An enthralling celebration of knowledge

Andrew Prescott reviews the Library's new flagship book

At a time when the value and future of libraries is frequently questioned, Michael Leapman's engrossing and beautiful Book of the British Library provides compelling testimony of the continued cultural importance of major research libraries. Leapman's powerful opening chapter uses the Library's recent acquisition of archives by such English writers as Harold Pinter, George Bernard Shaw, Ted Hughes and I. G. Ballard to illustrate how the Library is not a fusty storehouse but preserves for future generations the means to explore and understand contemporary life.

The Book of the British Library is sumptuously illustrated, with stunning figures of many of the Library's greatest treasures, ranging from the Lindisfarne Gospels to Mozart, Lewis Carroll, Karl Marx and beyond. A delight of the book are the illustrations of less familiar items, such as the sketch of Dalston Station by John Betjeman or a propaganda poster from Vichy France showing Winston Churchill as a cigar-chomping octopus whose tentacles grip Africa and the Middle East. The Book of the British Library should not only be purchased by all Friends, Readers and visitors to the British Library, but a copy should be sent to every Member of Parliament, so that they better appreciate the importance of the Library's work.

Michael Leapman conveys the complex story of the British Library in a clear and entertaining fashion. This is the first historical survey of the Library to describe it in its new home at St Pancras, and is valuable for that alone. The story of the St Pancras building is as titanic and engrossing as the battles of those great nineteenth-century librarians Panizzi and Madden, and Leapman's account of these stirring bibliographical episodes is even-handed and authoritative. It is surprising, however, that Leapman refers to Boston Spa as simply an off-site store in Yorkshire. The National Lending Library for Science and Technology established at Boston Spa under the redoubtable leadership of the scientist Donald Urquhart sought to reinvent information provision in Britain, and the subsequent history of the British Library is impossible to understand without describing that pioneering work at Boston Spa.
The story Michael Leapman tells here is very much an English one, and my only disappointment was that *The Book of the British Library* gives a limited sense of the Library's international character. The Library's astonishing European printed book collections are barely mentioned. It is just as amazing that the British Library has the only known copy of a 16th century Hungarian book in honour of Archbishop Cranmer or a unique collection of pre-revolutionary Russian bonds as that it has presentation pamphlets by Milton or the first edition of Robinson Crusoe. But this just shows how there is always more to discover in the British Library, and it is to be hoped Leapman will follow up this first enthralling Book of the British Library with another exploring more widely the international charades of the Library's collections.

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