Burning the Books
Burning the Books

A History of the Deliberate Destruction of Knowledge

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For Lyn
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‘Wherever they burn books, they will also, in the end, burn human beings.’

Heinrich Heine, 1823

‘Those who do not remember the past are doomed to repeat it.’

George Santayana, 1905
Nazi book-burnings in Berlin, 10 May 1933.
Introduction

In Berlin, on 10 May 1933, a bonfire was held on Unter den Linden, the capital’s most important thoroughfare. It was a site of great symbolic resonance: opposite the university and adjacent to St Hedwig’s Cathedral, the Berlin State Opera House, the Royal Palace and Karl Friedrich Schinkel’s beautiful war memorial. Watched by a cheering crowd of almost forty thousand a group of students ceremonially marched up to the bonfire carrying the bust of a Jewish intellectual, Magnus Hirschfeld (founder of the groundbreaking Institute of Sexual Sciences). Chanting the ‘Feuersprüche’, a series of fire incantations, they threw the bust on top of thousands of volumes from the institute’s library, which had joined books by Jewish and other ‘un-German’ writers (gays and communists prominent among them) that had been seized from bookshops and libraries. Around the fire stood rows of young men in Nazi uniforms giving the Heil Hitler salute. The students were keen to curry favour with the new government and this book-burning was a carefully planned publicity stunt. In Berlin, Joseph Goebbels, Hitler’s new minister of propaganda, gave a rousing speech that was widely reported around the world:

No to decadence and moral corruption! Yes to decency and morality in family and state! . . . The future German man will not just be a man of books, but a man of character. It is to this end that we want to educate you . . . You do well to commit to the flames the evil spirit of the past. This is a strong, great and symbolic deed.

Similar scenes went on in ninety other locations across the country that night. Although many libraries and archives in Germany were left untouched, the bonfires were a clear warning sign of the attack on knowledge about to be unleashed by the Nazi regime.

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Knowledge is still under attack. Organised bodies of knowledge are being attacked today, as they have been attacked throughout history. Over time society has entrusted the preservation of knowledge to libraries and archives, but today these institutions are facing multiple threats. They are targets for individuals, groups, and even states motivated to deny the truth and eradicate the past. At the same time, libraries and archives are experiencing declining levels of funding. This continued decline in resources has combined with the growth of technology companies, which have effectively privatised the storage and transmission of knowledge in digital form, taking some of the functions of publicly funded libraries and archives into the commercial realm. These companies are driven by very different motives from the institutions that have traditionally made knowledge available for society. When companies like Google have digitised billions of pages of books and made them available online, and when free online storage is provided by firms like Flickr, what is the point of libraries?

Just at the time that public funding is under extreme pressure we find that democratic institutions, the rule of law and open society are also under threat. The truth itself is under attack. This is, of course, no new thing. George Orwell pointed this out in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and his words ring disconcertingly true today as we think about the role that libraries and archives must play in defence of open societies: ‘There was truth, and there was untruth, and if you clung to the truth even against the whole world, you were not mad.’ Libraries and archives have become central to the support of democracy, the rule of law and open society as they are bodies that exist to ‘cling to the truth’.

The notion that there could exist ‘alternative facts’ was famously suggested by Kellyanne Conway, US Counselor to the President, in January 2017. She was responding to criticism of Trump’s assertion that the crowd that had attended his inauguration ceremony was larger than the crowd at Barack Obama’s five years before, when images and data showed the opposite to have been the case. It was a timely reminder that the preservation of information continues to be a key tool in the defence of open societies. Defending the truth against the rise of ‘alternative facts’ means capturing those truths, and the statements that deny them,
so that we have reference points that societies can trust and rely on.

Libraries are crucial for the healthy functioning of society. While I have worked in libraries for more than thirty-five years, I have been a user of them far longer, and have seen the value they bring. This book has been motivated by my own sense of anger at recent failures across the globe – both deliberate and accidental – to ensure that society can rely on libraries and archives to preserve knowledge. The repeated attacks on them over the centuries need to be examined as a worrying trend in human history and the astonishing efforts made by people to protect the knowledge they hold should be celebrated.

