

Destruction of Books

THE literary treasures of antiquity have suffered from the malice of men, as well as that of time. It is remarkable that conquerors, in the moment of victory, or in the unsparing devastation of their rage, have not been satisfied with destroying *men*, but have even carried their vengeance to *books*.

Ancient history records how the Persians, from hatred of the religion of the Phœnicians and the Egyptians, destroyed their books, of which Eusebius notices they possessed a great number. A remarkable anecdote is recorded of the Grecian libraries; one at Gnidus was burnt by the sect of Hippocrates, because the Gnidians refused to follow the doctrines of their master. If the followers of Hippocrates formed the majority, was it not very unorthodox in the Gnidians to prefer taking physic their own way? The anecdote may be suspicious, but faction has often annihilated books.

The Romans burnt the books of the Jews, of the Christians, and the philosophers; the Jews burnt the books of the Christians and the Pagans; and the Christians burnt the books of the Pagans and the Jews. The greater part of the books of Origen and other heretics were continually burnt by the orthodox party. Gibbon pathetically describes the empty library of Alexandria,

after the Christians had destroyed it. “The valuable library of Alexandria was pillaged or destroyed; and near twenty years afterwards the appearance of the *empty shelves* excited the regret and indignation of every spectator, whose mind was not totally darkened by religious prejudice. The compositions of ancient genius, so many of which have irretrievably perished, might surely have been excepted from the wreck of idolatry, for the amusement and instruction of succeeding ages; and either the zeal or avarice of the archbishop might have been satiated with the richest spoils which were the rewards of his victory.”

The curious narrative of Nicetas Choniates of the ravages committed by the Christians of the thirteenth century in Constantinople was fraudulently suppressed in the printed editions; it has been preserved by Dr. Clarke. We cannot follow this painful history, step by step, of the pathetic Nicetas, without indignant feelings. Dr. Clarke observes, that the Turks have committed fewer injuries to the works of art than the barbarous Christians of that age.

The reading of the Jewish Talmud has been forbidden by various edicts, of the Emperor Justinian, of many of the French and Spanish kings, and numbers

of popes. All the copies were ordered to be burnt: the intrepid perseverance of the Jews themselves preserved that work from annihilation. In 1569 twelve thousand copies were thrown into the flames at Cremona. John Reuchlin interfered to stop this universal destruction of Talmuds; for which he became hated by the monks, and condemned by the Elector of Mentz, but appealing to Rome, the prosecution was stopped; and the traditions of the Jews were considered as not necessary to be destroyed.

Conquerors at first destroy with the rashest zeal the national records of the conquered people; hence it is that the Irish deplore the irreparable losses of their most ancient national memorials, which their invaders have been too successful in annihilating. The same event occurred in the conquest of Mexico; and the interesting history of the New World must ever remain imperfect, in consequence of the unfortunate success of the first missionaries, who too late became sensible of their error. Clavigero, the most authentic historian of Mexico, continually laments this affecting loss. Everything in that country had been painted, and painters abounded there, as scribes in Europe. The first missionaries, suspicious that superstition was mixed with all their paintings, attacked the chief school of these artists,

and collecting, in the market-place, a little mountain of these precious records, they set fire to it, and buried in the ashes the memory of many most interesting events. Afterwards, sensible of their error, they tried to collect information from the mouths of the Indians; but the Indians were indignantly silent: when they attempted to collect the remains of these painted histories, the patriotic Mexican usually buried in concealment the remaining records of his country.

The story of the Caliph Omar proclaiming throughout the kingdom, at the taking of Alexandria, that the Koran contained everything which was useful to believe and to know, and he therefore ordered all the books in the Alexandrian library to be distributed to the master of the baths, amounting to 4000, to be used in heating their stoves during a period of six months, modern paradox would attempt to deny. But the tale would not be singular even were it true: it perfectly suits the character of a bigot, a barbarian, and a blockhead. A similar event happened in Persia. When Abdoolah, who in the third century of the Mohammedan era governed Khorassan, was presented at Nishapoor with a ms. which was shown as a literary curiosity, he asked the title of it, and was told it was the tale of Wamick and Oozra, composed by the great poet Noshirwan. On this Ab-

doolah observed, that those of his country and faith had nothing to do with any other book than the Koran; and that the composition of an idolater must be detestable. Not only he declined accepting it, but ordered it to be burnt in his presence; and further issued a proclamation, commanding all Persian mss. which should be found within the circle of his government to be burnt. Much of the most ancient poetry of the Persians perished by this fanatical edict. Cardinal Ximenes seems to have retaliated a little on the Saracens; for at the taking of Granada he condemned to the flames five thousand Korans.

