In a collection of letters by and to Sir Anthony Panizzi, chiefly relating to the history of the British Museum, assembled and recently presented by the author to the British Library (Add. MSS. 70839–70854), are two letters written by Sir Anthony to the Irish essayist and politician John Wilson Croker in 1852 that are revealing of the way publicity about the British Museum Library was handled in the mid-nineteenth century. They also reveal Panizzi’s attitude towards the problems he faced and his relationship to a prominent political figure of the day.

The administration of the Department of Printed Books had been under fire from Conservative politicians ever since Panizzi had assumed the keepership in 1837; but the attacks in the press and Parliament had increased during the late 1840s and had resulted in the appointment of a Royal Commission of Inquiry into the Museum’s affairs, which took evidence from 1847 to 1849. In the latter year a Select Committee of the House of Commons began hearings on the desirability of establishing more public libraries in London and the other large cities of Great Britain and Ireland, and a considerable part of this inquiry dealt with the British Museum Library and its failings as the largest public library in Britain. Such testimony was meant to show the need for more libraries subsidized by public funds, but Panizzi took any criticism of his department as a personal affront and hastened to present his side of the situation.

In early 1852 there was a spate of publicity about the need for more space in the Museum building, whose architect had not planned adequately for the massive increase in the collections that had occurred since it was completed. In particular, Panizzi’s use of a suddenly increased purchase grant from 1846 had brought so many books into the library that the cataloguers were behind with their work. Meanwhile the number of patrons of the Reading Room had grown until some of them complained of crowding. The arch-Conservative and very influential weekly, the *Athenæum*, had published a number of criticisms and suggestions beginning in the issue of 21 February and continuing on 3 April, 1 and 15 May, 25 September, and 2 October 1852. The anonymous writer called for an investigation into crowding of both visitors and collections, and recommended the construction of a reading room in the empty inner quadrangle, an idea of which Panizzi had been one of the most persistent and able supporters since 1835. The most amusing comment made by the anonymous *Athenæum*
writer was that the present Reading Room was already too crowded at a capacity of one hundred readers – they were ‘packed up like herrings in a barrel’ – so that another writer’s proposal to enlarge the room to accommodate five hundred readers would not be wise: ‘What would it be if there were five hundred persons coughing, scribbling, rocking, stamping, walking, talking, laughing, sneezing, snoring, fumbling, grumbling, mumbling – all in one miscellaneous chorus!’

The critic went so far as to accuse Panizzi of admitting too many readers just to make his annual reports to Parliament more impressive. On the other hand, the writer’s opinion that it would be better to separate the different kinds of collections housed in the Museum building into individual repositories around London had come from various sources, most recently in 1850 from James Fergusson, a writer on architecture, who had published a pamphlet about flaws in the British Museum and National Gallery buildings. In it Fergusson included criticism of the alphabetical catalogue of the Museum’s books, then being compiled under the ninety-one rules adopted by the Trustees in 1839. Panizzi had his assistant Thomas Watts write a rebuttal to the strictures on the catalogue, which appeared in the *Athenaeum* of 2 February 1850. Fergusson, unconvinced by Watts’s arguments, replied with a long letter in the *Athenaeum* of 9 February, and Watts had a last word on 16 February. There the matter had rested until the *Athenaeum* took it up again in an editorial two years later.

Although Panizzi was always connected with the Whig party, he was friendly with many prominent Tories, among whom was John Wilson Croker. The two men’s paths had crossed in 1831 when Panizzi was assigned the task of cataloguing the collection of French revolutionary tracts that the British Museum had purchased at the suggestion of Croker, an expert on the period. Two letters in the Manuscript Collections about translations of Dante and Petrarch and Croker’s use of the library indicate a broader acquaintance between the two men by the 1840s. Croker was a moderate Tory, but a redoubtable critic and advocate who had the ear of powerful politicians and was influential in parliamentary circles. He had supported Panizzi in testimony before the Royal Commission in 1849, and Panizzi would be anxious that such important support be continued. Croker evidently initiated the correspondence of 1852 by sending a query which Panizzi answered thus on 30 October:

My Dear Sir

... As to the encouragement of readers, I should agree with you; but how can they be discouraged? or kept out? or classed? In 1836 I stated, in giving evidence before a Committee of the House of Commons, that two more libraries ought to be founded in London, and provided with works and editions on a different principle from ours – that is, for mere readers. As to scholars, I suggested (in a paper which was printed by order of the House of Commons, and in which I gave a history of our library, of its then condition, and of its deficiencies) that duplicates of our books of value to scholars, and not merely books for readers, should be lent out under certain regulations.

