

# Why Auchterarder Library Matters

by Tom Langlands ([www.tomlanglandsphotography.com](http://www.tomlanglandsphotography.com))



As Scotland and its diaspora celebrated the life and work of its national bard, Robert Burns on 25 January I stumbled across an image of an 1856 painting titled Burns in James Sibbald's Circulating Library by William Borthwick Johnstone. The scene itself can be dated to 1786. As I studied the work I realised it had a significance and a message that we would do well to contemplate in light of a nation's desire to shut its rural libraries. Auchterarder Library is only one of many under threat but as I sit in that library writing this piece, Johnstone's painting comes to life. It is a work created mostly of dark, murky brown tones. In the shadows some of the great thinkers of the day stand reading and conversing, a thin sliver of light catching some of their faces. To the left of the work, sunlight streams in from outside illuminating the imposing, larger-than-life figure of Robert Burns standing in the doorway before sweeping across the wooden floor to highlight the seated figure of a young Walter Scott. Scott sits before a wall of books and is holding a volume in his hands while gazing in admiration at Burns. The reference to the Scottish Enlightenment is clear, as is the way light symbolically bounces off Burns before being absorbed by Scott. Sibbald's library is demonstrably more than a repository for books; it is a hub, a gathering place, a forum for minds, an opportunity for escapism, a venue for social interaction, discourse and a place of enlightenment.



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On the outskirts of Auchterarder sits Cloan House, once the imposing residence of the Haldanes - one of the most influential families in 20th century Scottish history. Elizabeth Sanderson Haldane was an author, suffragist, philosopher and promoter of social welfare. She exchanged letters with novelist and playwright James M Barrie, who was known to have visited Cloan as did John Buchan of *The 39 Steps* fame. She was also the first female trustee of Andrew Carnegie's UK Trust and Scotland's first female Justice of the Peace. With a strong sense of social justice and an understanding of the importance of education it is unsurprising to find her rubbing shoulders with Scotland's literati and equally unsurprising to discover that she was instrumental in the founding of Auchterarder Institute and Library - a place where the working classes could not only borrow books but could meet, listen, discuss, debate and learn. Although Auchterarder Library is not a Carnegie Library it is interesting to note that the man who funded over 2,500 libraries worldwide should be the one to formally open Auchterarder Library on 28 September 1896. In Carnegie's own words, 'A library outranks any other thing a community can do to benefit its people. It is a never failing spring in the desert.'

The year after Auchterarder Library was founded, Elizabeth Haldane's niece - Naomi Haldane was born. Later she would marry the labour politician Dick Mitchison. Naomi Mitchison wrote over ninety books - a formidable collection embracing many different genres and resulting in her becoming known as the doyenne of Scottish literature. Although she spent many of her formative years in Oxford she was a regular summer visitor to Cloan House. As such, she would have been exposed to the political and philosophical influences of her aunt and the literary figures of the day. If she did not directly engage with Auchterarder Library she would certainly have been aware of her aunt's influence and reasons for establishing it and it is reasonable to assume she may well have crossed its threshold. A committed socialist and something of a 'thorn in the side' of the British establishment, she stuck up for what she believed to be right: education, the plight of the common man and the need to redress the effects of British colonialism. She was a regular visitor to Africa, becoming mother of Botswana's Bakgatla tribe. In the village of Machudi she helped set up a museum, a school, and notably - a library.

A few miles north of Auchterarder lies a treasure of national importance - the Library of Innerpeffray. In 1680 David Drummond, 3rd Lord Madertie made his entire library of over four hundred books available to members of the public to borrow without charge. That simple, philanthropic action marked the moment Scotland's first free public lending library came into being. In 1739 ownership of the estate and library passed to Robert Hay Drummond who, in 1761, became Archbishop of York. This was the age of the Scottish Enlightenment and under Robert Hay Drummond's guardianship the library at Innerpeffray moved to a purpose built building on the estate. Not only can the library boast some incredibly old books but its Borrowers' Register records every person who borrowed a book between 1747 and 1968. It is one of the oldest, continuous Borrowers' Registers in Europe and contains the names of visitors such as Adam White, George Bernard Shaw, Beatrix Potter's parents and James M Barrie, the latter accompanied by Elizabeth Haldane.

What all these persons had in common was an appreciation of books, libraries, institutes and the importance of education. They understood the benefit for the individual and to society as a whole if people acquired knowledge. Many of those who founded libraries and institutes were wealthy and privileged. They did not create such

places for reasons of self-interest. They did so because they cared about their fellow man. They had witnessed uprisings and wars, poverty, homelessness and the ineptitude of authority to resolve such matters. They understood that better education would give rise to better thinkers and in turn perhaps create a fairer society. In brief, they chose to use their positions of power and influence for the betterment of all. Why then do some amongst us seek now to destroy the gifts they bequeathed us? Why are our libraries under threat?

