

‘A STRUGGLE FOR LIGHT’: THE FREE LIBRARY MOVEMENT IN NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE, C.1860-1880

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Introduction

In Victorian Britain, public libraries emerged as a new and radical agency for the enlightenment of popular cultural taste. Historians such as Alistair Black have located the historical development of the institution in broad political and intellectual contexts, pointing to a new perspective that goes beyond descriptive accounts and narrowly Whiggish views.¹ Alongside other leisure activities for ‘rational recreation’, the experience of public libraries has been discussed in terms of ‘social control’.² It has been also argued that the public library system might have strengthened disciplinary control over the people.³ Patrick Joyce has discussed the institution’s ideological strategy in a subtler way, explaining how it embodied a supposedly neutral doctrine of liberalism and was intended to produce a sense of good community life.⁴

This article explores the institutionalization of the free public library in English towns, taking the case of Newcastle upon Tyne. Particularly, I locate this institution in its Victorian social and intellectual contexts, and put stress on how its rationale shifted subtly, but unquestionably, from the *free* library to the *public* library, and what this transition implies with regard to urban governance. First, I discuss the free library movement in Newcastle, especially focusing on a series of debate over the institution’s principles. While the free library was expected to liberate people from ignorance and mental slavery, its liberal cause was fiercely challenged by hostile lobbies in the sphere of local government. Second, champions of the free library increasingly placed the accent on the sense of the communal good, along with the individual’s freedom in ‘self-culture’. Thus, they employed the inclusive rhetoric of ‘civic unity’ and ‘local

patriotism' in order to encourage people's active participation in a civic public sphere. The free library was internally and externally designed to inspire such civic feelings. Third, I look at how library facilities were engineered to serve for the liberal mission in a neo-Foucauldian mode of 'governmentality'. While the individual's ease of 'self-culture' was secured to a great extent, library users were placed in such free and transparent a space that everyone should be implicitly conscious of the public and abide by a civil code. Thus, the free library served to teach the uneducated masses and make them into a community of self-governing citizens.

1. Producing an intellectual democracy

Free libraries spread across Britain from the 1850s onwards. Until that time, the opportunity of book reading had been limited to a corner of society. Private libraries such as those of learned societies, schools, churches and subscription organizations had offered their reading facilities only to a limited number of the qualified members.⁵ On the other hand, free libraries were intended to provide a great repository of knowledge accessible to everyone on free and equal terms. The key rationale of this new institution was Millian intellectual democracy. In his treatise *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill claimed that for the progress of civil society every doctrine should be achieved through vigorous discursive challenges. As a precondition, the 'atmosphere of mental slavery' must be cleared away so that 'an intellectually active people' could participate in the arena of confrontational ideas on a free and equal basis.⁶ Thus, liberal provision of culture was deemed vital in securing the individual's open-minded exploration of better ways of life. Early Victorian champions of the free library, such as William Ewart and Edward Edwards, insisted that members of the public should be enabled to take advantage of 'self-culture' and learn how to act as civilized subjects.⁷

Thanks to the enthusiasm of Ewart and Edwards, Parliament passed the Public Libraries Act in 1850, which sanctioned for the first time the municipal creation of free libraries and museums. However, like anything

else in the civic administrative sphere, the support of early free libraries was based on the voluntary initiative of local government and generous patrons. Municipal corporations had to run them on the rates, or in a few cases some wealthy gentlemen might support the cause by making voluntary donations. The 1850 Act granted any municipal corporation of more than 10,000 population the power to levy a half penny rate for library buildings, provided that at least two thirds of the ratepayers consented. The Amendments of 1855 and 1866 progressively allowed municipal corporations to adopt the Act more easily and raise a one-penny rate.⁸ Reactions were various. In 1852 Manchester opened one of the earliest free libraries, but not many towns were so successful. It was only in the 1870s that free libraries came to spread extensively across the country, along with the introduction of the new parliamentary franchise in 1867 and universal education in 1870.

Compared with other provincial towns, Newcastle was remarkably behindhand. The city's first municipal library opened only in 1880. In 1854 William Newton, a radical Town Councillor, had initially proposed the foundation of a free library. He claimed that it would moralize the masses, who otherwise might become 'readers of the licentious, disgusting literature ... in the garbage of the cheap press'.⁹ However, his initial proposal did not win enough support from the ratepayers. After Newton's death in 1863, his son, Henry William Newton, took over the campaign, and made another proposal to the Town Council in 1870.¹⁰ The Free Library Committee (later Public Libraries Committee) was finally formed in May 1874. Newton was appointed Chairman, and nominated Committee members from a wide range of the city's leading citizens, regardless of their political affiliations. The list of the Committee included a number of notable liberals and radicals, such as Joseph Cowen, Robert Spence Watson, and William Edwin Adams, as well as Charles Hamond, Conservative M.P..¹¹ Cowen was a nonconformist Liberal M.P. for Newcastle, and as the proprietor of the *Newcastle Chronicle* led the popular press for the advancement of radical causes, domestic and overseas.¹² Adams collaborated with Cowen as chief editor of the *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle*, better known for his Cromwellian pseudonym 'Ironsides' in the paper.