If both these suggestions, or, at all events, the first, had been acted upon, we should not be, I think, now pressed as we are by the influx of both books and readers...
On 5 November 1852 Croker wrote again to ask for specific information to use in a response to the *Athenæum* critic which would be published in the *Quarterly Review*, the major Tory organ. In addition to the public concern over the admission policies of the Museum, Croker wanted to probe the assertion that continental libraries were far ahead of the British Museum Library, as stated by Panizzi in 1836 before the Select Committee of the House of Commons, and as was now being reiterated by others. The *Athenæum* had particularly mentioned the inadequacy of the Department of Antiquities and the Department of Prints and Drawings for the display, and the availability to students, of their treasures. Therefore Croker planned his essay as a review of three recent publications: Fergusson's pamphlet, *Observations on the British Museum, the National Gallery and the National Record Office, with Suggestions for their Improvement* (1849); *Handbook to the Antiquities in the British Museum* by W. S. Vaux (1852); and Copy of all communications made by the architect and officers of the British Museum to the Trustees, respecting the enlargement of the building and of all communications between the Trustees and the Treasury subsequent to the period when the Commissioners upon the constitution and management of the British Museum presented their report to Her Majesty; ordered printed 30th June 1852, a parliamentary blue book.

Panizzi lost no time in complying with Croker’s request for details that would be helpful in making an argument favourable to the Museum, based on these documents. He replied to the best of his ability very soon after Croker’s letter reached him, and even asked for a special privilege:

The Right Honble Mr Croker

My Dear Sir

I have had the honor [sic] of receiving your letter of yesterday, and beg to state that in the evidence before the Commission the subject of the Paris Library & foreign Libraries in general was but slightly touched upon. If however you will read my answers 4285 and 4293 (pp. 264, 265) you will find two interesting documents on the subject. But as to the Library at Paris the best evidence is to be found in the Evidence taken before a Committee of the H. of C. in 1850. The history of that Committee is not a little amusing.

In 1849 Ewart moved for a Committee on existing public Libraries, and on the foundation & establishment of new ones. Sir G. Grey objected as to existing Libraries; & said especially with regard to the British Museum that as there was a Commission inquiring into it, he would not consent to its Library being included in Ewart’s inquiry; whereupon Ewart withdrew his original motion & substituted an amended one excluding existing Libraries. The Committee sat, nobody minding what they were doing; when the evidence was published it was a tissue of falsehoods mostly against the Museum, but generally against other Libraries. Nothing could be done then; but as Ewart obtained a second Committee in 1850, he was looked after; we smashed all his conclusions of 1849, showed what lies his witnesses had told and what ignorance they had displayed; & so he was left. If you have not the evidence of these two Committees both of 1849 & of 1850, I will procure it for you. You ought to see it.

Of Mr. Ferguson [sic] & of his pamphlet I know a good deal. The man is a hasty & vain cox-
As to Arouet the case is exactly as you state it: a rule was adopted and is strictly adhered to, and no doubt there was to be in the printed part of letter V and there is in the Manuscript Catalogue now in the Reading Room a cross-reference from Voltaire to Arouet. In the case of the three Dukes of Buckingham errors have been and are perpetually committed by not distinguishing them by their family names. However as to Arouet see my evidence before the Commission ans. 9690 and 9691 p. 675; and if you glance at answer 9688 you will see what a man was the late Mr Cochrane both as to learning and as to truthfulness. Mr Fergusson’s pamphlet, so far as the Museum Library is concerned, was cut up as it deserved in the Athenaeum of Feb. 2nd 1850, by a gentleman who signed himself ‘W’. Fergusson’s answer in the Athenaeum of the 9th drew forth a reply on [the] 16th: they are amusing. If you have not got them I will get you the vol. of the A. to see them. Mr Fergusson once wrote to me a very angry and uncivil note about a livraison of Flandin’s Voyage en Perse which he stated had been long out & he could not find in the Museum. I asked him how he knew it was out? A few days after he wrote to apologize for his former note as he had ascertained the livraison in question was not out, and that we had all that had been yet published of the work.

