



Books on Fire: The Destruction of Libraries throughout History

By Lucien X. Polastron

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Books on Fire: The Destruction of Libraries throughout History By Lucien X. Polastron

A historical survey of the destruction of knowledge from ancient Babylon and China to modern times

- Includes the three separate destructions of the Library of Alexandria as well as many equally significant collections around the world
- Examines the causes of violence directed at repositories of knowledge
- Looks at the dangers posed by digitalization of books to the free availability of knowledge in the future

Hebrew, Hindu, Nordic, and Islamic traditions share the belief of a vast library existing before the creation of the world. The Vedas say that this library predated the creator's creation of himself. Yet, almost as old as the idea of the library is the urge to destroy it. The reasons cited for this are many: educated people are much harder to govern, and some proclaim that only the illiterate can save the world. There are also great destructions brought about by weather, worms, and even the paranoia of the library's owner.

Books on Fire traces the history of this perpetual destruction from the burning of the great library of Alexandria (on three separate occasions) and the libraries of the Chinese Qing Dynasty to more modern catastrophic losses such as those witnessed in Nazi-occupied Europe and the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The author examines the causes for these disasters, the treasures that have been lost, and where the surviving books, if any, have ended up. His investigation also reveals a new danger facing libraries today with the digitalization of books threatening both the existence of the physical paper book and the very idea of reading for free. The promise of an absolute library offered by the computer may well turn out to equal the worst nightmares of Ray Bradbury, Aldous Huxley, and George Orwell.

Books on Fire received the 2004 Société des Gens de Lettres Prize for Nonfiction/History in Paris.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

In his acclaimed *Double Fold* (2001), Nicholson Baker expressed outrage over newspapers and books turned into landfill by librarians who chose microfilm over paper. French historian Polastron picks up where Baker left off, writing with equal passion yet punctuating his pages with wit. A specialist in Chinese and Arab studies, Polastron surveys the annihilation of libraries from ancient Mesopotamia and China to potential problems looming with the cyber contents of today's virtual books. Although Polastron learned of lost libraries while writing a history of paper, it was the 1992 destruction of the National Library in Sarajevo that triggered his desire to explore all nooks and crannies of history in the attic of every civilization. Over the millennia, libraries crumbled to rubble during wars and bombings; theft and storage problems account for more losses. As countless books went up in smoke, others sank to a watery grave during shipwrecks and floods. Lamenting the loss of the ancient Alexandria library, the author covers books that perished during the Inquisition, the French Revolution and in Nazi Germany. Polastron's exhaustive research and vast scope make this detailed, authoritative study a revelatory read. (Oct. 26)

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Review

"The political, religious, and psychological motives for eradicating knowledge are explored by Polastron here, and he notes many faith traditions believe a primordial library existed before the world, itself." (*Today's Books, Nov 2007*)

"Polastron performs marvelous feats of synthesis and revelation as he describes the lost libraries of antiquity (*Donna Seaman, Booklist, Oct 2007*)

"*Livres en feu* is Lucien X. Polastron's magisterial history of the destruction of books and libraries over the millennia. Thoroughly impressive in scope, Polastron's work takes the reader on a journey from ancient Mesopotamia to modern day times, when just recently Iraq's national library was pillaged during the U.S. invasion." (*French Publisher's Agency*)

" . . . an eye-opening, involving read for any general-interest bibliophile and will make an excellent general lending library pick." (*The Midwest Book Review, Dec 07*)

"Polastron's book is a valuable contribution to the literature on libraries. It is scholarly to a degree, as well as wry, witty, gossipy, and polemic. . . . [He] is obviously devoted to libraries and determined to record the varied faces of the barbarism that threatens to decimate them." (*Rebecca Knuth, The Times Higher Education Supplement in the UK, Dec 07*)

" . . . the point to all this is that librarians, archivists, and other information professionals need to work together to ensure that the new digital forms represent enhancements to the way society can tap into its legacy of information and evidence." (*Richard J. Cox, Reading Archives*)

"More than book burning, more than mutilation, this story traces what happens to knowledge that is considered unsuitable by the authorities . . . because educated people are harder to control! The author's fine preface sets the pace for the book and what is to come." (*Lee Prosser, ghostvillage.com*)

"The author's indignation burns white hot, but does not obscure his comprehensive survey of book destruction worldwide--Asia and Africa as much as the Western world." (*David Keymer, Library Journal*)

"A Parisian and a scholar specializing in Chinese and Arab studies, Polastron was inspired to write about the destruction of libraries after the burning of the National Library in Sarajevo in 1992." (*Jeff Minick, Smoky Mountain News, Apr 2008*)

"In addition to an intensive survey of book destruction as policy, *Books on Fire* provides a splendid education in book collecting as a passion--as well as book production, library management, and great bibliophiles and their collections. . . . Jon E. Graham's masterful translation and the author's helpful chronology enhance this book." (*Peter Skinner, Foreword Magazine, Sept-Oct 2007*)

" . . . [examines] the newest danger facing free reading: digitalization. No longer a temple, the new Internet library is a collection of 'virtual books' made available by on-line publishers whose interests are largely profits and not the sharing of learning." (*Gail Lord, Spirit of Change, Vol. 21, No. 103, Spring 2008*)

