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English Conceptualisations of 'Public' Libraries, c. 1690s–1710s

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the transcultural aspects of English conceptualisations of 'public' libraries in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. The article employs keyword-based approach. It discusses a proposal for a public library in New York by John Sharpe, the significance of holistic and connected approaches to the Bray library projects and the discourses surrounding libraries in early modern published travel accounts included by Bray in his suggested library curriculum. The article is informed by and contributes to literatures on the global dimension of the history of early modern Anglicanism and the role of libraries in early modern English travel and encounter narratives. Not only can the 'global' help us understand early modern English ideas of the 'public library', but 'public libraries' can help us rethink some of the ways in which England engaged with the 'globe'.

Article text

The 'public library' was an utterly confused category in early modern England.[1] Early modern English sources refer to anything from the Ambrosiana in Milan to a local parish library as 'public' libraries, notwithstanding the enormous differences in the depositories, intended uses and audiences and funding models of the libraries in question. This article starts with a microhistory of one document – an unsuccessful proposal for the establishment of a 'public library' in New York in 1713. Using it as a starting point for a semantic and conceptual discussion of what made a library 'public' in the early modern Anglophone world, this article argues that some early modern English commentators understood the concept of a public library in a global framework. Travellers encountered libraries they described as 'public' in Paris and Rome, Switzerland and the Low Countries. 'Public libraries' were seen as essential for the civilising project on the frontiers of the emerging 'British' empire from New York to Tangiers, and books were seen as necessary for promoting godly behaviour in trading factories from Aleppo to Izmir. The transcultural dimension of conceptualising early modern 'public' libraries,

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[1]The phrase 'utterly confused category' was famously originally used to refer to sodomy in early modern Europe, see Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, *vol. 1, An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, 1990), 43. The footnotes in this article are formatted in a consistent style different from the *Cultural and Social History* required style (Chicago), to be amended if accepted for publication.

offered in this article, has hitherto been overlooked. This article explores these themes through a close reading of the texts of John Sharpe (1680–after 1715), a Scottish minister active in early-18th-century New York, and Thomas Bray (1656/58–1730), the famous founder of many early American libraries.[2] It then presents a study of mentions of 'public' and accessible libraries in travel accounts recommended by Bray to his library patrons and popular among his wider social circles.

Not only can the 'global' help us understand early modern English ideas of the 'public library', but 'public libraries' can help us rethink some of the ways in which England engaged with the 'globe'. 'public libraries' were one of the many 17th-century developments of English religious, social, political and civic life that did not happen in a vacuum defined by the borders of the kingdom of England. This article builds on recent developments in the field of English and British social history. Traditionally, the field has focused on England (and, sometimes, the Three Kingdoms) in isolation, exploring the questions of family structure, social order, population and locality, among others.[3] Contemporary English social and economic history has started to embrace the influences the world around England had on early modern English culture, society and economy.[4] Additionally, the last two decades have witnessed fierce debates and a framework shift in our understanding of English imperialism, shifting from an emphasis on state-driven colonial expansion towards a stress on decentralised approaches and the primacy of non-European actors, all accounting for the weakness of the English state in the 16th and 17th centuries.[5] The 'global', rather than exclusively 'imperial' or 'colonial' approach also speaks to the literature on the theory, rather than practice, of early modern English encounter and imperialism.[6] Historians have debated whether the English epistemically approached the whole world as a potential colony, or had distinctly different frameworks for understanding more powerful polities.[7] Bringing these strands together, the present article is a part of this wider drive to demonstrate that seemingly specific, local and insular social history ideas, experiences and concepts developed in an England acutely aware of and connected to the world around it. Adding to the decentralised approach to early modern English imperialism, the case study of libraries demonstrates the multiplicity of actors, institutional fragmentation, and significance of specific individuals (most of all, Thomas Bray) as driving forces of the day-to-day functioning of early modern English colonial projects. The third part of this article shifts the focus from

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[2]On Sharpe, see "Journal of Rev. John Sharpe," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 40, no. 3 (1916): 257–297.

[3]See, for instance Keith Wrightson, *English Society 1580–1680* (Abingdon, 1982), Craig Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation: Culture of Credit and Social Relations in Early Modern England* (London, 1998).