The radical wing of the Newcastle leaders regarded the free library as a great boon to the intellectual life of the public, especially of the working class: one Town Councillor stated that a free library would be 'on behalf of the great body of working men and their sons who do really need such an institution'.¹³ Adams played a significant role in the free library movement, offering his 'Ironside' columns in support of the cause all the way through.¹⁴ He was encouraged by one special correspondent from America, George Julian Harney. A well-known former Chartist, Harney had settled in Boston, where a municipal library enjoyed great fame. Convinced of its potential for intellectual democracy, he urged his fellow radicals in Newcastle to fight for it. In 1875 Harney even used his personal influence in Boston society to send a collection of books as a transatlantic public gift from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts to the Corporation of Newcastle—a supportive gesture for an as yet unresolved case.¹⁵

Still, in Newcastle, the free library movement had to fight persistent opposition for another several years. There was a widespread suspicion that free libraries might spread extremely radical ideas, and drive people to destructive anti-social action. Some leading figures of the free library movement were accused of their association with violent revolutionaries. Alderman Thomas Leslie Gregson openly denounced the Free Library Committee because 'a very considerable part of them are those of the most notorious Whig-Radicals—who are publicly known to keep the town in a state of hot water and constant agitation'.¹⁶ Later, in 1878, a letter to the *Newcastle Journal* opposed Adams's participation in the Committee, accusing him of once having written the 'bloodthirsty' pamphlet *Tyrannicide* in defence of Felice Orsini's terrorist attack on Napoleon III.

Surely there must be some terrible Jonah on the board that it constantly finds itself drifting into troubled waters and in danger of being shipwrecked! ... The writer of this bloodthirsty work undisguisedly advocated the assassination of the late Napoleon III, and seeks to inculcate his diabolical doctrines into the minds of the working classes of this country ...¹⁷

Actually, such a feud was largely irrelevant to the political party division between Liberals and Conservatives. Where charismatic leaders with great local followings like Cowen had a strong personal influence on civic affairs, Liberals and Conservatives had few major battles over municipal business.¹⁸ During the second half of the nineteenth century, emerging local party organizations came to work effectively for the electorate control, and fought parliamentary elections over national and international issues such as Irish Home Rule and Free Trade. With regard to local government, however, these agents had no party agenda until the 1890s.¹⁹ Even in Parliament, party control was not so rigid at that time. Cowen was affiliated with Liberals in municipal affairs, but claimed an independent position in Parliament and even voted in favour of Disraeli's foreign policy.²⁰

The weak party politics at the municipal level did not mean that provincial urban elites were in total agreement on local government—far from it in the case of a town like Newcastle, which often saw intense confrontations heating up between those who sought further urban improvement at the cost of higher local taxes on the one hand, and those who did not want it on the other. Town Councillors often disagreed on what project was worthwhile—even regarding such pressing matters as sanitation, let alone cultural welfare of the inhabitants. Eventually, such antagonism hindered adequate investment in many local improvement schemes.²¹ The Finance Committee was notorious in this regard, as one Councillor complained that '[r]eferring matters to the Finance Committee simply meant, in nine cases out of ten, shelving them'.²²

Behind the fiscal split in municipal government between 'improvers' and 'economisers' was a growing social antagonism among Newcastle ratepayers. The Municipal Reform Act of 1835 had replaced a Tory oligarchy with a ratepayers' democracy. Middle-class liberals were in control now. However, their dominance was increasingly undermined by a growing lower echelon of ratepayers, who formed a hostile lobby against what they saw as extravagant, unnecessary enterprises.²³ A large number of ratepayers were the owners of small properties such as shops, pubs and lodging houses, and they suffered from increasing burdens more

seriously than wealthy suburban dwellers. In the case of the Newcastle Free Library, many ratepayers considered it unfair to establish such an institution at their expense in order to help working-class users who did not pay rates. Especially in the 1870s, there was a growing recognition of economic depression, and such people had no stomach to increase the rates. When a public meeting resolved to adopt the Public Libraries Act in March 1874, nearly 1,100 'overburthened' Newcastle ratepayers rallied a day later to protest against it.²⁴

