

Whose Acquisitions Policy? Panizzi and his Predecessors

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In 1845 the Keeper, Anthony Panizzi, compiled *On the Collection of Printed Books at the British Museum* in which he stated that the national library should be ‘a public library [...] giving the necessary means of information on all branches of human learning from all countries, in all languages [...] capable, for some years to come, of keeping pace with the increase of human knowledge.’¹

In his well-researched biography, Edward Miller² details the long connections with libraries and well-informed librarians that Panizzi had from an early age. This coupled with his legal training led to his masterly abilities to compile the many papers and reports as well as his poise under verbal examination by government Commissions and Committees and of the Trustees of the British Museum which led to the establishment of the British Museum Library as the foremost library of printed works in the mid- to later nineteenth century.

Among his many accomplishments Panizzi is generally credited with devising the acquisitions policy that led to the superior position of the BM amongst world libraries. Without detracting in any way from his real abilities this article is an attempt to demonstrate where in fact these policies originated.

It was an appendix to a little remembered work by Gertrude Burford Rawlings³ which alerted me to the ‘Letter from Dr Johnson to Mr F. A. Barnard, King’s Librarian’ in which I first read the suggested acquisitions policy recommended by that eminent thinker, on 28 May 1768 some 29 years before Panizzi’s birth. In this letter Dr Johnson suggests:

It is natural for a Scholar to interest himself in an expedition, undertaken, like yours, for the importation of literature [...] though [...] I am very little qualified to give advice [...] yet [...] I will try [...] to lay before you what [...] may direct your enquiries, or facilitate your success. Things of which the mere rarity makes the value, and which are prized at a high rate by a wantonness rather than by use, are always passing from poorer to richer countries, and therefore, though Germany and Italy were principally productive of Typographical curiosities, I do not much imagine, that they are now to be found there in great abundance. An eagerness for scarce books and early editions, which prevailed among the English about half a century ago, filled our shops with all the splendour and nicety of literature and when the Harleian Catalogue was published, many of the books were bought for the library of the King of France.

I believe, however, that by the diligence with which you have enlarged the Library under your care, the present stock is so nearly exhausted, that till new purchases supply the booksellers with new stores, you will not be able to do much more than glean up single books, as accident shall produce them; this, therefore, is the time for visiting the Continent.

What addition you can hope to make by ransacking other countries, we will now consider. English Literature you will not seek in any place but England. Classical Learning is diffused everywhere, and is not except by accident, more copious in one part of the polite world than

¹ [Anthony Panizzi], *On the Collection of Printed Books at the British Museum: Its Increase and Arrangement* (London, 1845), p. 47. See P. R. Harris, *A History of the British Museum Library, 1753-1973* (London, 1998), pp. 144-7.

² Edward Miller, *Prince of Librarians: The Life and Times of Antonio Panizzi of the British Museum* (London, 1967).

³ Gertrude Burford Rawlings, *The British Museum Library* (London, 1916), pp. 217-20.

in another. But every country has literature of its own, which may be best gathered in its native soil [...].

Thus in Italy you may expect to meet with Canonists and Scholastic Divines, in Germany with Writers on the Feudal Laws, and in Holland with Civilians. The Schoolmen and Canonists must not be neglected, for they are useful to many purposes; nor too anxiously sought, for their influence among us is much lessened by the Reformation. [...] But the Feudal and Civil Law I cannot but wish to see complete. The Feudal Constitution is the original of the law of property, over all the civilised part of Europe; and the Civil Law, as it is generally understood to include the Law of Nations, may be called with great propriety a Regal study. Of these books, which have been often published, and diversified by various modes of impression, a Royal Library should have at least the most curious edition, the most splendid, and the most useful. The most curious edition is commonly the first, and the most useful may be expected among the last. Thus of Tully's Offices the edition of Fust is the most curious, and that of Graevius the most useful. The most splendid, the eye will discern. With the old Printers you are now become well acquainted; if you can find any collection of their productions to be sold, you will undoubtedly buy it, but this can scarcely be hoped, and you must catch up single volumes where you can find them. In every place things often occur where they are least expected. I was shown a Welsh grammar, written in Welsh, and printed at Milan, I believe, before any Grammar of that language had been printed here. Of purchasing entire Libraries, I know not whether the inconvenience may not overbalance the advantage. [...] It will generally be more commodious to buy the few that you want, at a price somewhat advanced, than to encumber yourself with useless books. But Libraries collected for particular studies will be very valuable acquisitions. The Collection of an eminent Civilian, Feudist, or Mathematician, will perhaps have very few superfluities. Topography or Local History prevail much in many parts of the Continent. I have been told that scarcely a village of Italy wants its historian. These books may be generally neglected, but some will deserve attention by the celebrity of the place, the eminence of the authors, or the beauty of the sculptures. [...] The old books with wooden cuts are to be diligently sought; the designs were often made by great Masters, and the prints are such as cannot be made by any Artist now living. It will be of great use to collect in every place Maps of the adjacent country, and Plans of towns, buildings and gardens. [...] Of the celebrated Printers you do not need to be informed, and if you did, might consult Baillet, *Jugemens des Sçavans*. The productions of Aldus are enumerated in the *Bibliotheca Graeca*. [...] The great ornaments of a Library, furnished for magnificence as well as use, are the First editions of which, therefore, I would not willingly neglect the mention. You know, Sir, that the Annals of Typography begin with the Codex, 1457, but there is great reason to believe, that there are latent, in obscure corners, books printed before it. [...]