[4]Phil Withington, "Where was the coffee in early modern England?" *The Journal of Modern History*, 92, no. 1 (2020): 40–75; Phil Withington, "Intoxicants and the invention of 'consumption'," *The Economic History Review*, 73, no. 2 (2019): 384–408; and Paul Slack, *The Invention of Improvement: Information and Material Progress in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford, 2014).

[5]Charles H. Parker, *Global Interactions in the Early Modern Age, 1400 –1800* (Cambridge, 2010), 15; Alison Games, *The Web of Empire English Cosmopolitans in an Age of Expansion, 1560–1660* (Oxford, 2008), 5; David Veevers, *The Origins of the British Empire in Asia, 1600–1750* (Cambridge, 2020).

[6]David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge, 2000); D. Vitkus, *Turning Turk: English Theater and the Multicultural Mediterranean* (London, 2003), 31; G. McLean, *Looking East English Writing and the Ottoman Empire Before 1800* (London, 2007), 61 and 20–23.

[7]See a sample debate in Judy A. Hayden and Nabil Matar, "Introduction," in *Through the Eyes of The Beholder: The Holy Land, 1517–1713*, eds. Judy A. Hayden and Nabil Matar (Leiden, 2013), 14. For a counterargument, see Julia Schleck, *Telling True Tales of Islamic lands: Forms of Mediation in English Travel Writing, 1575– 1630* (Selinsgrove [Pa.], 2011), 41–6, 50.

empirical imperial library projects focused on English colonial territories towards an assessment of libraries as tools of discourse and starts a conversation on the role of libraries and other mechanisms of knowledge production as signifiers of cultural developments in English writings.

The study of Sharpe, Bray and the wider context of early American libraries flourished in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with scholars such as Austin Baxter Keep, Samuel Clyde McCulloch, Gregory Frohnsdorff, and BC Steiner, among many others, making substantial contributions to establishing empirical facts about the libraries, publishing various contingent documents and contextualising them in the wider world of early 18th century American colonies.[8] Some Bray-related documents are still being discovered and rediscovered to this day.[9] One of the major new contributions into Bray's English activities, situating them in the wider context of the parochial libraries in England, has been made by Jessica Purdy.[10] Finally, the study of 'public welfare' is a field with a long and detailed history, often focusing on socioeconomic and religious factors, exemplified in the seminal work by Paul Slack.[11] Slack did not focus on libraries in his research, but many of his conceptual findings, including the role of 'public' institutions in social engineering and social control, have informed this article.

This article is also informed by recent research on religious developments of the late 17th and early 18th centuries in England, Scotland and the colonies. The contribution of this article is not that the Society for Promotion of Christian Knowledge, or the Anglican Church more broadly, had a global outlook in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. This has already been amply demonstrated.[12] As Brent Sirota has convincingly shown, late-17th- and early-18th-century Anglicanism had a global outlook, as both the church authorities, individual preachers and voluntary associations were actively interested in overseas expansion both in colonial domains and beyond them.[13] This article builds on recent work on Atlantic and global Anglicanism to argue that this global outlook translated into a global conceptualisation of the 'public library'.

The 'global', 'transcultural' and 'transnational', all wrought, imprecise, flawed and imperfect terms, do nevertheless speak to this sense of a connected process of encounter with the wider world in early modern England. 'global' does not mean 'engaged with (or, indeed, originating in) every single part of the Globe'; rather, it addresses the entangled

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[8]Bernard C. Steiner, "Rev. Thomas Bray and His American Libraries," *The American Historical Review* 2, no. 1 (1896): 59–75; Gregory Frohnsdorff, "'Before the Public': Some Early Libraries of Antigua," *Libraries & Culture* 38, no. 1 (2003): 1–23; Samuel Clyde McCulloch, "Dr. Thomas Bray's Commissary Work in London, 1696–1699," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 2, no. 4 (1945): 334–48; Samuel Clyde McCulloch, "Dr. Thomas Bray's Trip to Maryland: A Study in Militant Anglican Humanitarianism," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 2, no. 1 (1945): 15–32; Austin Baxter Keep, *History of the New York Society Library* (New York, 1908); and Thomas E. Keys, "The Colonial Library and the Development of Sectional Differences in the American Colonies," *The Library Quarterly: Information, Community, Policy* 8, no. 3 (1938): 373–90.