Besides the fear of overtaxation, many ratepayers had an aversion to the free provision of knowledge as a violation of their own self-help ethic. Although the rational benefits of book reading could not be doubted, unconditional endowment to anyone at the expense of the public seemed indulgent to them. A group of ratepayers petitioned against the free library, criticizing 'the right of persons who have no need of eleemosynary aid to take our money for the purpose of supplying themselves with a miscellaneous collection of books and newspapers, many of which ... would be of doubtful advantage to their readers'.²⁵ In the early stages of the free library movement across Britain, the most hostile reactions came from Mechanics' Institutes and Working Men's Clubs. These voluntary institutions owned libraries for the 'diffusion of useful knowledge' on a private basis, and made educational programmes available to aspiring and self-helping workmen at their cooperative expense.²⁶ It was suspected that free libraries would ruin such independent institutions and spoil a self-helping chance of working-class improvement. Alderman Gregson, President of the Newcastle Mechanics' Institute, complained that 'if a free library were established it would swamp the Mechanics' Institute, for the two could not exist together',²⁷ and 'it [was] quite absurd to say there was a want of a library at all'.²⁸

The rift was soon to come out. While looking for the new library's site, the Free Library Committee began to consider Higham Place, New Bridge Street, as the best location. In 1877 they managed to include in a local Town Improvement Bill a clause granting the Corporation to purchase a required portion of land in the city centre for a free library. Actually, the Mechanics' Institute was among the owners of the properties to be expropriated. Standing for their own interest, Alderman

Gregson referred to 'this public nuisance' and condemned the clause in question having been 'smuggled into the Bill'.²⁹ As Parliament passed the Bill, the Mechanics' Institute was forced to choose whether to compete with the neighbouring free library, or to give up their independence. In 1878 the Free Library Committee and the Mechanics' Institute went into negotiations for incorporation. Now, both sides came to stress a friendly nature of that arrangement: Gregson now claimed that the Mechanics' Institute was 'highly favourable to the free library';³⁰ W.E. Adams noted, '[i]t was not the absorption of the one in the other that was sought, but the amalgamation of the two for the advantageous of both'.³¹ The agreed conditions were that the liabilities of the Mechanics' Institute properties and books amounting to £2,000 should be settled; that their educational programmes should be maintained; and that nine members of the Mechanics' Institute Committee should join the Free Library Committee for a term of seven years.³² In fact, commonly having suffered from financial difficulties, a number of Mechanics' Institutes were forced to accept such merger arrangements and to become part of new free libraries.³³

On 13 September 1880, the Lending Department of the Newcastle Free Library was opened by Joseph Cowen at Higham Place, the site of the former Mechanics' Institute. At one and the same time, Cowen declared as a committed member of the Mechanics' Institute 'an honourable close' of the institution. A new Library building was to be built and annexed with the Mechanics' Institute wing, and then its foundation stone was ceremonially laid by Mrs. Newton. Cowen was asked to be the first user of the Free Library. After a brief examination of the Library and its catalogue, he requested one book in a careful manner.

I have thought of a book. We have been talking about progress. You cannot achieve that without freedom, and there can be no freedom where there are fetters. Liberty is the essential condition of progress. "Tis liberty alone that gives the flower of fleeting life its lustre and perfume, and we are weeds without it". I do not mean political liberty; I do not mean freedom from legal restraints. I mean liberty for every man to think for himself on all subjects, and when he has

thought to speak right out his thoughts manfully, temperately, but firmly. ... No one has pleaded for that more eloquently, more ably, and more clearly than the late Mr. John Stuart Mill.³⁴

The librarian in chief then handed him a copy of Mill's *On Liberty* amid loud cheers. By this ceremonial act, Cowen publicly demonstrated Mill's concept of intellectual freedom as the very spirit of the Free Library.

This opening of the Free Library signified the advent of a new liberal culture in Newcastle. Adams described the cause as 'a struggle for light; for the object of the movement was the general enlightenment of the masses of the people'.³⁵ The Free Library was here defined as a democratic place where individuals could equally enjoy 'self-culture'. Yet, this assertion of 'self-culture' encompassed a more active sense of empowerment than the logic of 'self-help' based on *laissez-faire*. In this sense, the Free Library's takeover of the Mechanics' Institute implied a crucial shift in liberalism—from utilitarian voluntarism to active citizenship. To the likes of Cowen and Adams, retrenchment of a coercive regime alone would not make civil society; civil society was rather a setting which required active measures of construction and maintenance.³⁶ 'Every legitimate device should be employed to create a taste for books', the *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle* claimed. 'It is not enough for a town to amass the tools of intellectual toil; the people must be taught their effective use'.³⁷ On this ground, the free library movement challenged the private interests of ratepayers in order to achieve the free circulation of knowledge, which proved to be a costly and arduous public service. Their triumph seemed to attest to the strength of a community feeling in the sphere of municipal government. Attending the opening of the Free Library, Mandell Creighton, an eminent Anglican clergyman and historian, eulogized the achievement as 'the noblest sample that could possibly exist in any place of its municipal vigour and the organised strength of its common life'.³⁸