The following anecdote respecting a Spanish missal, called St. Isidore's, is not incurious; hard fighting saved it from destruction. In the Moorish wars, all these missals had been destroyed excepting those in the city of Toledo. There in six churches the Christians were allowed the free exercise of their religion. When the Moors were expelled several centuries afterwards from Toledo, Alphonsus the Sixth ordered the Roman missal to be used in those churches; but the people of Toledo insisted on having their own preferred, as, being drawn up by the most ancient bishops, and revised by St. Isidore. It had been used by a great number of saints, and having been preserved pure during Moor-

ish times, it seemed to them that Alphonsus was more tyrannical than the Turks. The contest between the Roman and the Toletan missals came to that height, that at length it was determined to decide their fate by single combat; the champion of the Toletan missal felled by one blow the knight of the Roman missal. Alphonsus still considered this battle as merely the effect of the heavy arm of the doughty Toletan, and ordered a fast to be proclaimed, and a great fire to be prepared, into which, after his majesty and the people had joined in prayer for heavenly assistance in this ordeal, both the rivals (not the men, but the missals) were thrown into the flames—again St. Isidore's missal triumphed, and this iron book was then allowed to be orthodox by Alphonsus, and the good people of Toledo were allowed to say their prayers as they had long been used to do. However, the copies of this missal at length became very scarce; for now, when no one opposed the reading of St. Isidore's missal, none cared to use it. Cardinal Ximenes found it so difficult to obtain a copy, that he printed a large impression, and built a chapel, consecrated to St. Isidore, that this service might be daily chanted as it had been by the ancient Christians.

The works of the ancients were frequently destroyed at the instigation of the monks. They appear sometimes

to have mutilated them, for passages have not come down to us, which once evidently existed; and occasionally their interpolations and other forgeries formed a destruction in a new shape, by additions to the originals. They were indefatigable in erasing the best works of the most eminent Greek and Latin authors, in order to transcribe their ridiculous lives of saints on the obliterated vellum. One of the books of Livy is in the Vatican most painfully defaced by some pious father for the purpose of writing on it some missal or psalter, and there have been recently others discovered in the same state. Inflamed with the blindest zeal against everything pagan, Pope Gregory VII. ordered that the library of the Palatine Apollo, a treasury of literature formed by successive emperors, should be committed to the flames. He issued this order under the notion of confining the attention of the clergy to the holy scriptures! From that time all ancient learning which was not sanctioned by the authority of the church has been emphatically distinguished as *profane*—in opposition to *sacred*. This pope is said to have burnt the works of Varro, the learned Roman, that Saint Austin should escape from the charge of plagiarism, being deeply indebted to Varro for much of his great work “the City of God.”

The Jesuits, sent by the Emperor Ferdinand to pro-

scribe Lutheranism from Bohemia, converted that flourishing kingdom comparatively into a desert, from which it never recovered; convinced that ail enlightened people could never be long subservient to a tyrant, they struck one fatal blow at the national literature: every book they condemned was destroyed, even those of antiquity; the annals of the nation were forbidden to be read, and writers were not permitted even to compose on subjects of Bohemian literature. The mother tongue was held out as a mark of vulgar obscurity, and domiciliary visits were made for the purpose of inspecting books and the libraries of the Bohemians. With their books and their language they lost their national character and their independence.

The destruction of libraries in the reign of Henry VIII. at the dissolution of the monasteries is wept over by John Bale; those who purchased the religious houses took the libraries as part of the booty, with which they scoured their furniture, or sold the books as waste paper, or sent them abroad in ship-loads to foreign bookbinders.