[9]See, for example, Champagne, 'Atlantic Book Shipments', https://bookhistory.yale.edu/blog/kelsey-champagne-atlantic-book-shipments. Champagne, Kelsey, 'Atlantic Book Shipments', https://bookhistory.yale.edu/blog/kelsey-champagne-atlantic-book-shipments

[10]Jessica G. Purdy, "Parish Libraries and their Readers in Early Modern England, 1558–1709" (Unpublished PhD thesis, Manchester Metropolitan University, 2021); Jessica G. Purdy, *Reading Between the Lines: Parish Libraries and Their Readers in Early Modern England, 1558–1709* (Leiden, 2023); Jessica G. Purdy, "Access, Restrictions and Readership in Early Modern Parish Libraries," *Library & Information History* 40, no. 2 (2024): 86–100.

[11]Paul Slack, *From Reformation to Improvement: Public Welfare in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1999).

[12]See Brent S. Sirota, *The Christian Monitors: the Church of England and the Age of Benevolence, 1680–1730* (New Haven, 2014), Chapter 6; Carla Gardina Pestana, *Protestant Empire: Religion and the Making of the British Atlantic World* (Philadelphia, 2009); See especially Rose. "The Origins," 179.

[13]Sirota, *The Christian Monitors*, see 223–233; Sirota does not mention libraries.

nature of early modern English engagement with the wider world, resistant to neat compartmentalisation into disparate engagements with the 'Atlantic world', 'the Levant', or any other defined region with clearly established power dynamics. In this sense, the concept of the 'public library' in early modern English texts was 'global' – developed with an acute awareness and in direct conversation with a variety of places around the world, from North American colonies and France to Ottoman-ruled Greece and Ceylon.

This article introduces its major themes through a microhistory of John Sharpe's unsuccessful proposals for a public library in New York in 1713. It provides a close reading of Sharpe's text, focusing on what the 'public' in 'public library' meant for Sharpe. Sharpe's proposal merits attention for several reasons. On the one hand, Sharpe's proposal continues English provincial traditions of establishing libraries as a part of educational institutions for public benefit, exemplified in Humphrey Chatham's establishment of a similar library in Manchester.[14] In this context, 'public' was defined by a more scholarly curriculum and the primary intention of providing a book depository for a school. On the other hand, Sharpe clearly based his proposal on some of Thomas Bray's libraries, defined by their missionary zeal, and he further emphasised that his library would provide better general access than the existing New York Bray library at the time.[15] Additionally, Sharpe's proposal also offers something unique – conceptualising the public library as a colonial venture to systematically collect and process zoological, botanical, cartographical and anthropological knowledge of the 'New World' before transferring it back to the metropole. This conceptualisation of a public library as a repository of knowledge puts his proposal in closer proximity to large scholarly libraries of Continental Europe. Because Sharpe's proposal lies in this unique overlap of different concepts of what a 'public' library could mean in this period, it was chosen as an entryway case study into the topic, employed to introduce some of these ideas and tensions before expanding them into the wider context of his thought, exemplified in the works of Thomas Bray and the wider English discourses of foreign libraries and their purposes. Thomas Bray's work as the earliest founder of systematic library projects in America makes him indispensable for this study. This article focuses on the semantic concept of the 'public' nature of his library projects, as expressed in his essays and other writings explaining his idea of libraries. This article also puts Bray's own writings within the context of the content of books he recommended for his library curriculum by exploring what a library and a 'public' library meant for the many authors of travel accounts he selected for his libraries and made available to his readers.

Bray was fundamental in the establishment of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, one of the most influential voluntary organisations within the Church of England. The society played a key role in galvanising support for Bray's library projects and his other missionary endeavours. It was a voluntary Anglican response to the religious developments of the 1690s, driven by a politically and confessionally heterogenous group of people.[16] Important to the field of library history as the founding father

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[14]On Chatham, see Jessica G. Purdy "'For the Edification of the Common People': Humphrey Chetham's Parish Libraries" in *Communities of Print: Books and Their Readers in Early Modern Europe*, eds Rosamund Oates, Jessica G. Purdy (Leiden, 2022), 79–96.