The revelation that landing cards documenting the arrival into the UK of the ‘Windrush generation’ had been deliberately destroyed by the Home Office in 2010 shows the importance of archives. The government had also begun to pursue a ‘hostile environment’ policy on immigration, which required the Windrush migrants to prove their continued residence here or be deported. Yet they had been guaranteed citizenship under the British Nationality Act 1948 and had come in good faith to the UK, which faced severe labour shortages after the Second World War. By spring 2018, the Home Office had admitted to the wrongful deportation of at least eighty-three of these citizens, eleven of whom had since died, prompting a public outcry.

I was struck by the absurdity of a policy, instigated and aggressively promulgated by a government department (under the leadership of Theresa May, who had become prime minister by the time the situation came to light) that had destroyed the main evidence that would have enabled many of the people to prove their citizenship. Although the decision to destroy the records was made before the implementation of the policy and was probably not malicious, the Home Office’s motivation to persist with the hostile treatment may have been. I wrote an op-ed in the Financial Times pointing out that the preservation of knowledge of this kind was vital for an open, healthy society, as indeed it has been since the beginning of our civilisations.

For as long as humans have gathered together in organised communities, with a need to communicate with one another,
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knowledge has been created and information recorded. In the earliest communities, this took the form, as far as we know, of oral information, and the only permanent record that survives is in the form of images: paintings made on the walls of caves, or the scratches of symbols on stones. We know nothing of the motivation behind these marks; anthropologists and archaeologists can only make educated guesses.

By the Bronze Age, communities were becoming better organised and more sophisticated. As groups of nomads settled, and began to establish fixed communities, involved in farming and early industry, they also began to develop hierarchies of organisation, with governing families, tribal chiefs and others who led the rest of the community.

These communities, from around 3,000 BCE onwards, began to keep written records. From these earliest archives, and in the documents found in them, we know a surprising amount of detail about how those societies operated. In other documents people began to record their thoughts, ideas, observations and stories. These were preserved in the earliest libraries. This process of organising knowledge soon required the development of specialised skills, which included the recording of knowledge and techniques for copying. Over time these tasks resulted in the creation of professional roles – loosely similar to those of the librarian or archivist. ‘Librarian’ comes from the Latin word *librarius*, from *liber* meaning ‘book’. The term ‘archivist’ is from the Latin *archivum*, which refers to both written records and the place where they are kept. The origins of this word derive from the Greek *archeia* meaning ‘public records’. Libraries and archives were not created or run with the same motivation as those in the modern world, and it is dangerous to draw analogies between these ancient collections and those of today. Even so, these civilisations created bodies of knowledge and developed skills to organise them, many of which we recognise today, such as catalogues and metadata.

The roles of librarian and archivist were often combined with others, such as priest or administrator, becoming more distinct and visible in ancient Greece and Rome, where libraries were more publicly available, and the belief that access to knowledge is an essential element of a healthy society began to take hold. A list of
the names of the men who held the post of head librarian of the Great Library of Alexandria during the third and second centuries BCE survives – many of these figures were also recognised as the leading scholars of their time, such as Apollonius of Rhodes (whose epic poem about Jason and the Golden Fleece inspired the *Aeneid*) and Aristophanes of Byzantium (inventor of one of the earliest forms of punctuation).\(^\text{10}\)

