

## “When they burnt our library to ground, they destroyed the heart of the city...”

Chloe Menown, Anglia Ruskin University

[chloe.menown@anglia.ac.uk](mailto:chloe.menown@anglia.ac.uk)

What do we lose when we lose a library? This was the subject matter for the conference held at KU Leuven in September 2015. I was lucky enough to attend this three-day conference (9<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> September) in the delightful city of Leuven, thirty minutes outside of Brussels.

In 1914, the Germans famously sacked the city of Louvain (Leuven) and set fire to the main parts of the town. They purposefully targeted the University and the 500-year-old library was burnt to the ground along with all its manuscripts. Europe’s shock at the attack on a cultural institution lost sympathisers for the German cause and paved the way for the Allied forces propaganda. The “Flames of Louvain” became an iconic image of the Great War. The title of this article is a quote by our guide during the tour of the rebuilt University Library. This thought resonated with me and was echoed throughout the conference by different speakers time and again.

The tour of the University library (rebuilt in 1928 with American money by Herbert Hoover) provided a strong foundation to the history of the area and was followed by a visit to Louvain-la-Neuve in the French part of Belgium. In 1968 the University split into two separate institutions, the Flemish speaking half of the university stayed in Leuven and became Katholieke Universiteit (KU) Leuven whilst the French speaking side was relocated to Louvain-la-Neuve and became Université Catholique de Louvain (UCL). We attended a champagne lunch at UCL and the conference officially began with a talk by Alan Kramer (Trinity College, Dublin) on the Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War. The subject of book burning during WW1 was continued by the next two speakers with the main example being the University Library of KU Leuven.

After dinner, (back in Leuven) we were treated to a special keynote speech by Abdel Kader Haïdara from Timbuktu, you may recognise the name, as he is an internationally famous for moving over 30,000 manuscripts out of Timbuktu when they became a target for rebel groups in the area. His heroic efforts saved the manuscripts from certain destruction; Haïdara’s speech was attended by ambassadors from America, Germany, Great Britain and Mali. Those of us who could not understand French listened to a translation of his speech on a headset; it was a rare experience for me to be a part of the international community, surrounded by so many different languages and cultures.

The second day of the conference started with a bang with a keynote lecture by Michael Suarez from the University of Virginia. Anyone who can talk about potatoes for forty

minutes and keep his audience raptured is an incredible presenter and Michael's showmanship became a talking point for the rest of the conference. Another talking point was the lecture by Colin Higgins (St Catharine College, Cambridge University) who argued for the non-existence of the Library of Alexandria. As a former Classics student, I thoroughly enjoyed his theory on how it was never destroyed in a dramatic battle, as the library never existed as a singular building.

There were also presentations on the practical considerations of losing a library and how to prevent damage to your collection. Paul Garside (British Library) gave a talk about treating fire damaged parchment but all I seemed to take away from his talk was that they set fire to a shelf of books in the car park behind the British Library to see how the books burnt. From speaking to Paul afterwards I think he was surprised that so many Librarians had suggestions for different ways to burn the books, for educational purposes of course.

By the final day my day head was exploding with knowledge and my understanding of how important a library is to a community was cemented by Marica Šapro-Ficovic (Dubrovnik Libraries). She spoke about the interviews she conducted with Librarians and survivors of the Croatian war (1991-1995), the number of people visiting the library was at its highest during the worst part of the war. The ability to provide hope and knowledge in times of darkness is a library's greatest asset. In the closing speech Michael Suarez made a passionate plea for the word "we" in the conference title. What do we lose when we lose a library? Every person in the world loses a culture, a history, and a community when a library is destroyed.

KU Leuven libconf2015 - What do we lose when we lose a library?

<https://kuleuvencongres.be/libconf2015/website>