[15]On the context of the proposal, see Austin Baxter Keep, *The Library in Colonial New York* (New York, 1909), p 53.

[16]Rose, "The Origins," 172 -174.

of 'public' libraries in the American colonies, Bray was 'difficult to place in any party category' politically, but clear in his religious affiliation as a defender of the Church of England against 'the unprecedented force of the assault' of the 1690s.[17] Craig Rose argues that all of Bray's projects, including his libraries, were a response in defence of the established Church.[18] Thomas Bray and the libraries he founded and inspired were included in this article due to how fundamental they are to the development of 'public' libraries in North America, and in the context of the Anglophone world more widely.

Sharpe references Thomas Bray's libraries as direct inspiration. This article places Sharpe's proposal in the wider context of a set of texts orbiting Thomas Bray's library projects, including his own writings and proposals, a 1746 biography of Bray written by Samuel Smith, various pieces of colonial legislation establishing the Bray libraries from the late 1690s onwards and the content of the travel accounts Bray included in the catalogues of his libraries. The travel accounts were included to enable the users of Bray libraries to learn about the world around them, including learning about other libraries outside of England (and North American colonies). These accounts present a tangible link between Sharpe's and Bray's proposals for public libraries and the wider English discourses about libraries, including 'publick libraries', outside of England. This article thus shines new light on the relationship between the early modern library and encounter.[19] Travel accounts illuminate the cultural milieu in which Bray's and Sharpe's thinking about what a 'library' can be developed. More specifically, the inclusion of travel accounts in Bray's list of recommended books, echoed in the list of books actually sent to the library of Charlestown, South Carolina, demonstrate that travel accounts were widely read by people like Bray and Sharpe and were a staple of the educational curriculum.[20] Thus, this article starts with a microhistory, then anchors it in its immediate surroundings, and then opens up the wider cultural context.

The innovation of the approach taken in this article is to connect John Sharpe and Thomas Bray's ideas about provincial and parochial libraries in early American colonies with the wider context of libraries encountered by English and Scottish travellers and tourists in continental Europe and beyond. This is done through the semantic prism of the 'public library', a signifier used by both Sharpe and Bray to label their creations and by a plethora of English and Scottish travellers describing disparate European libraries, from the Ambrosiana, Milan, and Marciana, Venice, and major university libraries to smaller local monastic book collections.[21] The source selection, combining sources

[17]Ibid., p 173 and 178; for the opposing view arguing that the establishment of the SPCK is a sign of the diminishing importance of Anglican clergy see Leonard W. Cowie, *Henry Newman: An American in London 1708–43* (SPCK, 1956), 37; M. G. Jones, *The Charity School Movement* (Cambridge, 1938), 5–6.

[18]Rose, "The Origins," 178.

[19]Nil Ö. Palabıyık, *Silent teachers: Turkish books and oriental learning in early modern Europe, 1544–1669* (London, 2023); Alexander Bevilacqua, *The Republic of Arabic letters: Islam and the European Enlightenment* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 2018); Majid Daneshgar, *Reconstructing Erpenius' Library: The First Collection of Oriental Manuscripts at Cambridge University Library* (Leiden, 2024); Abigail Brundin, Dunstan Roberts, "Book-Buying and the Grand Tour: the Italian Books at Belton House in Lincolnshire," *The Library*, 16, no. 1 (2015): 51–79; see also Jill Bepler's work on Germany, eg Jill Belper, "Women's Books and Dynastic Networks in Early Modern Germany," *Der Hof. December*, 12, (2013): 295–313; Richard Ansell, "Reading and Writing Travels: Maximilien Misson, Samuel Waring and the Afterlives of European Voyages, c.1687–1714," *The English Historical Review*, 133, no. 565, (December 2018): 1446–1477; and David McKitterick, *The Invention of Rare Books Private Interest and Public Memory, 1600–1840* (Cambridge, 2018).

[20]Edgar Legare Pennington, "The Beginnings of the Library in Charles Town, South Carolina," *The Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, 44, no. 1 (1934): 172–173.