Storehouses of knowledge have been at the heart of the development of societies from their inception. Although the technologies of creating knowledge, and the techniques for preservation have altered radically, their core functions have changed surprisingly little. Firstly, libraries and archives collect, organise and preserve knowledge. Through gift, transfer and purchase they have accumulated tablets, scrolls, books, journals, manuscripts, photographs and many other methods of documenting civilisation. Today these formats are expanded through digital media, from word-processing files, to emails, web pages and social media. In antiquity and the medieval period the work of organising libraries had sacred connotations: the archives of the ancient kingdoms of Mesopotamia were often kept in temples, and King Philippe Auguste (also known as Philip II) of France established the ‘Trésor des Chartes’ (the treasury of charters). This was at first a ‘mobile’ collection, but by 1254 came to be stored in a purpose-built suite of rooms at the holy site of the Sainte-Chapelle in Paris.\(^\text{11}\)

Through developing and publishing their catalogues, providing reading rooms, sponsoring scholarship, by publishing books, staging exhibitions, and more recently through digitisation, libraries and archives have been part of the broader history of disseminating ideas. The creation of national libraries from the eighteenth century and public libraries from the nineteenth century onwards massively expanded the role that these institutions played in transforming society.

At the heart of this is the idea of preservation. Knowledge can be vulnerable, fragile and unstable. Papyrus, paper and parchment are highly combustible. Water can just as easily damage them, as can mould created through high humidity. Books and documents can be stolen, defaced and tampered with. The existence of digital files can be even more fleeting, owing to technological obsolescence,
the impermanence of magnetic storage media, and the vulnerability of all knowledge placed online. As anyone who has encountered a broken web link has discovered, there can be no access without preservation.

Archives are different from libraries. Libraries are accumulations of knowledge, built up one book at a time, often with great strategic purpose, while archives document directly the actions and decision-making processes of institutions and administrations, even of governments. Libraries often hold some of this material as well – the printed *Journal of the House of Commons*, for example – but archives are by their nature full of material, often mundane in its character, not intended to be read by a mass audience. But where libraries deal with ideas, ambitions, discoveries and imaginings, archives detail the routine but vital stuff of everyday life: land ownership, imports and exports, the minutes of committees and taxes. Lists are often an important feature: whether they are lists of citizens recorded in a census, or lists of immigrants arriving on a boat, archives are at the heart of history, recording the implementation of the ideas and thoughts that may be captured in a book.

The flip side of this, of course, is that the significance of books and archival material is recognised not only by those who wish to protect knowledge, but also by those who wish to destroy it. Throughout history, libraries and archives have been subject to attack. At times librarians and archivists have risked and lost their lives for the preservation of knowledge.

I want to explore a number of key episodes from history to highlight different motivations for the destruction of the storehouses of knowledge, and the responses developed by the profession to resist it. The individual cases that I focus on (and I could have chosen dozens of others) tell us something about the period in which the events took place and are fascinating in their own right.

The motivations of states that continue to erase history will be considered in the context of archives. As knowledge is increasingly created in digital form, the challenges that this reality poses for the preservation of knowledge and for the health of open societies will be examined. The book will end with some suggestions for how libraries and archives could be better supported in their current political and financial contexts, and as a Coda I will suggest five
functions that these institutions have for society, to highlight their value, for the benefit of those in positions of power.

Libraries and archives themselves destroy knowledge daily. Duplicate books are routinely disposed of when only one copy is needed. Smaller libraries are often subsumed into a bigger unit, a process that usually results in the knowledge being maintained by the bigger library but sometimes, by accident or design, unique materials are lost. Archives are designed around a process called appraisal, a system of disposal and retention. Not everything can or should be kept. Although this can sometimes seem outrageous and incomprehensible to historians, the idea that every document should be kept is economically unsustainable. Much of what is destroyed in such processes is information that is already held elsewhere.

The processes of selection, acquisition and cataloguing, as well as of disposal and retention, are never neutral acts. They are done by human beings, working in their social and temporal contexts. The books and journals that sit on library shelves today, or are made available through our digital libraries, or the documents and ledgers that are in our archives, are there because of human agency. The past behaviour of humans involved in the creation of collections was, therefore, subject to bias, prejudice and personality. Most libraries and archives have great omissions in their collections, ‘silences’ that have often severely limited how the historical record treats, for example, people of colour, or women. Anyone using those collections today must be aware of those contexts. Readers of this book are similarly encouraged to bear these historical contexts in mind and to remember that in the past people did things differently.

