

***The Minute Book of the Bristol Library Society, 1772-1801* edited by Max Skjönsberg and Mark Towsey. Bristol Record Society 2022. xlviii, 381 pp., 6 b/w ill. Paperback, £15 plus p&p from Record Society Books, B Bond Warehouse, Smeaton Road, Bristol BS1 6XN (archives@bristol.gov.uk) [ISBN 978-0-901538-45-1].**

Literature concerning the history of libraries has been growing steadily since the millennium. It includes the *Cambridge History of Libraries in Britain and Ireland* (2006), Pettegree and Der Weduwen's *The Library: A Fragile History* (2021), Campbell and Pryce's *The Library: A World History* (2020) and Ovenden's *Burning the Books: A History of Knowledge Under Attack* (2020). All are ambitious, authoritative and wide-ranging. Not only are these books concerned *with* libraries, at least two of them are discernibly concerned *for* libraries, perhaps due to an unease that major cultural collections of books have been vulnerable to destruction or dispersal in the past, so who is to say those we take for granted will be any different?

In terms of libraries providing reading for members of the public there have been three main kinds: free public libraries funded by rates or council tax; circulating libraries (booksellers loaning books for fees, e.g. the defunct Boots Book-Lovers' Library), and proprietary libraries, collectively owned by subscribing members. It is from the latter category that this latest in Bristol Record Society's long-running series documenting and interpreting the City's historical records is presented.

The reader is urged to forget the dry title of the book and to reflect that what Bristol had, based in King Street from 1772 to 1855, was quite remarkable: a society of 'friends to literature' which at its cultural zenith between 1790 and 1810 included among its subscribers such luminaries as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Robert Southey, Walter Savage Landor, Sir Humphrey Davy, Sarah Guppy, Thomas Lovell Beddoes and John Loudon McAdam. And, uniquely among Britain's one-time proprietary libraries, its borrowing registers have survived to be held by the Bristol Central Library.

The *Minute Book* sheds little light on the above celebrities but instead reveals how the Society came about, who ran it and what was involved in the

management of the institution. The editors provide a 48-page introduction which ably explains the Society's early involvement and significance within the fabric of the city. It is essential reading, providing a critical background to the often succinct committee minutes, and has numerous informative footnotes. They justify their cut-off point of 1801 on the basis that in that year, founding member and long-serving vice-president the Rev. Dr. John Casberd finally stood down (as Bristol Archives hold decades more of the Society's minutes, might Skjönsberg and Towsey be persuaded to produce a continuation volume?).

In the late 1700s Bristol was second only to London in importance and the Bristol Library Society was characteristic of the city's cultural growth at that time. In the introduction we learn that Bristol's leaders were Anglican or non-conformist ministers, a small but growing professional class including medical men, and *nouveau riche* merchants and manufacturers. Politically, the committee was a diverse mix of Tories and Whigs, slavers and abolitionists, but if there was friction it is not apparent from the minutes. Many were members of the Society of Merchant Venturers; some sat on the Common Council. This volume includes an appendix containing brief but handy and well researched biographies of committee members. Their common bond was what R. J. Morris has called 'subscriber democracy', whereby members could make stock suggestions and vote people onto the committee at an annual general meeting. Outside the all-male management team, a number of women became members and borrowers.

Following the book's introduction we have the minutes of the annual general meetings, followed by a substantially larger section recording the proceedings of all 236 committee meetings. Then follow the appendices, including membership lists and a bibliographical index of all the books mentioned in the minutes, whether donated or purchased. The final part of the volume is a general index focussed on 'people, places and subjects detailed in the text'.

The Society sat cuckoo-like in the nest of the pre-existing but virtually dormant City Library opened in 1740. The index has building matters hidden, perhaps somewhat coyly, under 'Bristol Library Society. Accommodation. Building'. Discussions leading up to the construction of the wing/extension are of considerable interest, but without cross-references the reader will spend

excessive time locating them. The editors assume that, because the minutes note early on that local architect, builder and subscriber William Paty was invited to discuss a potential annexe it must have been he who supervised the project. Subsequent minutes simply reference 'Mr Paty', but on 3rd March 1789 they record that payment was made to 'Thomas Paty and Sons'. It is generally acknowledged that different members of the Paty family, (or 'Pattys' as they are misspelt on page xxxiii) are not readily distinguished from each other in the historical record, but the firm should also have been indexed. Such nit-picking aside, the index is thorough, and from the examples checked by this reviewer, includes all names mentioned in the footnotes.

The committee appointed the librarian to have responsibility for both collections, though in practice the City's was relegated ever further into the building's recesses after 1801, with the Society's library increasingly running out of space. They eventually fell foul of the free libraries movement and were given notice to quit the building in 1855. In 1871 they merged with the Bristol Institution and enjoyed a swansong at the top of Park Street. Ultimately the library did not succumb to fire or other physical disaster but through the financial difficulties of its custodians. In 1894 they handed over their collection to the municipal library service to be maintained. A substantial amount of it is preserved at the Central Library to this day.

This volume builds on and complements the editors' previous work, Paul Kaufman's on historic community libraries, and Kathleen Hapgood's on the Bristol Library Society itself. It is printed on high quality paper, though the wider gutter between the facing pages that the hardbacks had in previous years would have been an improvement. Unfortunately, when this title was assembled some of the plates were mis-paginated in the list of illustrations: for example the portrait of William Barrett is on page xxxviii, not xxxv. Such minor blemishes aside, it is a valuable addition to the literature and fully in keeping with the mission of the Bristol Record Society.

HOWARD SYKES