

Treasures for all

Explorer, GP and writer Gavin Francis on why libraries are invaluable

Years ago I read a piece by Carlos Fuentes, the great Mexican novelist, comparing libraries in the Latin world with those that are culturally Anglo-Saxon. According to Fuentes, librarians in Mexico, Italy, Spain and Argentina are jealous guardians who prefer their books to remain buried in the vaults.

When he first visited a library in the United States Fuentes was astonished: not only could he handle the books, in some cases he was even allowed to take them home. The Anglo-Saxon literary culture was one with a great passion for books and for learning, but tempered with a pragmatism which recognises that if books are to fulfil their potential they have to be accessible.

In Scotland, that pragmatism has been allied not only with great reverence for learning, but also with a 'school in every parish' philosophy that has made this country such a powerhouse of intellectual and artistic achievement over the last three or four centuries. One of the many aspects of Scottish public life I find admirable is the respect we have for, and the importance we place on, our libraries.

As a child I made weekly visits to Dunfermline library, which celebrated

its 130th birthday this year. It was the first of some 2,500 libraries Andrew Carnegie helped to build across the British Isles, the USA and the Commonwealth (Fuentes would have said 'the Anglo-Saxon world').

Growing up in Dunfermline I took it for granted that a town's library should be one of its most magnificent buildings. When later I moved to Edinburgh, I accepted that Carnegie's Central Library on George IV Bridge has all the grandeur of a Renaissance

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palace. Over the lintel is carved a flourishing scroll with 'Let There Be Light' inscribed on it, as if Carnegie wanted to build not just a palace of brick and slate, but a palace of the mind. If that wasn't enough to confirm the Scots' respect for libraries, just across the street I began to visit the National Library of Scotland, with its façade of sculptures representing the arts and sciences, medicine and theology, music and law.

These days I spend part of the week working as a GP on the south side of Edinburgh, and part of the week writing in NLS. My first book, *True North – Travels in Arctic Europe*, was written while I was the base doctor on a remote Antarctic station. I wrote it without access to libraries or the internet, and so had to take a trunk of about 100 books with me to the ice.

When I came to write my second book, *Empire Antarctica – Ice, Silence & Emperor Penguins*, I didn't have to be so careful in my planning – I passed the National Library every day. Being able to call up first editions of Scott's or Shackleton's writings, obscure scientific papers on the aurora australis, or monographs on the emperor penguin is a tremendous privilege. Carlos Fuentes and the Latin librarians are right – our libraries hold the treasures of our learning and our culture. I'm delighted that in Scotland we believe everyone should be able to get their hands on those treasures.

Gavin Francis's Empire Antarctica – Ice, Silence & Emperor Penguins (Chatto) has been named Scotland's Book of the Year in the 2013 Scottish Mortgage Investment Trust Book Awards.
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