The statement of the square feet of floors & walls has taken more time [to] compile than I expected; and I include it not only for the first but also for the second floor. [The tally is no longer present.]

As I am extremely anxious that, were you to write, you should be above all cavil as to all & every single fact however trifling, I wish you would permit me to wait on you to talk over the subject any Sunday; the very next – tomorrow week – will suit me perfectly. I cannot sleep from home but I can start in the morning, spend a few hours with you, & return in the evening. I can repeat my visit with the greatest ease & pleasure...

Please therefore let me have a line only to say you will see me if I come down next Sunday, & believe me with great respect,
Yours very truly & obliged
A Panizzi

Panizzi’s coaching of Croker as to what to write and his conviction that only he, the Keeper of Printed Books, was entirely competent to ascertain the verity of statements about the Library, was typical of him, and it is somewhat surprising that so many distinguished persons took his admonishments in a welcoming spirit. He seems in this case to have felt secure in Croker’s sympathy, which had been partly shown in his letter requesting explanations of some of the matters criticized by the Athenæum writer. Fergusson had expressed indignation upon discovering that in the new catalogue of the Museum’s books Voltaire was entered under Arouet, his family name, with a reference from the pen-name. The one volume of the A-section of the catalogue that had been printed in 1846 would not show the cross-reference from the letter V, which was, however, in the manuscript catalogue in the Reading Room. It would seem, in the twentieth century, that Voltaire would have been a better main entry, but the rule Panizzi followed made more sense with such entries as those for the Dukes of Buckingham, a title which had, in fact, over the centuries been borne by no less than four different families, the Staffords, Villiers, Sheffields, and Grenvilles.
John Cochrane had died on 11 May 1852. As librarian of the London Library he had published a catalogue of its books, and his catalogue of Sir Walter Scott's library had been highly praised, but Panizzi thought his cataloguing inadequate. More reprehensible to Panizzi was that as editor of the *Foreign Quarterly Review* from 1827 through 1835, Cochrane had allowed a hostile review of Panizzi's edition of Boiardo\(^18\) to appear. This had caused much unpleasantness between the two men.

On what would seem to be 8 November 1852, as it is dated 'Monday', the 6th having been a Saturday, and assuming that Croker had answered the previous letter the day it was received, Panizzi wrote again, this time a full six pages.\(^19\)

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**British Museum**

**Monday**

My Dear Sir

I always take a letter to be *confidential* whether so stated or not; you may therefore be certain that yours shall be so treated now and on any future occasion. On the present occasion it is more my interest than yours that our correspondence should be kept strictly *private*.

When I wrote last Saturday I meant to propose my visit for the *then* next Sunday *week*, now Sunday next. However I shall defer it till you let me know. I wish before you *print* to have my talk, and then to see the proof. The opinions & suggestions you make [sic; *recte* may] think right to make being the reviewer's I shall not presume to meddle with them; but I am most particularly anxious that the *facts* should be unimpeachable.

As to your view being confined to the paramount importance of the printed books I consider it a most fortunate thing. There is matter enough to make that single subject not only eminently interesting & amusing but highly instructive & beneficial.

I send you the two reports of evidence of the Committees on public libraries. In that of 1850 you will find my evidence not uninteresting. That of 1849, if you look at it, you will find full of pencil notes of mine. I also send a copy of a report of mine on the state of the Library at the time which I hope will deserve glancing at.\(^20\) The question of space is touched upon at the end of it. There is a short table or summary of contents after the letter to the Treasury.\(^21\) That letter produced the best effect & Mr Goulburn\(^22\) as well as Mr Cardwel\(^23\) are entitled to public gratitude for it. I likewise send the articles from the *Times*.\(^24\) I have not the *Athenaeum* unbound but will send the volume if you have any difficulty in finding yours.