2. Patriotic inspiration

The free library gave the equal opportunity of 'self-culture' to those who had had no access to knowledge free of charge. In this respect, however, too much stress on the idea of helping the individual misses the free library's rationale as a social agent for the public. Amid the free library movement, liberal intellectuals in Newcastle came to assert the idea of civic community as a self-regulating public sphere, where the individual's freedom ought to be limited to a reasonable extent. In his 'Ironsides' column, Adams criticized the ratepayers' disapproval of the free library, contending that every ratepayer should renounce his selfish aims and act in accordance with what they saw as the common good.

The opponents of the Free Library have for the most part taken a narrow, selfish, and utterly illiberal view of the whole question. ... Let us get out of this region of mean ideas. Every ratepayer in the town—the poor and the rich, each according to his means—will have to contribute to the maintenance of an institution which will be free and open to all. This is not a question of class or of party, but of the common and general good. It is not one class that will pay the necessary rate: it is all classes. It is not one class that will benefit by the establishment of the Library: it is every inhabitant of the borough who has the taste and culture to avail himself of its inestimable advantages.

All people should be given the freedom of self-government. Adams contemplated that their own freedom, and the freedom of others, were by no means to be opposed.

An enlightened consideration of the subject would induce our citizens to ask themselves whether it is better for a community that the population should be ignorant and besotted or intelligent and refined; whether a taste for reading is not preferable to a taste for beer; whether it would not even relieve the rates if wholesome influences were called into activity to supplant the low civilization

which prevails by that higher civilization which ought to prevail, and which one day will prevail.³⁹

The free library was of use to the public as a whole. 'Self-culture' was not supposed to further the private interests of any individuals, partisan groups, religious sects, or classes. Provincial urban elites liked to use in their public speeches the logic of all-embracing 'civic unity', while restraining the conflicting notion of liberty.⁴⁰ At a luncheon celebrating the new Free Library in Newcastle, John Hunter Rutherford, a local nonconformist educationalist, spoke of religious harmony for the good of Humanity: 'he rejoiced that the Established Church, and Roman Catholic brethren, and all the dissenting communities could unite. It was a great phalanx, no doubt, but it was a great battle that they had to fight against ignorance, and sin, and wrong'.⁴¹ Adams likewise envisaged the progressive democratic agency of the free library that would bring about social unity over class antagonism.

It is not for a class, but for the whole community, that the Free Library has been established. The labourer who sweeps the streets and the capitalist who drives his handsome equipage through them can alike command the services of the librarian. I apprehend that the pursuit of a common object in a common edifice will help to remove those odious distinctions of class which our exclusive habits and customs have preserved.⁴²

To associate free individuals with a collective public turned out to be an important mission in the governance of Victorian cities. Urban elites increasingly paid attention to the meaning of 'patriotism' as a vital fulfilment of the free library. They attributed the success of provincial free libraries to the strength of local patriotic sentiment and the public spirit. In this, Adams claimed, 'patriotism and philanthropy are alike exercised'.⁴³ Mandell Creighton spoke of how in an inner emotional way the Newcastle Free Library came to be demanded, and was achieved as a common good.

It was to their local patriotism it owed its basis. ... It was only because all felt that they were compelled by the gift that was put within their reach—it was only because all felt that all felt them something had been done for them to which they were willing to respond—it was only on the strength of that feeling that that library could answer the purposes for which it was intended.⁴⁴

The free library was in turn expected to reinforce local patriotism. The Victorian notion of patriotism had gathered momentum in the direction of the ethical teachings of community life by Giuseppe Mazzini, the Italian nationalist leader and exile who acquired a substantial following among liberal intellectuals in Britain.⁴⁵ He stressed the sense of communal duty based on patriotic feelings. For Mazzini, *patria* does not mean merely a fixed geographical territory, but an emotional community open to anyone who shares a romantic and organic attachment to it. Far from narrow provincialism, his idea of patriotism affirmed variable levels of association: as long as a citizen fulfills moral duties for the good of humanity in general, he or she could belong to civic, national, and imperial dimensions all at the same time.⁴⁶ To many disciples of Mazzini, patriotism would be the bedrock of citizenship: without a love of locality, no one could realize his or her duty in the world. It was no surprise that Cowen, well-known as an avid supporter of Mazzini, remarked on local patriotism as the primary principle of the new Free Library, evidently borrowing his master's idea:

I know that this love of locality is looked down upon by many superior persons, and derided as vulgar and provincial. I form, however, a different estimate of it. The feeling is salutary and wholesome. It is the basis on which all national and patriotic sentiment is built. ... Starting from his locality, his sympathies broadened to his native land and from that to the human race.⁴⁷

To produce a strong sense of the virtuous collective, the free library needed to feature local civic pride, or, as Cowen put it, 'a cheerful regard shown for the local ties, to local character, to local achievements, and to

local peculiarities'.⁴⁸ The reference department of the library especially was meant to encourage local studies as the basis of community knowledge. The comprehensive storage of local special collections could be seen as an expression of local patriotism.⁴⁹ The reference library was a relatively late innovation, but its importance was widely appreciated. For example, in 1863 the Chairman of the Manchester Public Library anticipated a Reference Library as 'the most important department', yet remaining undone until 1878.⁵⁰ In Newcastle, with a Lending Library opening to the public in 1880, the Public Libraries Committee discussed the provision of a Reference Library and its collection of local documents as their next major project.

The Committee are ... anxious to keep steadily in view the desirability of collecting all books, pamphlets, and manuscripts, relating to Newcastle and the Northern counties generally—whether they deal with the history, topography, natural history, dialects, folk-lore, or customs of the neighbourhood.⁵¹

Free libraries aimed to establish themselves as centres of civic public life. And for this reason, the question of where to locate a central library was vital in both practical and symbolic ways. Municipal leaders normally sought to situate it on main streets of the city centre—a strategy to express not only the concept of free communication and equal access, but also the civic ideal. The central library's location was, however, usually difficult to decide because city-centre properties were generally expensive as well as noisy.⁵² Still, topographical centrality was crucial. Debating the Newcastle Library site in 1878, one Town Councillor proposed instead to open a number of branch libraries here and there in the borough wards. Another Councillor opposed him, maintaining that 'what the [Free Library] committee had aimed at was to get a good central position'. H.W. Newton also thought the suggestion of branch libraries 'premature': 'The feeling of the committee was to work from the centre to the circumference'.⁵³ Eventually, the Corporation of Newcastle obtained for the Central Library a site in New Bridge Street, 'the main thoroughfare of the town; the main line of tramways between the east and

the west would carry the readers to and from the doors'.⁵⁴

At the heart of community life, the Central Library's visual form ought to deliver a sense of civic pride. Newton claimed that 'in a town like Newcastle ... the [Library] building must be worthy of the town, and equal to the requirements of our great population'.⁵⁵ The Corporation appointed Alfred Fowler as Town Engineer, and he adopted the Doric and Corinthian styles. The exterior of the 167 foot-long grand building was handsomely ornamented as such. As Cowen hoped for 'memorials of the distinguished Tynesiders', the Central Library was designed like a pantheon of local heroes. The spandrel of the main entrance featured a group of the busts of local celebrities, such as George Stephenson, Lord Collingwood and Thomas Bewick, together with a carved head of Father Tyne, the demigod guardian of the river, placed in the centre.⁵⁶

In September 1882, the new building was completed to accommodate a Reference Library, a Juvenile Department, and a News-room. On 20 August 1884, when the Reference Library was formally opened by the Prince of Wales, all the facilities of the Free Library were finally ready to function as one. Through the struggle at the level of local government, the rationale of the free library was tacitly overwritten with the sense of the collective public. The *public* library increasingly served to let the people bind themselves together and advance their new public life and culture. At the full opening, the *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle* eulogized the library's mission: '[t]he Public Library', it said, 'has quickened corporate life, and shed over civic affairs the grace of culture'.⁵⁷

3. Civilizing experience

Victorian free libraries acted as experimental agents of liberal public culture. Their primary motive for enlightenment was to make good citizens who were liberated from a state of ignorance and dependency. To practise citizenship, liberal intellectuals argued for the importance of *indirect* empowerment: the individual's character should be shaped not by the exercise of coercive power, but by the reasonable encouragement

of his or her own moral imperative to improve the self. H.W. Newton championed such a principle of liberalism in the free library:

Directly, it offers the means of enriching the mind by study and recreation; whilst indirectly, by elevating the educational standard, it promises to mitigate vice. ... This is a much more enlightened policy than the passing of coercive measures to suppress vice. It is much more liberal to elevate the people above their weaknesses than to endeavour to stamp them out.⁵⁸