There prevails among Typographical Antiquaries a vague opinion, that the Bible had been printed three times before the edition of 1462, which Calmet calls 'La premiere Edition bien averée.' One of these editions has been lately discovered in a Convent, and transplanted into the French King's Library. Another copy has likewise been found, but I know not whether of the same impression or another. These discoveries are sufficient to raise hope and instigate enquiry. In the purchase of old books, let me recommend you to enquire with great caution whether they are perfect. In the first edition the loss of a leaf is not easily observed. You remember how near we both were to purchasing a mutilated Missal at a high price.

All this perhaps you know already, and therefore my letter may be of no use. I am, however, desirous to show you, that I wish prosperity to your undertaking. One advice more I will give, of more importance than all the rest, of which I, therefore, hope you will have still less need. You are going into a part of the world divided, as it is said, between Bigotry and Atheism: such representations are always hyperbolic, but there is certainly enough of both to alarm any mind solicitous for Piety and Truth; let not the contempt of Superstition precipitate you into Infidelity, or the horror of Infidelity ensnare you in Superstition.

As Panizzi was well acquainted with the King's Library it is certain that he knew of and had read Dr Johnson's letter since it was bound into the main catalogue of that Library.

In the definitive history of the British Museum Library⁴ Phil Harris gives thorough details of the founding collections and early additions to the library departments. Most of the money provided by variously invested funds, some £900 per annum, and by Parliament had to be spent in those days on the buildings, repairs, furniture and preservation of the items already held including binding the works received in loose sheets by legal deposit. During the first decade there were no regular funds for buying additions to the collections of books, manuscripts, etc., so donations were very important for increasing the library holdings and, therefore, as early as 1756 a scheme was devised for registering the donations in a separate book. Some of the original collections came with funds, which could be applied, to the purchase of continuations of periodical publications and multi-volume works. Also from 1757 the warehouse keeper of the Stationers Company was paid £1 1s each year to ensure the delivery of any items received by legal deposit (Harris, p. 6). In 1805 the Trustees managed to have the law changed so that deposit was made directly to the British Museum but the keeper was paid for a time after that until many publishers accepted the need to comply with the deposit regulations. The law continued to be revised and strengthened and the amount of deposit material increased until by 1824 the work of chasing tardy publishers was taking so much of the Assistant Librarian, Baber's, time that the Trustees agreed to employ an independent collector at £60 per annum.

The Trustees, many of whom were very active in the administration and the day to day running of the British Museum, were very aware of the need to increase and complete the library collections and as early as the 1760s they ordered Maty, the Principal Librarian, to fill gaps. Also at this time the attention of the Trustees was drawn to the possibility of raising money by selling the valuable duplicates which occurred as a result of the overlap of works held by a number of the founding collections.⁵ Unfortunately for the integrity and provenance of those collections a number of sales were made but not all the items were true duplicates. The funds received from these sales were put to the improvement of the library holdings. After 1770 when the income from the Edwards Fund became available orders were placed with more frequency. Between January 1769 and December 1779 buying from booksellers and at auction took place on a regular basis. Conscious of the need for more money the Trustees applied to Parliament for funds for purchases to improve the collections and fill gaps and from 1762 they were granted £2000 in a series of biennial grants.