The fear of destruction induced many to hide manuscripts under ground, and in old walls. At the Reformation popular rage exhausted itself on illuminated books, or mss. that had red letters in the title-page: any

work that was decorated was sure to be thrown into the flames as a superstitious one. Red letters and embellished figures were sure marks of being papistical and diabolical. We still find such volumes mutilated of the gilt letters and elegant flourishes, but the greater number were annihilated. Many have been found under ground, being forgotten; what escaped the flames were obliterated by the damp: such is the deplorable fate of books during a persecution!

The Puritans burned everything they found which bore the vestige of popish origin. We have on record many curious accounts of their pious depredations, of their maiming images and erasing pictures. The heroic expeditions of one Dowsing are journalised by himself: a fanatical Quixote, to whose intrepid arm many of our noseless saints sculptured on our cathedrals owe their misfortunes.

The following are some details from the diary of this redoubtable Goth, during his rage for reformation. His entries are expressed with a laconic conciseness, and it would seem with a little dry humour. "At *Sunbury*, we brake down ten mighty great angels in glass. At *Barham*, brake down the twelve apostles in the chancel, and six superstitious pictures more there; and eight in the church, one a lamb with cross (+) on the back;

and digged down the steps and took up four superstitious inscriptions in brass," &c. "*Lady Bruce's house*, the chapel, a picture of God the Father, of the Trinity, of Christ, the Holy Ghost, and the cloven tongues, which we gave orders to take down, and the lady promised to do it." At another place they "brake six hundred superstitious pictures, eight Holy Ghosts, and three of the Son." And in this manner he and his deputies scoured one hundred and fifty parishes! It has been humorously conjectured, that from this ruthless devastator originated the phrase to give a *Dowsing*. Bishop Hall saved the windows of his chapel at Norwich from destruction, by taking out the heads of the figures; and this accounts for the many faces in church windows which we see supplied by white glass.

In the various civil wars in our country, numerous libraries have suffered both in MSS. and printed books. "I dare maintain," says Fuller, "that the wars betwixt York and Lancaster, which lasted sixty years, were not so destructive as our modern wars in six years." He alludes to the parliamentary feuds in the reign of Charles I. "For during the former their differences agreed in the *same religion*, impressing them with reverence to all allowed muniments; whilst our *civil wars*, founded in *faction* and *variety* of pretended *religions*, exposed all

naked church records a prey to armed violence; a sad vacuum, which will be sensible in our *English historie.*”

The scarcity of books concerning the Catholics in this country is owing to two circumstances; the destruction of Catholic books and documents by the pursuivants in the reign of Charles I., and the destruction of them by the Catholics themselves, from the dread of the heavy penalties in which their mere possession involved their owners.

When it was proposed to the great Gustavus of Sweden to destroy the palace of the Dukes of Bavaria, that hero nobly refused, observing, “Let us not copy the example of our unlettered ancestors, who, by waging war against every production of genius, have rendered the name of GOTH universally proverbial of the rudest state of barbarity.”

Even the civilization of the eighteenth century could not preserve from the savage and destructive fury of a disorderly mob, in the most polished city of Europe, the valuable MSS. of the great Earl Mansfield, which were madly consigned to the flames during the riots of 1780.

In the year 1599, the hall of the stationers underwent as great a purgation as was carried on in Don Quixote’s library. Warton gives a list of the best writers who

were ordered for immediate conflagration by the prelates Whitgift and Bancroft, urged by the puritanic and calvinistic factions. Like thieves and outlaws, they were ordered to be *taken wheresoever they may be found.*—“It was also decreed that no satires or epigrams should be printed for the future. No plays were to be printed without the inspection and permission of the archbishop of Canterbury and the bishop of London; nor any *English historyes*, I suppose novels and romances, without the sanction of the privy council. Any pieces of this nature, unlicensed, or now at large and wandering abroad, were to be diligently sought, recalled, and delivered over to the ecclesiastical arm at London-house.”