[21]See discussion below.

directly related to library studies with travel accounts which mentions libraries in passing as a part of painting a much larger picture, is key to the innovations of this article bringing encounter and library studies together. The methodology for this article focuses on semantic history and keyword approaches.[22] A specifically identified signifier – 'publick' and its variations – is at the heart of the research. This article is based on a close reading of three distinct sets of sources – John Sharpe's proposal, sources related to Thomas Bray and 17th- and early-18th-century English travel accounts – with a focus on the variations of the signifier 'publick' in proximity to mentions of libraries and book depositories. The phrase 'English texts' signifies texts published in English, regardless of whether their authors were English, Scottish or non-Anglophone altogether, thus including a limited number of texts translated into English.

Libraries: Parochial, Public, Provincial?

'Public' libraries in late-17th- and early-18th-century dominions of the English Crown ranged from parochial libraries to the founding of lavish establishments such as Marsh's Library in Dublin, secured by 'an Act of the Irish Parliament in 1707 'for Settling and Preserving a Public Library for ever'.[23] The concept and the phrase itself is not new to the period, either in the Three Kingdoms or the Atlantic colonies. Henry Dunster, the second President of Harvard College, referred to the Harvard library as a 'Public' one in 1645.[24] In a will drafted in 1653, Captain Robert Keayne bequeathed money for a town library in Boston, and John Oxenbridge left some books, including works of Augustine and Euclid's Geometry, to the 'Public Library' in Boston in 1674.[25] At least one book from a 'publick' library' in Boston survives from as early as 1674.[26] Norwich City Library was regularly referred to as 'the Public Library of Norwich' from 1656 onwards.[27]

The three primary signifiers for non-private libraries were 'public', 'parochial' and 'provincial', all categories without clearly defined meanings. Parochial libraries are the best studied category among these, starting with a seminal report in 1959 and continuing

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[22]Mark Knights, "Towards a Social and Cultural History of Keywords and Concepts by the Early Modern Research Group," *History of Political Thought*, 31, no. 3 (2010): 427 – 448, 432; Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York, 1976), 20–24; Phil Withington, *Society in Early Modern England: The Vernacular Origins of Some Powerful Ideas* (Cambridge, 2010), 6–15; The classic study employing a conceptual approach to the study of early modern public libraries remains Thomas Kelly, *Early Public Libraries: a History of the Public Libraries in Great Britain before 1850* (London, 1966).

[23]W. M. Jacob, "Libraries and Philanthropy, 1690–1740," *Bulletin of the Association of British Theological and Philosophical Libraries*, 4, no. 2 (1997): 7.

[24]Thomas Goddard Wright, *Literary Culture in Early New England, 1620–1730* (New Haven, 1920), 40.

[25]Jesse H. Shera, *Foundations Of The Public Library The Origins Of The Public Library Movement In New England 1629–1855* (Chicago, 1949), 19–21; Michael J. Canavan, "The Old Boston Public Library, 1656–1747," *Proceedings of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts*, XII (March, 1908): 116–33.

[26]Samuel Mather, *A testimony from the Scripture against idolatry & superstition* . . . (Cambridge, Mass. : S. Green? or S. Green and M. Johnson?, 1670 or 1672); the title page of the Boston Athenaeum copy, no. 13 of 14 titles bound together, is inscribed: 'For the publike library at Boston, 1674'; Boston Athenaeum B258. For more information on this very poorly documented library, see Charles Knowles Bolton, *The Athenaeum Centenary* (Boston, 1907), 17; Wright, *Literary Culture*, 43.