"After reading *Books on Fire*, the fact that any ancient knowledge was transmitted in books through all the centuries of war, religious intolerance, societal indifference, pure accident and sheer bungling seems miraculous." (*Vincent Tinguely, Ascent Magazine, Issue 37, Jan 2008*)

"This welcome addition to the topic of annihilated libraries, authored by a noted French historian and prolific writer, presents a cornucopia of historical events and noted people (builders and destroyers of libraries) in dozens of countries from Asia, Africa, Europe, and North America during a four-millennia span . . . Recommended for public, special, and academic libraries, and of course, as professional reading for librarians at large." (*Vladimir F. Wertsman, New York Public Library, MultiCultural Review, Vol. 17, No. 1, Spring 08*)

"All of us, especially in academic libraries today, surely ought to be gravely concerned about what might be an even greater danger from electronic books. There's an ongoing debate on their possible detrimental psychological effects, and how they affect the actual process of learning and the purpose of education as our culture has traditionally conceived of it." (*Nancy McCormack, Head of the Lederman Law Library and assistant professor of law at Queen's Universi*)

". . . his [Polastron's] story is an important one and deserves wide readership, especially for us in the business of libraries and librarianship." (*The Haworth Press, Inc, Collection Management, Dec 2009*)

"A book on the subject of books - not only about books, but about the burning of books and libraries - might give the impression of being dull and boring. That is far from the case with *Books on Fire* . It is a fascinating account of the destruction of the world's greatest libraries that will haunt the dreams of bibliophiles who read it . . . Highly recommended." (*Douglas R. Cobb, Curled Up With A Good Book, Sept 2007*)

"Polastron's exhaustive research and vast scope make this detailed, authoritative study a revelatory read." (*Publisher's Weekly, July 16, 2007*)

"If you are lover of the printed word, this book will open your eyes, and most likely shock you." (*Mike Gleason, alt.religion.wicca, Sept 4, 2007*)

"This book contributes to a new understanding of the devastation caused by book burning. Every reader's worst nightmare is recorded with horrid fascination." (*Fernando Báez, author of A Universal History of the*

Destruction of Books)

"Polastron performs marvelous feats of synthesis and revelation as he describes the lost libraries of antiquity; portrays such library makers as the Sumerian Ashurbanipal, the caliph al-Hakam (circa 970), and Liu Bang, founder of the Han dynasty; chronicles dramatic assaults against libraries; and offers discerning analysis, backed by rarely aired facts, about the crucial role books play as both vehicles of knowledge and freedom and instruments of tyranny" (*Donna Seaman, Booklist, Oct 15, 2007*)

"Polastron traces the history of this subject in an informative way, never reducing or limiting the importance of the loss of so much knowledge merely to dates and numbers of volumes lost . . . It is a fascinating account of the destruction of the world's greatest libraries that will haunt the dreams of bibliophiles who read it like the best horror novels of Stephen King or Clive Barker." (*Curled Up with a Good Book, Sept 2007*)

"A 'must-have' history for public libraries and the shelf of any book lover." (*The Midwest Book Review, Oct 2007*)

" . . . penned by a skilled writer who knows that the best way to convey history is by letting the reader in on behind the scenes descriptions, gossip, and scandal. . . . I highly recommend *Books on Fire* to the historian, the literary enthusiast, and to all champions of free thought. *Books on Fire* is a sheer pleasure to peruse." (*Jeff Farrow, gnostics.com, Nov 2007*)

"The exhaustively researched *Books on Fire* is a comprehensive and authoritative historical survey of the destruction of knowledge from ancient Babylon and China to modern times." (*SirReadALot.org, Sep 07*)

"[A] comprehensive survey of book destruction worldwide--Asia and Africa as much as the Western world. . . . Recommended for academic collections and larger public libraries." (*David Keymer, Library Journal, Oct 2007*)

From the Back Cover

HISTORY

Hebrew, Hindu, Nordic, and Islamic traditions share the belief of a vast library existing before the creation of the world. The Vedas say that this library predated the creator's creation of himself. Yet, almost as old as the idea of the library is the urge to destroy it. The reasons cited for this are many: educated people are much harder to govern, and some proclaim that only the illiterate can save the world. There are also great destructions brought about by weather, worms, and even the paranoia of the library's owner.

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LUCIEN X. POLASTRON is a historian specializing in Chinese and Arab studies and has written several books on calligraphy as well as a monumental study of paper, *Le Papier: 2000 ans d'histoire* [*Paper: 2000 Years of History*]. The destruction of the National Library in Sarajevo in 1992 was the catalyst for his

systematic research into the destruction of libraries, a subject he had encountered many times over while working on his previous book about paper. The culmination of his extensive research, *Livres en feu* [Books on Fire] received the 2004 Société des Gens de Lettres Prize for Nonfiction/History. His most recent book is *La Grand numérisation: Y a-t-il une pensée après le papier?* [The Great Digitization: Is There Thought after Paper?]. He lives and works in Paris.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

George Sanders:

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