *La Trobe Journal* 8 (1971): 81–90 (86). The FPL retained selected works of prose fiction in its reference collection but they were not available for borrowing.
24. Heather Gaunt, ‘Identity and Nation in the Australian Public Library: The Development of Local and National Collections 1850s–1940s, Using the Tasmanian Public Library as Case Study’ (PhD diss., University of Tasmania, 2010), 157, accessed August 6, 2018: [https://eprints.utas.edu.au/10772/2/Gaunt\\_whole.pdf](https://eprints.utas.edu.au/10772/2/Gaunt_whole.pdf).

25. Gaunt, 'Identity and Nation in the Australian Public Library', 45.
26. Joshi, *In Another Country*, 53, 54, 55.
27. Wayne A. Weigand, *Part of our Lives: A People's History of The American Public Library* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 25–26, 28, 48.
28. A 1859 letter in an unidentified newspaper in *Newspaper Cuttings Relating to the State Library of Victoria*, cited in McVilly, "'Something to Blow About"?', 89.

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