

A Book Review of  
*Burning the Books: A History of Deliberate Destruction of Knowledge*  
by Lara Taylor

April 16, 2022

Ovenden, Richard. *Burning the Books: A History of Deliberate Destruction of Knowledge*. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020. 320, illustrations, bibliography, index.

*Burning the Books: A History of Deliberate Destruction of Knowledge* takes the reader on a journey through history to examine the deliberate destruction of major book collections. The reason behind the destruction is considered in every situation. The author concludes that every instance of major destruction, whether man-made or natural, serves a purpose for someone. Each instance has also resulted in the loss of knowledge.

It is hard to gauge the impact of some of the losses. Some levels of impact are seen, and some are harder to recognize at the moment. But the careful reflection of history can lead one to conclude that the preservation of knowledge is of vast importance to individual societies and mankind as a whole. Every time the world loses a bit of knowledge, an opportunity to learn from the past and to understand the future is also lost. The author shows examples of major and minor instances to prove this point.

The book is broken down into eras of destruction. Ovenden walks the reader through the progression of the existence of materials... from clay tablets to papyrus to bound books to the digital age. At each point, he asks the reader to examine the destruction of each form – both through natural instances and the more deliberate instances of humans. The impact of each instance impacts a society deeply and sometimes with unexpected results. He also walks the reader through the various attempts by individuals and institutions to preserve after each instance of destruction. It seems that every time an important collection was destroyed, renewed vigor was put into the preservation of what survived.

Certain events were simply difficult for a society to overcome, unfortunately. Of course, the library at Alexandria is discussed; this is usually the first instance of destruction that comes to mind. And while history has attributed fire as the main reason for the destruction at Alexandria, there may have been other reasons for the loss of knowledge there. But the library of Alexandria is only a pixel in the entire picture that Ovenden creates. From the clay cuneiform tablets of Ashurbanipal to the papyrus of other ancient civilizations and on to the invention of the printing press and beyond, Ovenden explores the collection and destruction of knowledge and the effects on civilizations throughout known history.

His entire argument for the book is summed up on page 37. He stated, “What survives is more of an ethos - the ethos that knowledge holds great power, that the pursuit of gathering and preserving it is a valuable task, and that its loss can be an early warning sign of a decaying civilization” (Ovenden, 2019, para. 2). The rest of the book is filled with examples of this ethos throughout history’s various countries and societies. This sentiment is played out in the deliberate destruction of books and knowledge by rulers, armies, power-hungry tyrants, and those who simply wanted everything for themselves. Harder to come to terms

with are the unforeseen examples of destruction, such as fires, flooding, or other natural disasters that destroy archives and records.

He takes the reader through the Reformation via the destruction by John Leland and Henry VIII in contrast to the preservation efforts of Sir Thomas Bodley. Then Ovenden traveled forward to the destruction of the Library of Congress and the library of Louvain University in Belgium, both of which were destroyed twice in a century. The acts of preservation by other countries on behalf of these libraries showed that the collective knowledge of such institutions is valuable not just to the native countries.

From here, Ovenden traveled to Germany and the Stasi library – the multitude of papers that were destroyed rather than reach the light of day – including the weird scent library collected by the Stasi. He detailed the striving of Jewish communities to preserve important documents during WWII. He explored other horrific examples of people who willingly destroyed important pieces of history and literature at the wishes of the executors of such papers. He then takes the reader forward to the destruction of the National and University Library of Bosnia in Sarajevo. The library staff formed a human chain to rescue materials at great risk to their very lives since the shelling and bombs continued for 3 days before the building fully collapsed. There were deliberate and ruthless attacks by the Serbians to destroy records in other libraries and archives across Bosnia. The destruction was enormous with over “480,000 metres of archives and manuscripts... and around 2 million printed books” (Ovenden, 2019, pg. 159, para. 5) completely and deliberately destroyed.

There is then an exploration of the stealing of material from other countries. While many countries would not call it stealing, that is what it is. Countries such as Great Britain have taken artifacts and collections from many countries and added them to their museums, libraries, and artifact collections. How is this

From the flames of Sarajevo to the ruthless taking of archives as the spoils of war, or as a “humanitarian” effort to preserve a country’s history, this stealing and destruction of archival materials have affected civilizations across the globe. It has also resulted in some countries possessing materials that perhaps they should not, and a refusal to return the materials to their rightful owners.

Ovenden goes past the well-known examples of the destruction of knowledge. He takes us past Ashurbanipal and Alexandria to examine the destruction of institutes that the reader may or may not know. He does so in a gripping manner that causes the reader to long for these documents to have somehow been preserved. He takes the reader on a journey of the hubris of the human spirit, which tends to view society, and even ourselves, as indestructible. He shows the steps that are taken when that hubris is destroyed along with a vast collection of knowledge.

Ovenden concludes that “we do not always know the value of the knowledge we are losing when it is destroyed or allowed to decay” (Ovenden, 2019, pg. 227 para. 2). This book is an

exploration of what happens when a society fails in that task. And it leaves the reader to conclude whether current steps can prevent this from happening again. Ovenden offers one final urging to learn from our mistakes and look for ways to overcome the deliberate and unintentional destruction of libraries, archives, and materials that we should hold dear.