In examining the history of libraries and the way their collections have evolved over time we are, in many ways, telling the story of the survival of knowledge itself. Every individual book that exists now in these institutions, all the collections that together build up into larger bodies of knowledge, are survivors.

Until the advent of digital information, libraries and archives had well-developed strategies for preserving their collections: paper. The institutions shared the responsibility with their readers. All new users of the Bodleian, for example, are still required to formally swear
‘not to bring into the Library, or kindle therein, any fire or flame’, as they have done for over four hundred years. Stable levels of temperature and relative humidity, avoidance of flood and fire, and well-organised shelving were at the heart of preservation strategies. Digital information is inherently less stable and requires a much more proactive approach, not just to the technology itself (such as file formats, operating systems and software). These challenges have been amplified by the widespread adoption of online services provided by major technology companies, especially those in the world of social media, for whom preservation of knowledge is a purely commercial consideration.

As more and more of the world’s memory is placed online we are effectively outsourcing that memory to the major technology companies that now control the internet. The phrase ‘Look it up’ used to mean searching in the index of a printed book, or going to the right alphabetical entry in an encyclopaedia or dictionary. Now it just means typing a word, term or question into a search box, and letting the computer do the rest. Society used to value the training of personal memory, even devising sophisticated exercises for improving the act of memorising. Those days are gone. There are dangers in the convenience of the internet, however, as the control exercised by the major technology companies over our digital memory is huge. Some organisations, including libraries and archives, are now trying hard to take back control through independently preserving websites, blog posts, social media, even email and other personal digital collections.

‘We are drowning in information, but are starved of knowledge,’ John Naisbitt pointed out as early as 1982 in his book Megatrends. A concept of ‘digital abundance’ has since been coined to help understand one important aspect of the digital world, one which my daily life as a librarian brings me to consider often. The amount of digital information available to any user with a computer and an internet connection is overwhelmingly large, too large to be able to comprehend. Librarians and archivists are now deeply concerned with how to search effectively across the mass of available knowledge.

The digital world is full of dichotomies. On the one hand the creation of knowledge has never been easier, nor has it been easier
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to copy texts, images and other forms of information. Storage of
digital information on a vast scale is now not only possible but
surprisingly inexpensive. Yet storage is not the same thing as pres-
ervation. The knowledge stored by online platforms is at risk of
being lost, as digital information is surprisingly vulnerable to both
neglect as well as deliberate destruction. There is also the problem
that the knowledge we create through our daily interactions is
invisible to most of us, but it can be manipulated and used against
society for commercial and political gain. Having it destroyed may
be a desirable short-term outcome for many people worried about
invasions of privacy but this might ultimately be to the detriment
of society.

I am lucky enough to work in one of the world’s greatest libraries.
Formally founded in 1598, and first opened to readers in 1602, the
Bodleian in Oxford has enjoyed a continuous existence ever since.
Working in an institution like this I am constantly aware of the
achievements of past librarians. The Bodleian today has well over
13 million printed volumes in its collection, plus miles and miles
of manuscripts and archives. It has built up a broad collection
including millions of maps, music scores, photographs, ephemera
and a myriad other things. This includes petabytes worth of digital
information such as journals, datasets, images, texts, emails. The
collections are housed in forty buildings dating from the fifteenth
to the twenty-first century, which have a fascinating history in
themselves.