I am not aware that the new stir for room is caused by the wish of exhibiting Carpenter's prints.\(^25\) The suggestion of exhibiting prints came from the Commission & forms part of their report. I do not know what sort of frames it is intended to provide, but the idea was of changing from time to time the set of prints exhibited: the frames to be provided accordingly; that is so made as to render the operation of lifting the engraving very easy.

This question is substantially the same as that whether the Museum is instituted for the multitude to wander & wonder with open mouths & dim eyes, or for artists, for instance, or naturalists, or antiquarians, to study & learn? I say that one hundred thousand of the former class ought to go for nothing in comparison of one single person belonging to the second. I consequently have always argued against Hume\(^26\) & Co that the Museum collections instead of being too little accessible are far too much so. On public days the more crowded the rooms by
visitors the less possible for artists to draw, for naturalists to examine, etc.; and prints in portfolios
must, as you say, be of much greater use than on the walls.

Forgive [me] if this letter is rambling; but I have written it between intervals of everlasting
interruptions, & believe me
Your ever obliged
A Panizzi

The Trustees’ letter to the Treasury of 1846 had been received favourably by the
Chancellor of the Exchequer, Goulburn, and the Secretary to the Treasury, Cardwell,
and the result was a large increase in funding for the acquisition of books. Carpenter was
an efficient Keeper of Prints who had greatly augmented the Museum’s holdings of old
masters and of British artists. There is no evidence that he himself was making a special
plea for room at this time, although there is no doubt that he needed it, for his quarters
were very small; but the *Athenaeum* had singled out his department as an example of the
crowding of the collections, along with the Department of Antiquities, whose members
had been bemoaning the arrival of numerous artifacts from the Near East with no place
to store, let alone to display them.

It is strange to read the last paragraph of Panizzi’s letter in the light of his being noted
as the champion of the ‘poor scholar’, such as he himself had been, and to whose literary
needs he had devoted himself so ably. The distinction lay in the visitor’s reason for
coming, whether from idle curiosity or from a serious purpose, such as authorship, or,
in the case of the antiquities and prints, to learn by copying the great artists of the past.
It is worth noting that Panizzi was writing to a Tory and that many Tories were elitist
in their views. Even some of the officers of the Museum looked askance at visitors who
lacked the background for proper appreciation of the exhibits. They disliked letting the
galleries be filled with sailors and their girls looking for something to do on a Saturday
afternoon, taking up room that students from art schools needed to set up easels or lay
out drawings to copy. As Panizzi had admitted in his letter to Croker of 30 October, no
one could be turned away, not even the novel-readers, the bane of those with a serious
urge to write who came too late to find a seat in the Reading Room. The Whigs were
not so egalitarian as the Radicals, such as Hume, who wanted no restrictions on the use
of libraries by the public. Panizzi sounds in this letter to be genuinely in favour of
restricting access to the Museum to persons who could show that they would directly
profit from the opportunities for enlightenment offered by its collections, albeit
recognizing that this was impossible to achieve. Yet he may simply have been trying to
be agreeable to his correspondent, whose sentiments he may have misunderstood.

For, as it turned out, Croker expressed a more liberal concept of the purpose of the
Museum in his article for the December 1852 issue of the *Quarterly Review*. He
defended the value of extending to everyone ‘popular education on a large scale’, saying
that the ‘Sight-seers – the crowds that saunter through those galleries [are] coming to
school ... as good for the taste, as a Sunday-school for the morals, of those who can go
to no other.’ He did, however, oppose the suggestion that a gallery for framed prints be
given preference over a larger library or a room for the Elgin Marbles. Space was needed, he said, by all the departments — ‘in the Antiquities [the lack of it] is stated to be already serious — in Natural History perhaps more so — and in the library overwhelming.’ Yet he objected to the proposed devotion of the entire building to the library, for he considered the various Museum collections complementary to each other and valuable as a combined resource. He was also against the suggestion that a gallery should be established for hanging ‘Framed and Glazed Prints’ to show them without the damage that might occur when they were removed by students from the portfolios in which they were then kept. The ordinary public might enjoy them on the walls, but artists would not be able to take advantage of the closer scrutiny they needed for copying.