At a later period, and by an opposite party, among other extravagant motions made in the parliament, one was to destroy all the records in the Tower, and to settle the nation on a new foundation. The very same principle was attempted to be acted on in the French revolution by the “true sans-culottes.” With us Sir Matthew Hale showed the weakness of the proposal, and while he drew on his side “all sober persons, stopped even the mouths of the frantic people themselves.”

To descend to the losses incurred by individuals, whose names ought to have served as an amulet to charm away the demons of literary destruction. One of

the most interesting is the fate of Aristotle's library; he who by a Greek term was first saluted as a collector of books! His works have come down to us accidentally, but not without irreparable injuries, and with no slight suspicion respecting their authenticity. The story is told by Strabo, in his thirteenth book. The books of Aristotle came from his scholar Theophrastus to Neleus, whose posterity, an illiterate race, kept them locked up without using them, buried in the earth! One Apellion, a curious collector, purchased them, but finding the mss. injured by age and moisture, conjecturally supplied their deficiencies. It is impossible to know how far Apellion has corrupted and obscured the text. But the mischief did not end here; when Sylla at the taking of Athens brought them to Rome, he consigned them to the care of one Tyrannio, a grammarian, who employed scribes to copy them; he suffered them to pass through his hands without corrections, and took great freedoms with them; the words of Strabo are strong: "Ibique Tyrannionem grammaticum iis vsum atque (ut fama est) *intercidisse, aut invertisse.*" He gives it indeed as a report; but the fact seems confirmed by the state in which we find these works: Averroes declared that he read Aristotle forty times over before he succeeded in perfectly understanding him; he pretends he did at the

one and fortieth time. And to prove this has published five folios of commentary.

We have lost much valuable literature by the illiterate or malignant descendants of learned and ingenious persons. Many of Lady Mary Wortley Montague's letters have been destroyed, I am informed, by her mother, who did not approve that she should disgrace her family by adding to it literary honours; and a few of her best letters, recently published, were found buried in an old family chest. It would have mortified her ladyship's mother, to have heard that her daughter was the Seigné of Britain.

At the death of the learned Peiresc, a chamber in his house filled with letters from the most eminent scholars of the age was discovered: the learned in Europe had addressed Peiresc in their difficulties, who was hence called "the Avocat general" of the republic of letters. Such was the disposition of his niece, that although repeatedly entreated to permit them to be published, she preferred to regale herself occasionally with burning these learned epistles to save the expense of firewood!

The mss. of Leonardo da Vinci have equally suffered from his relatives. When a curious collector discovered some, he generously brought them to a descendant of the great painter, who, coldly observed, that "he had a

great deal more in the garret, which had lain there for many years, if the rats had not destroyed them!" Nothing which this great artist wrote but showed an inventive genius.

Menage observes on a friend having had his library destroyed by fire, in which several valuable mss. had perished, that such a loss is one of the greatest misfortunes that can happen to a man of letters. This gentleman afterwards consoled himself with composing a little treatise *De Bibliothecâ incendio*. It must have been sufficiently curious. Even in the present day men of letters are subject to similar misfortunes; for though the fire-offices will insure books, they will not allow *authors to value their own manuscripts*.

A fire in the Cottonian library shrivelled and destroyed many Anglo-Saxon mss.—a loss now irreparable. The antiquary is doomed to spell hard and hardly at the baked fragments that crumble in his hand.

Meninsky's famous Persian dictionary met with a sad fate. Its excessive rarity is owing to the siege of Vienna by the Turks; a bomb fell on the author's house, and consumed the principal part of his indefatigable labours. There are few sets of this high-priced work which do not bear evident proofs of the bomb; while many parts are stained with the water sent to quench the flames.