The Bodleian’s collection includes the First Folio of Shakespeare
(1623), the Gutenberg Bible (c.1450), as well as manuscripts and
documents from around the world – the late Ming Period Selden
Map of China, or the illuminated masterpiece the Romance of
Alexander from the fourteenth century, for example. These items
have fascinating histories that tell the story of how they have passed
through time and now sit on the shelves of the Bodleian. The
Bodleian is in fact really a collection of collections, and the stories
of how these collections came to be in the Bodleian have helped
to build its fame over the past four hundred years. \(^{15}\)

My own education, up to the age of eighteen, was transformed
by being able to use my home town of Deal’s public library. In that
building I discovered the joys of reading. At first this was escape
through science fiction (especially Isaac Asimov, Brian Aldiss and Ursula K. Le Guin), and then I read Thomas Hardy and D. H. Lawrence, but also authors from beyond Britain: Hermann Hesse, Gogol, Colette and many more. I found I could borrow vinyl records and discovered there was more to classical music than Tchaikovsky’s *1812 Overture*: Beethoven, Vaughan Williams, Mozart. I could read the ‘serious’ newspapers and the *Times Literary Supplement*. All for free – crucially important as my family were not wealthy and there was little money to buy books.

The library was (and is) run by local government, free for users of the majority of its services, and funded from local taxation under legal provisions that were first set out by the Public Libraries Act of 1850. There was political opposition to the idea at the time. As the bill worked its way through Parliament, the Conservative MP Colonel Sibthorp was sceptical of the importance of reading to the working classes, on the grounds that he himself ‘did not like reading at all and had hated it while at Oxford’.\(^\text{16}\)

The system of public libraries that the Act inaugurated replaced a patchwork of endowed libraries, parish libraries, collections in coffee houses, fishermen’s reading rooms as well as subscription libraries and book clubs, which were products of the ‘age of improvement’ and the concept of ‘useful knowledge’. This term grew out of the ferment of ideas in the eighteenth century. The American Philosophical Society was started by a group of prominent individuals, including Benjamin Franklin, in 1767, for ‘promoting useful knowledge’. In 1799, the Royal Institution was founded ‘for diffusing the knowledge and facilitating the general introduction of useful mechanical inventions and improvements’. Both organisations had libraries to support their work.

Libraries were a key part of a wider movement to broaden education, for the benefit of the individual, but also for society as a whole. A century or more later Sylvia Pankhurst, the inspirational champion of women’s rights, wrote to the director of the British Museum requesting admission to the Reading Room of the library: ‘as I desire to consult various government publications and other works to which I cannot obtain access in any other way.’ At the foot of her letter of application she cited her object of study: ‘to obtain information on the employment of women’.\(^\text{17}\)
The Public Libraries Act made it possible for local authorities to institute public libraries and pay for them through ‘rates’ (as local taxation was then called), but this system was entirely voluntary. It was not until 1964 that the Public Libraries and Museums Act made it a duty for local authorities to provide libraries, and the system retains a strong place in the general consciousness today as a cherished service, part of the national infrastructure for public education.\textsuperscript{18}

Despite this, public libraries in the UK have borne the brunt of the pressure that successive governments have placed on budgets available to local authorities.\textsuperscript{19} Local authorities have had to make very tough decisions on how to manage, many of them targeting libraries and county record offices. As of 2018/19 there are 3,583 public libraries in the UK compared with 4,356 in 2009/10: 773 have closed. Libraries in many communities have also come to depend increasingly on volunteers to remain open as the number of people employed in the sector fell to less than 16,000.\textsuperscript{20}

The preservation of knowledge is a critical struggle all over the world. In South Africa, following the collapse of the apartheid regime, the approach taken to help heal a society, riven by the violence and oppression of the previous century, was to ‘faithfully record the pain of the past so that a unified nation can call upon that past as a galvanising force in the large tasks of reconstruction’.\textsuperscript{21} A Truth and Reconciliation Commission was established as a way of ‘addressing their difficult past’.\textsuperscript{22} The commission was there to support the transitioning of society in a peaceful way, while at the same time coming to terms with – and confronting – the recent history and its impact on society and on individual citizens. There were political and legal aspects to the commission, but also historical, moral and psychological aims; one of the aims in the Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act was to establish ‘as complete a picture as possible of the nature, causes and extent of gross violations of human rights’. This was undertaken in partnership with the National Archives of South Africa, whose staff were intimately involved in ensuring that the past could be properly addressed, and the record would be available for people. However, the emphasis in South Africa was not to open up state archives to encounter the ‘nature, causes and extent’ of what had gone wrong,
as has been the case in East Germany following the collapse of communism in 1989, but rather on the hearings themselves, where the testimonies created a deep oral history, which has formed a new archive.