[27]Thomas Kelly, "Norwich, Pioneer of Public Libraries," *Norfolk Archaeology*, 34, no. 20 (1967): 215–222, 220.

into modern scholarship.[28] Historians have argued that parochial libraries varied greatly, making any stable definition of them problematic.[29] 'Public libraries' is an unstable term, used cautiously by scholars of early modern library history.[30] Jessica Purdy and Matthew Yeo showed that the signifiers 'public' and 'parochial' could be used to denote distinct and mutually exclusive categories of libraries.[31] For example, the Manchester merchant Humphrey Chetham bequeathed money for a public library for scholars and 'the well-educated', leaving a thousand pounds for the purchase of books for the one public library. He also left two hundred pounds for the setting up of five parish libraries for, in his own words, 'the common people', in the same will.[32] As Purdy argues, the term 'public' in this sense does not allude to the public sphere as understood in the eighteenth century, but rather to Chetham's view of the library as a public service in promoting learning and knowledge'.[33] Parochial libraries were also understood as a source of goodness for their readers. W. M. Jacob emphasised the role of parochial libraries in providing godly learning among both the clergy and the parishioners after the Reformation.[34] Finally, 'provincial' libraries as a term refers to a variety of libraries in the English provinces, including parochial, civic and school libraries, as a loose group often also labelled as 'semi-public'. In her study of provincial libraries in Devon, Anna-Lujz Gilbert has argued that there were 'widely understood conventions about the type of books they should hold, which would be of public benefit'.[35] The term 'public library', intentionally used anachronistically, is still influential in overview histories of public libraries, referring to wide access. Thomas Kelly defined them as 'libraries for the use of the public (irrespective of finance)'.[36] The issues of access, funding and benefit for the intended audience were at the heart of conceptualising 'public' libraries in early modern English thought.

John Sharpe's proposal for a public library in NewYork

John Sharpe failed to establish a single library, but he left behind a fascinating document with ambitious proposals, available in two different manuscript copies (currently in the Bodleian and Lambeth Palace libraries).[37] Sharpe referred to his proposed institution as

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[28]Central Council for the Care of Churches, *The Parochial Libraries of the Church of England* (London: Faith Press, 1959); and David Williams, "English Parochial Libraries: A History of Changing Attitudes," *Antiquarian Book Monthly Review*, 5, no. 4 (1978), 138–147.

[29]Michael Perkin, "Parochial Libraries: Founders and Readers" in *The Reach of Print: Making, Selling and Using Books*, eds. Peter Isaac and Barry McKay (Winchester, 1998), 191; W. M. Jacob, "Libraries for the Parish: Individual Donors and Charitable Societies" in *The Cambridge History of Libraries in Britain and Ireland, Volume II: 1640–1850*, eds. Giles Mandelbrote and K. A. Manley (Cambridge, 2006), 65; Sarah Gray and Chris Baggs, 'The English Parish Library: a Celebration of Diversity', *Libraries & Culture*, 35 (2000), 414.

[30]Kelly, *Early Public Libraries*.

[31]Matthew Yeo, *The Acquisition of Books by Chetham's Library, 1655–1700* (Leiden, 2011), 4–5

[32]Jessica G. Purdy, "'For the Edification of the Common People': Humphrey Chetham's Parish Libraries" in *Communities of Print: Books and their Readers in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Rosamund Oates, and Jessica G. Purdy (Leiden, 2021), 79.

[33]Ibid., 79.

[34]W. M. Jacob, "Parochial Libraries and their Users," *Library and Information History*, 27, no. 4 (2011): 211; see also Arnold Hunt, "Clerical and Parish Libraries" in *The Cambridge History of Libraries, Volume I, to 1640*, eds. Elisabeth Leedham-Green and Teresa Webber (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 401, 416.

[35]Anna-Lujz Gilbert, "Public Books in Provincial Town: Parish and Town Libraries in Early Modern Devon," (Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Exeter, 2021), 181.

[36]Kelly, *Early Public Libraries*, 13.

[37]Both the two manuscript version of this source and the printed version were consulted for this research; a variant of the Lambeth Palace copy was printed in John Sharpe, 'Rev. John Sharpe's Proposals', *Collections of the New York Historical Society for the Year 1880*, v. 13 (New York, 1880) 339–363. The manuscript copies are Bodleian Library, MS. Clarendon 102, Fol 225 and Lambeth Palace Library, MSS 841. For convenience, the printed copy is referenced.