The key question was how the individual could be reconciled to the social code. According to a neo-Foucauldian argument of 'liberal governmentality', an advanced form of liberalism is defined as a mode of active social structure that, for all its claim to political neutrality, encourages people to control themselves. In other words, as Nikolas Rose puts it,

civility was ... instituted through strategies which attempted to *construct* well-regulated liberty through creating practices of normality, rationality and sensibility. These practices governed *through* freedom, to the extent that they sought to invent the conditions in which subjects themselves would enact the responsibilities that composed their liberties.⁵⁹

Aside from the provision of free access to knowledge, the free library's facilities encouraged users to avail themselves, and thus demonstrate and stimulate the ability and habit of 'self-culture'. In theory, this was indeed a vigorous construction of the independent, self-governing subject. In early free libraries, librarians did their best to improve provision by minimizing the user's difficulty in finding and handling information as well as the librarian's intervention. They particularly recognized the importance of a scientifically classified catalogue as a straightforward and self-helping tool.⁶⁰ Under the auspices of W.J. Haggerston, City Librarian, the Newcastle Free Library adopted an alphabetical-index catalogue for its simplicity and ease of use.⁶¹ The

Newcastle Daily Chronicle appreciated this practically ordered system: '[t]he difficulty of many people in discovering exactly the literature that suits them often acts as a barrier to their intellectual elevation. In this Library, happily, all that ingenuity can do has been done to make the path of knowledge plain'.⁶² Besides, although open access to the stack was yet to be introduced in the 1880s,⁶³ the Newcastle Library installed the Library Indicator, an invention by John Elliot of the Wolverhampton Public Library, in order to 'effect the safe and rapid issue of books'. By checking it, users could find instantly whether the books they wanted were available or not. The first year's trial of it proved that, out of an annual issue of more than 300,000 volumes, only two were miscarried.⁶⁴ These innovative library devices not only showed how the individual could get information, but also demonstrated in a figurative way the democratic utility of the free library where all knowledge was equally open and obtainable.

For everyone's better access and convenience, the Newcastle Free Library resolved to open regularly to nine o'clock on weekday evenings.⁶⁵ Moreover, according to Thomas Greenwood, Newcastle was one of a few pioneering examples of the Sunday opening of libraries and museums in England.⁶⁶ Liberal citizens such as Robert Spence Watson campaigned for this cause, and from October 1883 the Library opened its News-room on Sunday afternoons, from two to nine o'clock.⁶⁷ The News-room subscribed a substantial number of newspapers and periodicals. According to the accounts of the Public Libraries Committee in 1882, the News-room was regularly supplied with 31 daily, 3 bi-weekly, 64 weekly, and 4 colonial newspapers, and 2 fortnightly, 53 monthly, and 11 quarterly magazines. It also contained timetables and guides of railway and steamboat companies across the British Isles. A daily average of 1,804 people visited the News-room. Such popularity was more than the Committee had initially expected. Soon they received complaints about the disproportionately small size of the room, and hence had to consider a more spacious layout to meet the demand.⁶⁸

Patrick Joyce argues that the free library advanced the transparency of information and democracy in order to encourage people's awareness of self-government. The library's popular analogy of 'light', as Adams

used it, was appropriate not only in *enlightening* the uneducated masses, but also in *highlighting* a civic public life before them.⁶⁹ In this context, it was a significant gesture of the transparency of municipal government that in 1886 the City Council of Newcastle resolved to archive all the municipal reports and documents in the Reference Library, with free access.⁷⁰ With the provision of open public records, the individual was enabled to see the governance of civic community from the perspective of a participant in it.

However, for all the active empowerment of the individual's intellectual liberty, the free library's universe could never be completely transparent. Public disclosure of information should be reserved somehow; we may be seeing 'gestures' of openness rather than the real thing.⁷¹ Free libraries offered free information and communication, but that freedom was to be adjusted in compliance with what urban elites judged to be the public good. This preference was implicit in the inconspicuous shift in title when most *Free Libraries* changed their names to *Public Libraries*, as Newcastle's did soon after its formal opening. The name, 'Free Library', was considered no longer proper from the 1870s onwards, when a number of Free Libraries Bills passed as Public Libraries Acts. When Thomas Greenwood's *Free Public Libraries*, first published in 1886, ran to its third edition in 1890, the influential library campaigner removed 'Free' from the title at last.⁷²