Officials in South Africa’s apartheid regime destroyed documents on a massive scale. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was hampered all along by this; in their final report they devoted an entire section to the destruction of records. They put it bluntly: ‘The story of apartheid is, amongst other things, the story of the systematic elimination of thousands of voices that should have been part of the nation’s memory.’ The report placed blame on the government: ‘The tragedy is that the former government deliberately and systematically destroyed a huge body of state records and documentation in an attempt to remove incriminating evidence and thereby sanitise the history of oppressive rule.’ The destruction highlighted the critical role that these records played: ‘the mass destruction of records . . . has had a severe impact on South Africa’s social memory. Swathes of official documentary memory, particularly around the inner workings of the apartheid state’s security apparatus, have been obliterated.’ In Iraq, as we shall see in chapter 12, many of the key records were not destroyed but removed to the United States, where some still remain. Their return could form part of another process of national ‘truth and reconciliation’ in that country so ravaged by civil war.

Libraries and archives share the responsibility of preserving knowledge for society. This book has been written not just to highlight the destruction of those institutions in the past, but also to acknowledge and celebrate the ways librarians and archivists have fought back. It is through their work that knowledge has passed down from one generation to the next, preserved so that people and society can develop and seek inspiration from that knowledge.

In a famous letter of 1813, Thomas Jefferson compared the spread of knowledge to the way one candle is lit from another: ‘He who receives an idea from me’, wrote Jefferson, ‘receives instruction himself without lessening mine; as he who lites his taper at mine, receives light without darkening me.’ Libraries and archives are institutions that fulfil the promise of Jefferson’s taper – an essential point of reference for ideas, facts and truth. The history of how
they have faced the challenges of securing the flame of knowledge and making it possible to enlighten others is complex.

Individual stories in this book are instructive of the many ways knowledge has been attacked throughout history. Jefferson’s taper remains alight today thanks to the extraordinary efforts of the preservers of knowledge: collectors, scholars, writers, and especially the librarians and archivists who are the other half of this story.
Austen Henry Layard sketching at Nimrud.
The ancient Greek general and historian Xenophon, writing in his most famous work, the *Anabasis* or *Persian Expedition*, recounted the dramatic story of how he led a stranded army of 10,000 Greek mercenaries out of Mesopotamia and back to Greece. Xenophon described the army passing through the centre of what is now Iraq and pausing at a spot on the banks of the River Tigris, at a place he referred to as Larisa. Surveying the landscape, Xenophon noted an immense deserted city with towering walls. From here they marched further along to another city, Mespila, that Xenophon states ‘was once inhabited by the Medes’. It was here, according to Xenophon, that Medea, the king’s wife, had sought refuge while the Persians were besieging their empire. The Persian king was unable to take the city, Xenophon reports, until Zeus ‘rendered the inhabitants thunderstruck’.

What Xenophon was looking at, in this ancient landscape, was the remains of the cities of Nimrud (Larisa) and Nineveh (Mespila). These cities were at the heart of the great Assyrian Empire and flourished under the rule of the famed and formidable King Ashurbanipal. After Ashurbanipal’s death, Nineveh was destroyed by an alliance of Babylonians, Medes and Scythians in 612 BCE. Xenophon confuses the Assyrians (who had inhabited the city) and the Medes (who took it) with the Medes and the Persians, the major eastern power at his time of writing.