a 'publick Library', which would 'advance both learning and piety'.[38] He immediately contextualised his proposal among similar institutions in 'Charles Town in Carolina, Annapolis in Mary Land, at Philadelphia and Boston', most of them Bray libraries.[39] However, he explained his eagerness to establish a library in New York despite the presence of a Bray library there, calling the latter 'parochial' and lamenting that the books 'remain in the hands of the Incumbent'.[40] This conceptualisation of a 'public' library based on access echoes modern scholarly reservations about the 'public' status of early modern English parochial libraries.[41] Sharpe then methodically listed ten core organisational principles of his proposed library. The key points were for the library to be 'publick and provincial and to be open every day in the week at convenient hours', that 'all men may have liberty to read in the Library at these hours' and that 'the light of the Library and use of the books be given gratis', with further rules stipulating the specific conditions for borrowing books, the size of deposits for borrowing and other measures taken to prevent 'Embezelments', including establishing catalogues and communication with trustees in England.[42] Despite its clear connection to the school, the 'public' in Sharpe's proposal is clearly about widening access to the books, and not providing for public good through the existence of a scholarly institution.

The basic rules regulating access, lending, custody of books and prevention of the loss of books mirror those at Charlestown, one of the libraries which the proposed Sharpe library was explicitly modelled on, and follow the content of the 1709 Parochial Libraries Act in England.[43] On 16 November 1700, the South Carolina General Assembly ratified 'An Act for Securing the Provincial Library at Charles Town, in Carolina'. The ratification followed the de facto establishment of the library in 1698–99, and its main purpose for the 'effectual preservation' of the library, setting out the rules to prevent the loss of books.[44] The Act does not refer to the library as 'public' or 'publick' at any point, terming it a 'provincial' library. However, the major conditions of access, borrowing and governance provide a blueprint for Sharpe's proposals. There is a stipulation that 'the inhabitants of this Province shall have liberty to borrow any book out of the said provincial library', that a penalty would be paid for damage to books, that the local incumbent would be the custodian of the library and that catalogues of the library would be kept with the custodian and also sent to England to Bray and various individuals including the Bishop of London.[45] The Act also provided stipulations for setting up a board of trustees, a blueprint Sharpe would follow in his proposal.[46] The Act was less specific on physical access than Sharpe's proposal, as it makes no mention of opening hours and the usage of the space itself, but the general organisational principles of the Charlestown 'provincial' and Sharpe's 'publick and provincial' libraries are very similar. Sharpe showed familiarity

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[38]Sharpe, "Rev. John Sharpe's Proposals," 345–46.

[39]Ibid., 346.

[40]Ibid., 346.

[41]Purdy, "Parish Libraries," 46.

[42]Sharpe, "Rev. John Sharpe's Proposals," 346.

[43]Parochial Libraries Act 1708, https://www.legislation.gov.uk/apgb/Ann/7/14/1991-02-01. Parochial Libraries Act 1708, https://www.legislation.gov.uk/apgb/Ann/7/14/1991-02-01.

[44]McCulloch, "Dr. Thomas Bray's Commissary Work," 335; "An Act for securing the Provincial Library at Charlestown, in Carolina" in *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*, volume 7, ed.David J. McCord (Columbia, S.C.: A. S. Johnston, 1840), 13–16, 13.

[45]McCord, *The Statutes*, 14.

[46]Ibid., p 15.

with the expected legal structures of setting up a library, 'An Act of Assembly can be also easily obtained to secure' the books, showing his awareness of the legal provisions of South Carolina, Maryland and other colonies which issued legal acts to set up their libraries.[47]

Most of these provisions, including prevention of embezzlement, power of enquiries and creation of a catalogue was introduced into metropolitan legislation through the Parochial Libraries Act of 1708, showing that there was a dialogue between colonial and metropolitan legislation concerning conceptualising public libraries.[48] The involvement of a legislative body in governing library rules is not new to the early 18th century, as the examples of civic corporation libraries such as St Margaret's in King's Lynn in the 1630s, discussed above, shows. However, the similarities between the South Carolina and England legislation, both based on the ideas of Thomas Bray, point to the development of a shared understanding of what a publicly accessible library should be. The focus on preservation of the library collection through the prevention of collection loss by authorising external regulation, rules for book preservation and the necessity of a catalogue all point to centring accountability as a key tenet of public libraries. The 1708 Act differs from the South Carolina legislation by acknowledging the public and potentially shared nature of the library space, which might be used for other purposes. The Act stipulates

> that in case the Place where such Library is or shall be kept shall be used for any publick Occasion for Meeting of the Vestry or otherwise for the Dispatch of any Business of the said Parish or for any other publick Occasion for which the said Place hath been ordinarily used the Place shall nevertheless be made use of as formerly for such Purposes and after such Business dispatched shall be again forthwith shut and lockt up or otherwise secured as is before directed,

thus furthering the association between the physical space of the library and public use.[49] South Carolina legislation made no such provisions. However, the other similarities between the two pieces of legislation, the metropolitan following the colonial, further point to the global nature of commonly accessible libraries in early modern England.

