

LIBRARIES IN THE MIDDLE AGES

When history tells us of the continual wars that Christian Europe had to wage from the collapse of the Roman Empire to the period of the Crusades, we should look for little library building during this span of turmoil. The pressure that the ruthless Vandals, Danes, Tartars and Saracens brought to bear upon Europe in the early Middle Ages was so terrific that a supplication was inserted in litanies, begging Almighty God to deliver Christendom from the fury of the Northmen. These fierce tribes not only prevented the Christians from amassing books, but destroyed much of that precious store which was the heritage of scholars from the golden days of the Empire.

Over and above the ever-recurring catastrophe of foreign invasion, the problem of library building was intensified by the mechanical difficulties of bookmaking. Paper was obtainable only from Egypt and, in the period we are treating, Egypt refused to export it; parchment, the substitute for paper, though durable, was costly and slow in the making; ink was hard to obtain. Persons like the monks who were interested in literature and willing to write, found at best, only six hours a day for library work. The actual making of a book meant a laborious process of handwriting with an inconvenient quill or stylus with much transcribing and time-consuming difficulty of reading the close handwriting of ancient authors. Travelling in those days rendered communication with cities very slow and hindered both the advertisement and the multiplication of books. An ordinary book when finished cost in the vicinity of \$80.00, an impossible sum to peasants and laborers. Mediaeval peoples faced stupendous problems in their bookmaking and it would not be surprising to be told that when the thirteenth century dawned, Christendom was a poverty-stricken institution in the matter of books.

But in spite of such tremendous obstacles, Europe was dotted with many excellent libraries. The thirteenth century was famous for books as well as for cathedrals and schools, and the causes for such a surprising condition were many and interesting.

The growth of libraries from the fall of Rome to the preaching of the first Crusade is amazing. Zeal for converting souls

and defending the faith necessitated the writing and conservation of many books. The commissioned officers of the army of Christ realized that their strongholds, the cathedrals and monasteries, would be weak without a well-equipped literary armory with which to repel the incessant attacks of heresy and paganism. This supreme need was responsible for the making and preservation of many books. Other reasons were, the conscientious diligence of monkish scribes and copyists, the love of study and wisdom gradually instilled into the hearts of the faithful by Christian ideals, the spirit of conservation prevalent in all religious communities whereby all waste was eliminated, and the sharp ecclesiastical legislation concerning the lending, exchanging and care of books. Regarding this last point, among the many regulations, was the grave sentence of excommunication to be incurred by any person taking a book from a library without permission. Simple but useful rules were in vogue. The reader was asked to hold a book in a gloved hand; to shut the book and put it away immediately after use; the book presses were to be lined with wood so that dampness would not get to the binding; the books were not to be shelved in a cramped fashion; the cupboards where the books were kept, were to be open only certain hours of the day; records of the taking out and return of books were to be kept, and there were other rules of similar nature. Mediaeval care of books amounted to love and reverence. Richard of Bury struck the keynote of the Church's regard for books when he said, "and surely next to the vessels and vestments dedicated to Our Lord's Body, holy books deserve to be rightly treated by the clergy . . ." Modern library systems have borrowed much from mediaeval regulations.

The influence of St. Columbanus and his Irish monks, settling in France, Switzerland, Germany and Italy, added zest to library building. They brought with them an enthusiasm for study that was contagious and they inspired a host of enthusiasts to traverse Europe and gather books for their convents or castles. Kings were influenced to encourage bookmaking and personally make donations. The feudal lords were shown the advantages of education and the serfs were taught to regard every written word as precious. The danger of losing a valuable manuscript was lessened when it was loaned to responsible

persons for copying purposes. This policy of lending accomplished tremendous good, for the monasteries became public libraries and the people of the vicinity were advanced on the road of learning.

Summing up the results of the united labor of Christendom for the years immediately preceeding the first Crusade, that is before 1095, we find that notable collections of books, to mention but a few, had been made in the towns of Monte Cassino, Fulda, Novalesse, Pomposa, Bobbio, Tours, Fleury, Cluny, St. Gall, York, Canterbury, Reichenau, Sponheim, Armagh, Iona, Lismore, Clonard, Clonmacnoise and Glendalough. In fact, every cathedral school and convent claimed a fair library for such a period and the palaces of nobles carried their own commendable hoarding of precious volumes.