Sensible censorship would guide the masses to the true public spirit and the right civic taste, while the capacity of what sort of books could do so was limited in terms of library space and budget.⁷³ The Public Libraries Committee appointed Spence Watson as Chairman of the Books Committee, a sub-committee in charge of the selection of reading materials.⁷⁴ Considering that a large number of early library books were donated from benevolent citizens like him, a prejudiced, if not too narrow-minded, literary taste was most likely to prevail. Civic leaders paid attention to the development of the juvenile section, since a decent reading taste of 'young citizens' was considered integral to a civilized community life.⁷⁵ Under the auspices of Adams, the Juvenile Department served boys and girls older than the age of twelve, and soon proved to be very successful.⁷⁶ The utility of 'light literature' was often

debated.⁷⁷ Some argued that its encouragement of the reading habit would prove good in the long run, and free libraries usually did not ban popular literature in conspicuous ways. Yet, the Public Libraries Committee admitted that they were 'gratified to find the somewhat comparatively small percentage of the issues of works in prose fiction'.⁷⁸

The question of civility and discipline was vital to the design of the urban public sphere. New civic institutions such as free libraries, art galleries and public parks were open to everyone, but at the same time a certain degree of social order was required. Urban elites were anxious that the full exposure of the public to public space might invite the transgression of the ungovernable masses.⁷⁹ In reality, offensive anti-social behaviour was not uncommon. One Town Councillor was furious at some delinquents who had damaged a local sculptor's statues exhibited in public: 'I had thought that the days of such wanton vandalism had passed and gone; but it would appear that such is not the case'.⁸⁰ Even Adams, who always sided with the common people, thought that public spaces should be carefully monitored somehow. For instance, he was suspicious about the security of a public park, and thus demanded the appointment of a park-keeper: '[i]t is by no means creditable to the sense or dignity of the population of Tyneside that such a proceeding should have been required'.⁸¹ Free libraries also needed to exercise discipline and surveillance. In some situations, they employed direct overseeing powers to instruct users to comply. Every library user had to accept regulative terms of use, and handed over personal information before obtaining a reader's ticket. Public authorities monitored and analyzed users by statistical methods, classifying them by occupation, age and residence. Users were liable for breaches of the rules, such as misuse of facilities and delayed return of books.⁸²

Notwithstanding the disciplinary and policing views, liberal intellectuals were equally careful about the defence of freedom, and sought as much as possible to evade exercising direct and coercive interventions. As for surveillance, as a social model of the single authority overseeing multiple subjects, the 'panopticon' was not an ideal technology—for liberal governance, at any rate. Its assumption of the central power as 'the superior eye over many' clashed with the guarantee

of liberty as a precondition of government. Instead, liberal intellectuals envisaged that free communication would help people foster a civil sensibility and govern themselves. With the advance of environmental infrastructures such as electric lighting, Victorian urban elites forged public spaces as open and transparent spheres, where each could see the other and the many could see the many. The 'liberal city' was an arena of communication where, even if without a voice, individuals could act out mutual awareness.⁸³ Tony Bennett has discussed a historical development of the 'exhibitionary complex': the omni-conscious agency of vision was implemented into city arcades, boulevards, department stores, parks and museums.⁸⁴ Instead of the 'one-to-many' panopticon, this was the 'many-to-many' gaze that would make each atom of the masses aware of the social. Everyone would subtly involve everyone else in a compulsive desire to acknowledge the public sphere, and everyone would adjust to everyone else in sensible citizenship.⁸⁵

Free libraries guided this kind of communication between readers—not by conversation, because readers were supposed to read in silence, but by omni-conscious decorum. H.W. Newton stated that 'the only obligation under which they will rest is the necessity to be quiet and conduct themselves in an orderly manner'.⁸⁶ The experience of silent reading was itself essentially personal, but the library's atmosphere of silence and politeness constantly served to remind readers of their public circumstances, and forced them to comply with the social protocol. Early free libraries were carefully designed to engineer silence for awareness of the public. Library architects often adopted the panopticon design, situating librarians at the centre as overseers and towering bookshelves surrounding readers.⁸⁷ However, unlike the celled prison in Bentham's panopticon, the reading rooms were designed to be as open and transparent as possible, so that readers were not allowed to isolate themselves. Each reader was noticeable to other readers as well as librarians, while enjoying the open storage of books as a spectacular exhibition of free knowledge.⁸⁸ In this way, the free library sought not only to help the individual's learning, but also to create and test the eligibility of liberal community life, where every individual was equally entitled only when exposed in the full public view.⁸⁹

Conclusion

The Victorian free library emerged as a key component of urban public life. Theoretically, utilitarian liberals regarded the free, unhindered circulation of knowledge as the precondition of civil society. Only with the liberation of people's mental culture from ignorance and dependency, the ideal of the rational, self-governing individual could be achieved. At the same time, liberal intellectuals considered that 'self-culture' should be instrumental more for the collective good than for personal or sectarian benefit. They invested in civic institutions in order to connect the atomized individual with some form of community life. We can see that, in the free library, such a dual rationale was elaborated out of the theories of public moralists, such as Mill and Mazzini, as well as out of practical experiences of urban government. Rather than reckoning on disciplinary regulations and interventions, the library's intellectual public sphere entailed active arrangements in order to let all the people avail themselves of self-governing habits at implicit mental levels. At the same time, urban elites engineered in the library a transparent arena of social consciousness, and intensified the power of the civil code. In that sense, we may see that the free library functioned as a school for the production of civic community life.