I find it astonishing to think that Xenophon viewed these great mounds more than two millennia ago; that the ruins were already many centuries old when he saw them, with the events that destroyed the cities already obscure even to that great historian. The Greeks saw themselves as the pioneers of libraries and by the time Xenophon was writing the Greek world had a vibrant book culture, in which
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libraries played an important part. Xenophon would surely have been excited to have learned of the magnificent library preserved deep in the soil below, that would one day reveal the story of its ancient founder, Ashurbanipal.

It would take a further twenty-two centuries before the great library of Ashurbanipal would be discovered and the full history of this empire (and of its predecessors and neighbours) could be unravelled, both from archaeology of many Assyrian sites excavated since but especially from the documents found in these digs.

Writing feels like such a recent technology in the long story of humanity that it is tempting to assume our most ancient civilisations relied primarily on oral communication to pass on knowledge. These civilisations, centred around the area we know today as Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran, left large and impressive physical remains – buildings and objects above the ground and uncovered in archaeological digs – but they also left behind documents that give us clear evidence that the written record existed alongside oral communication in the centuries before the civilisations of Egypt, Mycenae, Persia, and eventually Greece and Rome. This written record is highly revealing of these cultures. The peoples of Assyria and their neighbouring civilisations had a well-developed culture of documentation and have passed down to us a rich intellectual inheritance.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, the lands that Xenophon described at the turn of the fifth and fourth centuries BCE became the subject of great interest to rival European imperial powers. This interest was to help recover the cultures of knowledge developed in these civilisations, revealing not only some of the earliest libraries and archives on the planet, but also evidence of ancient attacks on knowledge.

The British presence in this region was originally due to the activities of that engine of imperial expansion, the East India Company, which mixed trade with the enforcement of military and diplomatic power. One of its key employees in the region was Claudius James Rich, a talented connoisseur of oriental languages and antiquities, considered by his contemporaries to be the most powerful man in Baghdad, apart from the local Ottoman ruler, the Pasha; ‘and some even questioned whether the Pasha himself would
not at any time shape his conduct according to Mr. Rich’s suggestions and advice, rather than as his own council might wish’. In pursuit of gratifying his ‘insatiable thirst for seeing new countries’, Rich had even managed to enter the Great Mosque at Damascus in disguise, which would have been a tall order for a Western visitor at the time. Rich travelled extensively throughout the region and made detailed studies of its history and antiquities, building a collection of manuscripts, which were purchased by the British Museum after his death. In 1820–1 Rich first visited the site of Nineveh, and the great mound of Kouyunjik (as it was called in Ottoman Turkish), which was at the heart of the Assyrian city. During this visit, Rich unearthed a cuneiform tablet that had been preserved from Ashurbanipal’s palace. This tablet was the first of tens of thousands that would be discovered on the site.

Rich sold his collection of amateurishly excavated artefacts to the British Museum, and the arrival of the first cuneiform tablets in London triggered a flurry of excited interest in the region, and speculation about what treasures might be in its soil. The collection was seen in London by Julius Mohl, the secretary of the French Asiatic Society, who also read Rich’s published accounts. Mohl immediately encouraged the French government to send its own expedition to Mesopotamia, so that they could compete with Britain for the glory of French scholarship. A French scholar, Paul-Émile Botta, was dispatched to Mosul as consul, with enough funds to make his own excavations, beginning in 1842. These were the first serious excavations to be made in the area and their publication in Paris in a sumptuously illustrated book, Monument de Ninive (1849), furnished with illustrations by the artist Eugène Flandin, made them famous among European elites. We do not know exactly where and when, but its pages were at some point turned with a growing sense of wonder by an adventurous young Briton named Austen Henry Layard.

Layard grew up in Europe, in a wealthy family, and spent his early years in Italy where he read avidly, being most strongly influenced by the Arabian Nights. He developed a love for antiquities, fine arts and travelling, and as soon as he was old enough he embarked on extensive journeys across the Mediterranean, through the Ottoman Empire, eventually visiting the country we now call
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