Under the Education Act of 1496 Scotland became the first country in Europe to legislate for compulsory education albeit for the sons of barons and wealthy landowners. Subsequent education acts maintained Scotland's standing as an enlightened nation proud of its education system. The libraries of the country were - and remain - an integral part of that system. The decision by Culture Perth and Kinross (CPK) - established by Perth and Kinross Council - to close five of its rural libraries including Auchterarder Library on the basis that it has insufficient funds to run them necessitates a look at how we value libraries, what their role is in modern society and how we arrive at decisions resulting in their closure. While acknowledging that libraries cost money we need to be mindful that not everything we value as a society should be monetised. As the Scottish author and journalist Kirsten Innes so eruditely puts it,

*“What’s exceptional about libraries is that they’re the one remaining public indoor space that people can be in for free. No cost. In this late-capitalist world of £3 flat whites and toilet taxes, that makes them palaces of subversion. It also means they can’t be monetised, which chafes against the way most local councils currently seem to think of their services. The people who attend libraries are not customers. They are humans, existing in a space, accessing knowledge, internet or resources.”*

Save Our Rural Libraries (SORL) campaigners are angered at what they see as the failure of CPK to comprehend what libraries mean to people in rural communities. As SORL campaigner Shirley Ann Williams explains,

*“Libraries are social hubs, safe spaces, warm spaces, meeting places, facilitators of life-long learning, self help and social mobility. They provide computers and broadband access, access to online training for employment and education, access to national and local government information services, adult and child literacy services and health services such as hearing aid assistance. Libraries are a birth to death service contributing to the wellbeing of all and the levelling up of the disadvantaged in society.”*

There is an irony in closing libraries in the very places where such services are not readily available elsewhere while retaining libraries in cities where at least some of those services can be provided in other ways. Williams also observes,

*“Auchterarder is a growing town and is identified as a key planning development area. Usage of the library is increasing with the expanding population. This means Perth and Kinross Council is receiving increased council tax receipts while at the same time choosing to deny the residents of a key service.”*

There is growing anger at the logic of such decisions. The 2017 infrastructure plan for Auchterarder acknowledged the growing population and noted that community facilities may need to be increased in order to satisfy the needs of the residents. The library is listed as one of the community facilities. All of this comes on the back of a belief that Perth is disproportionately benefitting from inward investment at the expense of rural communities. The recently redeveloped Perth Museum cost £27M and its subsidised cafe is a bone of contention with campaigners and other cafe owners in the vicinity. There is also a deep sense of frustration at what is perceived as a lack of openness and willingness to engage meaningfully with the local community. Council officials have already conceded that the consultation process was delayed because they were busy with the opening of the new museum. SORL campaigners argue that CPK has only invited people to public meetings where answers provided on a questionnaire indicate that locals would be interested in engaging with an alternative provision. If making use of an alternative is presented as the only option then it is inevitable that people wishing to retain some level of service will opt for it.

Regular library users not interested in this were not invited to meetings. Some 1,789 persons have now signed either an online or paper petition to save the library. A recent rally saw over 300 protesters gather in noisy protest outside Perth Museum to make their views known.

James Crawford, writer, publisher and broadcaster understands the importance of rural libraries, the role Auchterarder Library played in his own development as a writer and the comfort it has brought to his mother who lives in the town. As he explains,

*"I was four years old when I first passed through the doors of Auchterarder library. I was six when I told my parents I wanted to be a writer. I don't believe this was a coincidence. Libraries make writers. They also make readers. More than that, they bind communities together. Since my father passed away suddenly last year, my mother has found solace, companionship and escape in the bookshelves of Auchterarder library. There is no tenable argument that the closure of a library is ever a good thing. The erasure of a library like Auchterarder sends a message that access to reading in rural environments is somehow less important, less essential. That you can get by without it. No one should have to.*

*I am currently the Chair of the Board of the Edinburgh International Book Festival, the presenter of a weekly books programme on BBC Radio 4, and the author of nine books that have been translated into seven languages including Italian, Portuguese, Spanish, Japanese and Mandarin. I can't overstate the importance of access to a local library, from a young age, in shaping the direction of my career and making all of these things possible. Did I go to Auchterarder library as a child because I loved books? Or did I love books because of going to Auchterarder library? The answer is almost certainly the latter. Remove libraries and you remove opportunity. The ultimate long-term cost of their absence – to both individuals and communities – is incalculable."*



Looking back at the painting of Burns and Scott in Sibbald's library we should be mindful that Burns and Sibbald started life as the sons of farmers, worked as farm labourers and eventually, through education, connected in Edinburgh in 1786 - the year represented in the painting. The library that Sibbald ran was key to the success of Burns, the development of his world views and his enduring recognition as a man of words. Although Scott had a more privileged upbringing he was also a regular visitor to Sibbald's library. All three men understood the importance of literature but they also understood libraries as something much more than just a place for books.



The key presented to Andrew Carnegie Esq. on the occasion of his opening the Auchterarder Institute 28 Sept. 1896.

Image courtesy of the Andrew Carnegie Birthplace Museum

THE AUTHOR'S EARNEST REQUEST by Lesley Buchan Donald

What e'r yer pairty, Richt or Left  
Tae leave the Lang Toon sae bereft  
The leebrary's an easy mark  
Siller tae save  
O cooncillors I bid ye hark  
Yer time I crave

Scotland honours eductation  
Cornerstane o oor proud Nation  
The bairnies learn their ABCs  
Wi sang and rhyme  
Sat upon a parent's knees  
At story time

But leebraries are mair than books  
See, cooried doon in cosy nooks  
The dowie herted social join  
A human need  
The benefit much mair than coin  
My honest rede

Dinna gie ower this social hub  
Jalouse oor protest but a rub  
A better answer there must be  
A different course  
Than reivin oor community  
O this resource