Croker gave the dimensions of the then rectangular Reading Room, in use from 1838 to 1857, as one hundred feet long, thirty-four feet wide, and thirty feet high, with ‘ten large and lofty windows’. The central court, however, was 329 feet by 230 feet, ‘space thrown away’, and that was where the expansion should take place. Fergusson had had a plan for placing a reading room in the centre of the courtyard, leaving sixty feet between the two buildings for light and for aesthetic effect. It would resemble, Croker thought, ‘a giant birdcage’ and would darken the adjacent galleries. Panizzi’s plan was much better, and it had been endorsed by the Trustees and the architect, but the government had balked at the cost. Obviously something had to be done, and, thanks to Croker and to other sensible and influential persons, it was done, and the new round Reading Room with its surrounding bookstacks, mostly filling in the former courtyard, was opened in 1857.

The incident revealed by these letters was only one of many successful endeavours by Panizzi to influence public opinion by means of the newspapers and journals that constituted the main sources of information in the mid-nineteenth century. The other source was Parliament, and Panizzi had about equal numbers of friends and enemies there; but the friends prevailed in the end, and by the time he left the Department of Printed Books Panizzi was fully in charge of the catalogue, the acquisitions, and the Reading Room, with the press pretty generally favourable to his administration.

1 John Wilson Croker (1780–1857), M.P. 1806–32; writer for The Times, Quarterly Review, and other periodicals; editor of Boswell’s Johnson, 1831; coined the term ‘Conservative’ for his political persuasion in the Quarterly Review, xli (Jan. 1830), p. 276.

2 Athenæum, no. 1279 (1 May 1852), p. 488.

3 Ibid., no. 1300 (25 Sept. 1852), p. 1059. That such a nightmare failed to materialize when the new round Reading Room opened in 1857 was revealed in All the Year Round, n.s., no. 6 (15 July 1871), p. 157: ‘But considering that there are often five or six hundred people in the room, the behaviour of every one concerned is wonderful for propriety, and the room is for the most part as quiet and orderly as if it were a church.’


7 Report from the Select Committee on the Condition,
Management and Affairs of the British Museum, together with the Minutes of Evidence, Appendix and Index (London, 1836), vol. x, p. 387, ans. 4794. The letters from Croker showing his acquaintance with Panizzi are Add. MSS. 49596, f. 1 (12 Apr. 1845); 70847, f. 23 ([1846?]).

On the Collection of Printed Books at the British Museum, Its Increase and Arrangement (1845), a report based on a survey of the Library. In it Panizzi pleaded for a larger grant to supply the deficiencies noted in the survey.


On the Collection of Printed Books at the British Museum... (see n. 8 above).

A Copy of a Representation of the Trustees of the British Museum to the Treasury, on the subject of an enlarged scale of expenditure for the supply of printed books for the library and Museum, and of the minute of the Board of Treasury thereon..., Parliamentary Papers, House of Commons, Session 1846, vol. xxv, no. clxvi (London, 1846).

Henry Goulburn (1784-1856) was M.P. for Cambridge University 1831-56, and Chancellor of the Exchequer 1841-46.

Edward, Viscount Cardwell (1813-86), was Secretary to the Treasury 1845-52.

These were probably the letters and comments about the catalogues and service of the British Museum library published in The Times for 21 Sept. and 2, 4, and 6 Oct. 1852, pp. 8d, 5e and f, 5f, and 3e, respectively.

Edward Hokham Carpenter (1792-1866) was Keeper of Prints and Drawings 1845-66.

Joseph Hume (1777-1855), Radical M.P. who favoured public libraries and was critical of the British Museum Library.

Quarterly Review, xci (Dec. 1852), art. vii, pp. 157-75.

Ibid., p. 164.

Ibid., p. 162.

Ibid., p. 166.

Ibid., p. 169.

Ibid., p. 173.