It is certain that Panizzi was well aware of the above as a statement of the expenditure of the Edwards Fund from 1785 until it ceased to exist in 1815 appeared in the appendix to the 1835 Report to the Select Committee of the House of Commons on the British Museum; a Committee to which he played an active part in supplying information.

In 1811 the then Principal Keeper (Planta) drew up a document expressing concern about the weakness of the Department of Printed Books (Harris, pp. 34-5). This was particularly unfortunate as printed books were the most important repositories of knowledge and the British Museum was the only library in Great Britain open to the public. He reviewed the holdings class by class of which he noted that Theology and British history and topography were the strongest. The classics, thanks to the bequest of the Rev. Crachrode, were reasonably well represented but other sections were all but nonexistent. Every effort should be made to improve the holdings. However, this would require extra funds and £5000 was considered an adequate amount to fill gaps in the older collections. With this amount whole libraries could be purchased which would allow the Museum to acquire works which otherwise would be difficult to obtain.

⁴ Harris, *A History of the British Museum Library*, chs 1-2.

⁵ T. A. Birrell, 'The BM Duplicate Sales 1769-1832 and Their Significance for the Early Collections', in *Libraries within the Library: The Origins of the British Library's Printed Collections*, ed. Giles Mandelbrote and Barry Taylor (London, 2009), pp. 244-57.

Any duplicates could be sold and Planta hoped that persons of influence would campaign for a Parliamentary grant. With regard to current publications it was very desirable that the privilege which came with the Royal Library of claiming a copy of all new publications should be revived and enforced. Was this the precursor of the 1845 document *On the Collection of Printed Books at the British Museum*?

In January 1812 Planta was instructed to estimate the amount needed to fill gaps in the holdings of material on the British Isles and the British Empire. After approaches to various booksellers and much debate amongst the Trustees an additional £1000 was requested. This was granted in 1812/13 and a subcommittee was set up to give directions regarding how this was spent. Similar sums were granted from 1813/14–1816/17. From 1817/18 the Trustees allocated part of the general Parliamentary grant for the purchase of books. Newspapers were also considered in 1812 as the result of an offer by Mr John Nichols (1745-1820) of a collection which contained a number of early newspapers.

From the above it is clear that many of the innovations of Panizzi, who joined the Museum library in April 1831, were in fact already discussed or established processes within the Department of Printed Books and that he was certainly aware of many, if not all of them. Ellis the Principal Librarian when Panizzi joined was in post for 29 years and he had followed Planta who as we have seen was an active innovator and had served some 28 years. Also on the staff was Baber who had played an active part in trying to improve the collections and who would undoubtedly have passed on the customary workings of the Department to the latest member of staff. It was not uncommon in those days for people in top positions to take credit as the originators of important ideas and processes. Although in his preface to the first and only volume of the 1841 alphabetical catalogue⁶ of Printed Books in the British Museum Library to 1838 he notes that he was assisted by colleagues whom he declines to name until that catalogue is completed.

This in no way detracts from his performance as the important contributions of Panizzi were his incredible knowledge of the British Museum Library, which he compared to the most important continental libraries. He had not only sent questionnaires to those but many of them he had personally visited and inspected. He had an indefatigable capacity for work and when necessary worked all hours to complete a task. Previous Principal Keepers were mainly physicians or clergymen but Panizzi's training was in the law. This enabled him to draft extremely accurate reports and to give informed and reasoned replies when questioned by Trustee or Parliamentary Committees. The most remarkable document, *On the Collection ...* compiled by Panizzi with the assistance of his trusted deputies, John Winter Jones and Thomas Watts,⁷ not only listed in great detail the actual gaps of Printed Books but also was a work to which Panizzi brought his great assets of a legal training as well as his detailed knowledge of the Department of Printed Books, and caused the Treasury to raise the grant to £10,000 within one month.⁸ However, as importantly with his love of good food and socializing he made many significant friends among people in high places who were in a position to assist the British Museum to become the foremost library of the nineteenth century.

⁶ *Catalogue of Printed Books in the British Museum* (London: Printed by order of the Trustees, 1841), vol. i, Preface.

⁷ Christine Thomas and Bob Henderson, 'Watts, Panizzi and Asher: The Development of the Russian Collections, 1837-1869', *BLJ*, xxiii (1997), pp. 154-75.

⁸ Information and emphasis from P. R. Harris