Then followed even a brighter period. The Crusades were the cause of a fresh boom in the matter of bookmaking. The experiences of the Christian warriors on foreign soil, the problems they confronted, the intercourse they had with Moorish culture and their glorious deeds of valor demanded histories. The menace of Arabian philosophy demanded refutation. Many Christian philosophers wrote monumental works to show the errors of Arabianism and Christian historians recorded the conflicts between the East and the West.

The new impetus was sponsored by the regal man of God, St. Louis IX. He formed an intimate friendship with Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, Robert of Sorbonne and Vincent of Beauvais. With these intellectual geniuses around him, the monarch soon conceived a passion for books and he went to great trouble to gather them for his own foundation of La Ste. Chapelle and for the different convents of the realm. His system of procuring books, was simple, efficient and is illustrative of the general method of library building in the thirteenth century. In his frequent travels, staying at cathedrals and abbies, he examined all the libraries in his realm. Finding any work not in his possession, the scribes who always accompanied him were ordered to transcribe them and send copies to La Ste. Chapelle. The archives of the kingdom were also deposited there and these swelled the total of manuscripts to such an extent that La Ste. Chapelle soon became the leading library of the time.

Other new stimulants to library building were: the founding of such famous universities as Paris, Oxford, Padua, Naples; poetry was popular; linen paper was made at home; schoolmen debated and committed to writing the thoughts of the century; Marco Polo visited China and India and awakened dreams of wealth; momentuous civil questions, as the Magna Charta in England, Fehmic Courts in Germany, Swiss Liberties and Sicilian Vespers; the crying need of codifying the religious and civil canons.

The Mendicant Orders helped exceedingly in furnishing the home of Christendom with a precious library. From their very birth, the Franciscans and Dominicans worked to acquire and save those valuable manuscripts from which they could learn the secrets of life, so as to be able to give the people the fruits of their study. The sons of the Seraph and sons of the Athlete were most lavish in writing, purchasing and preserving books for they knew that to be poor in learning would frustrate the high purposes of their saintly founders.

As a result of the labors of the scholars of the Crusade period and of the thirteenth century, Christianity in Europe was in possession of the following leading libraries in the fourteenth century. A full enumeration of course is impossible and only the more famous are given.

In Italy: Naples, Padua, Bobbio, Monte Cassino, Bologna, Pisa, Sienna, Ravenna, Palermo, Treviso, Salerno, Pavia, Perugia.

In France: Paris, Sorbonne, Fontanelle, Bec, St. Riquier, Corbie, Tours, Chartres, Fleury, St. Amand, St. Martial, Rebais, Hotel Dieu, St. Victor, Montepellier, Moissac, Orleans, Cluny.

In Germany: Cologne, Ratisbon, Fulda, Salzburg, Corvey, Lubeck, Passau, Reichenau, Augsburg, Westphalia, Wessobrun, Nuremburg.

In Ireland: Lindisfarne, Armagh, Clonfert, Kildare, Cork, Sligo.

In England: Oxford, Peterborough, Canterbury, Glastonbury, Durham, York, Burys, St. Edmunds, Croyland, Whitby.

In Switzerland: St. Gall, Muri.

In Spain: Salamanca, Palencia, Seville, Toledo.

The Netherlands had a few collections, Greece had her Mt.

Athos and Austria was massing literature at Prague and Vienna. Libraries also existed in the Balkans, Egypt and Asia Minor.

Hence, where we naturally expected barrenness, we find a remarkable abundance. Christian Europe was never destitute of precious books. The sheer strength of her will and grace of her mighty mission necessitated the triumph over every conceivable obstacle. Her libraries were numerous enough and wealthy with the burden of ancient lore. They are but another jewel in the glorious crown of the Spouse of Christ.

—Bro. Christopher Perrotta, O. P.

Works consulted: *Monasticism and Civilization*, by John B. O'Connor, O. P., P. G.; *The Thirteenth, Greatest of Centuries*, Walsh; *Catologi Bibliothecarum Antiqui*, Becker; *Catholic, Americana and Brittanica Encyclopedias*; *Harper's Monthly*, CX (1905); *Bibliomania in the Middle Ages*, Merryweather; *Libraries and Founders of Libraries*, Edwards.