W.E. Adams wrote of the general rule of the free library that '[e]very person who enters or uses it is the equal there of every other person. The only restriction imposed is that order and decorum shall be observed by all'.⁹⁰ However, we should not exaggerate the democratic experience of the free library as Adams dreamed of it. In reality, free libraries somewhat segregated the people into a number of types of users, who went to different facilities, read different genres, and hardly mingled to make a unified civic public. Also, we should be cautious about the achievement of rationalistic 'liberal governmentality', for the library staff could be regarded as the disciplinary authority that actually exercised professional expertise to mediate between the people and knowledge.⁹¹ Nevertheless, this is not to dismiss the innovative character of this new cultural institution which served as a model of citizenship in urban public life. As the case of Newcastle has shown, the free library was fought

for and consequently was achieved, and this struggle itself turned out to be a significant impetus in the making of civic community. The *public* library was there established not only to embody the culture of liberal citizenship, but also to practise it upon the urban population as a whole.

notes

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⁵ A. Black, *A New History of the English Public Library: Social and Intellectual Contexts, 1850-1914* (London, 1996), 26-7.

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¹⁹ Hennock, *Fit and Proper Persons*, 131, 253-4.

²⁰ Todd, *The Militant Democracy*, 127-36.

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²² *NCP*, 4 Jul. 1888, 419.

²³ B.M. Doyle, 'The changing functions of urban government: Councillors, officials, and pressure groups', in M. Dauntton (ed.), *The Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, vol.3 (Cambridge, 2000), 298-9.

²⁴ *NCP*, 1 Apr. 1874, 85-7.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 86.

²⁶ *Ibid*, 86. According to the report, the Working Men's Club then charged one penny a week; the Mechanics' Institute two and half pence a week; the Literary and Philosophical Society charged one guinea per annum, which was 4.8 pence per week.

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²⁹ *NCP*, 2 May 1877, 294.

³⁰ *NCP*, 6 Mar. 1878, 103.

³¹ *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle* (NWC), 14 Sep. 1878.

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³⁴ *NCP*, Record, 13 Sep. 1880, lvii-lviii.

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³⁶ A.B. Rodrick, *Self-Help and Civic Culture: Citizenship in Victorian Birmingham* (Aldershot, 2004), 88-132, discusses the transformation of an 'improvement' culture in Birmingham from individualistic voluntarism to active citizenship.

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⁴² NWC, 18 Sep. 1880.

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⁵⁰ Quoted in Hewitt, 'Confronting the modern city', 71.

⁵¹ *PLCR*, 1 (1881), 14.

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⁵³ NCP, 6 Feb. 1878, 63-4.

⁵⁴ NCP, 23 Oct. 1878, 347.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 347.

⁵⁶ NDC, 1 Sep. 1882.

⁵⁷ NWC, 23 Aug. 1884.

⁵⁸ NCP, Record, 13 Sep. 1880, liv.

⁵⁹ N. Rose, *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought* (Cambridge, 1999), 72.

⁶⁰ Black, *A New History*, 204-6; R.M. Brunt, 'Organising knowledge: cataloguing, classification and indexing in the modern library', in Black and Hoare (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Libraries*, 568-83.

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⁶³ S. Pepper, 'Storehouses of knowledge: The free library movement and the birth of modern library architecture', in Black and Hoare (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Libraries*, 603-5.

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⁶⁵ Knott, *Newcastle City Libraries*, 17.

⁶⁶ T. Greenwood, *Museums and Art Galleries* (London, 1888), 201-2.

⁶⁷ R.S. Watson, *Presidential Address at the National Federation of Sunday Societies, 11 October 1896* (Liverpool, 1896), 4.

⁶⁸ *PLCR*, 2 (1882), 11.

⁶⁹ Joyce, *The Rule of Freedom*, 129-30.

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⁸³ Rose, *Powers of Freedom*, 72-3.

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⁸⁸ Pepper, 'Storehouses of knowledge', 589.

⁸⁹ Joyce, *The Rule of Freedom*, 133-5.

⁹⁰ *NWC*, 18 Sep. 1880.

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