The sufferings of an author for the loss of his manuscripts is nowhere more strongly described than in the case of Anthony Urceus, one of the most unfortunate scholars of the fifteenth century. The loss of his papers seems immediately to have been followed by madness. At Forli, he had an apartment in the palace, and had prepared an important work for publication. His room was dark, and he generally wrote by lamp-light. Having gone out, he left the lamp burning; the papers soon kindled, and his library was reduced to ashes. As soon as he heard the news, he ran furiously to the palace, and knocking his head violently against the gate, uttered this blasphemous language: "Jesus Christ, what great crime have I done! who of those who believed in you have I ever treated so cruelly? Hear what I am saying, for I am in earnest, and am resolved. If by chance I should be so weak as to address myself to you at the point of death, don't hear me, for I will not be with you, but prefer hell and its eternity of torments." To which, by the by, he gave little credit. Those who heard these ravings tried to console him, but they could not. He quitted the town, and lived frantically, wandering about the woods!

Ben Jonson's *Execration on Vulcan* was composed on a like occasion; the fruits of twenty years' study were

consumed in one short hour: our literature suffered, for among some works of imagination there were many philosophical collections, a commentary on the poetics, a complete critical grammar, a life of Henry V., his journey into Scotland with all his adventures in that poetical pilgrimage, and a poem on the ladies of Great Britain. What a catalogue of losses!

Castelvetro, the Italian commentator on Aristotle, having heard that his house was on fire, ran through the streets exclaiming to the people, *alla Poetica! alla Poetica! to the Poetic! to the Poetic!* He was then writing his commentary on the Poetic of Aristotle.

Several men of letters have been known to have risen from their death-bed, to destroy their MSS. So solicitous have they been not to venture their posthumous reputation in the hands of undiscerning friends. Marmontel relates a pleasing anecdote of Colardeau, the elegant versifier of Pope's epistle of Eloisa to Abelard.

This writer had not yet destroyed what he had written of a translation of Tasso. At the approach of death, he recollected his unfinished labour; he knew that his friends would not have the courage to annihilate one of his works; this was reserved for him. Dying, he raised himself, as if animated by an honourable ac-

tion, he dragged himself along, and with trembling hands seized his papers, and consumed them in one sacrifice.—I recollect another instance of a man of letters, of our own country, who acted the same part. He had passed his life in constant study, and it was observed that he had written several folio volumes, which his modest fears would not permit him to expose to the eye even of his critical friends. He promised to leave his labours to posterity; and he seemed sometimes, with a glow on his countenance, to exult that they would not be unworthy of their acceptance. At his death his sensibility took the alarm; he had the folios brought to his bed; no one could open them, for they were closely locked. At the sight of his favourite and mysterious labours, he paused; he seemed disturbed in his mind, while he felt at every moment his strength decaying; suddenly he raised his feeble hands by an effort of firm resolve, burnt his papers, and smiled as the greedy Vulcan licked up every page. The task exhausted his remaining strength, and he soon afterwards expired. The late Mrs. Inchbald had written her life in several volumes; on her death-bed, from a motive perhaps of too much delicacy to admit of any argument, she requested a friend to cut them into pieces before her eyes—not

having sufficient strength herself to perform this funeral office. These are instances of what may be called the heroism of authors.

The republic of letters has suffered irreparable losses by shipwrecks. Guarino Veronese, one of those learned Italians who travelled through Greece for the recovery of MSS., had his perseverance repaid by the acquisition of many valuable works. On his return to Italy he was shipwrecked, and unfortunately for himself and the world, says Mr. Roscoe, he lost his treasures! So pungent was his grief on this occasion that, according to the relation of one of his countrymen, his hair became suddenly white.

About the year 1700, Hudde, an opulent burgomaster of Middleburgh, animated solely by literary curiosity, went to China to instruct himself in the language, and in whatever was remarkable in this singular people. He acquired the skill of a mandarin in that difficult language; nor did the form of his Dutch face undeceive the physiognomists of China. He succeeded to the dignity of a mandarin; he travelled through the provinces under this character, and returned to Europe with a collection of observations, the cherished labour of thirty years; and all these were sunk in the bottomless sea!

The great Pinellian library, after the death of its illustrious possessor, filled three vessels to be conveyed to Naples. Pursued by corsairs, one of the vessels was taken; but the pirates finding nothing on board but books, they threw them all into the sea: such was the fate of a great portion of this famous library. National libraries have often perished at sea, from the circumstance of conquerors transporting them into their own kingdoms.