Access is clearly the key value Sharpe saw in his library when comparing it to the existing New York Bray library, the Trinity Parish Library.[50] Sharpe did not name the library in his proposal, he did not even call it a 'library', reducing the Bray foundation to 'some books [...] formerly sent' to New York.[51] The Trinity Parish library was referred to as a 'public library' in at least one Trinity Vestry meeting in 1707, demonstrating that the semantic boundaries between 'public', 'parochial' and 'provincial' libraries were not always clear-cut.[52] The Trinity Parish Library continued receiving donations till 1741.[53] The accessibility of this collection was established as an issue by the 1720s. Rector William Vesey, who had been in this post since 1698, wrote to the Bishop of London in 1723 or 24 that 'under my care in my Study' there is 'a small parochial library', and although he 'never received any particular rules and

[47]Sharpe, "Rev. John Sharpe's Proposals," 348.
[48]https://www.legislation.gov.uk/apgb/Ann/7/14/1991-02-01.
[49]https://www.legislation.gov.uk/apgb/Ann/7/14/1991-02-01.
[50]See Keep, *The Library in Colonial New York*, 8–43.
[51]Sharpe, 'Rev. John Sharpe's Proposals, 346.
[52]Keep, *The Library in Colonial New York*, p 22.
[53]Ibid., p 33.

orders concerning it, [...] all the books [were] preserved and kept in good condition'.[54] In November 1720, Reverend Robert Jenney, the chaplain at the fort in New York, wrote to the Bishop of London regarding Sharpe's proposal, that he was in favour of it 'provided it be really a publick library & be not lockt up in ye particular Study of any particular person', probably referring to the current state of the Trinity Parish Library.[55] In other words, Sharpe's issue was not with Bray's library programme more broadly (although there is some evidence to indicate that the two men might have had a personal falling out), but with the state of the accessibility of the Trinity Parish Library in particular. Access was also at the heart of one of the key differences between Sharpe's 'public' and Bray's 'provincial' libraries. Sharpe envisaged the schoolmaster of his proposed school, not a parish priest or a churchwarden, as the literal key keeper to the library, proposing that 'those who come to see the Library can see the school and being one building a key of the Library may remain with the school-master'.[56]

Points nine and ten of Sharpe's plan speak of wider ambition and are more illuminating on his view of the purpose and scope of his proposed library. Point 9 stipulates that 'In this Library, may be copies of the Catalogues of the several parochial Library's that where the publick may be deficient the studious may be supplied elsewhere' and point 10 declares that 'in this Library also may be a Repository of all such Rarities as the Country produces, or are brought hither from other places to be communicated to the Ingenious in Europe. There may be also a small garden of rare and exotick plants to send yearly some to the curious in England and have others in exchange'.[57] Both of these speak to a more ambitious conceptualisation of a 'public' library than Chetham or Bray ever proposed, akin to scholarly libraries of Europe. European libraries were often merged with cabinets of curiosities, and the visitor experience of a library, especially if it was a part of a wider institution such as a Jesuit college, a monastery or a university, often involved a visit to a botanical garden. Many visitors and colonists in the 'New World' were fascinated by local flora and fauna, and there was a steady stream of Indigenous cultural artefacts making its way towards Europe.[58] Situating his library both as a repository of colonial knowledge and as a conduit for such knowledge to make it to England, Sharpe materially expanded the scope of what a provincial library could do, bringing it in line with libraries labelled as public by English and Scottish visitors to Europe, such as the Ambrosiana or Leiden University Library.

Sharpe's proposed library was to be a part of a wider institution, namely, a school for about 150 students, which would be sheltered from the surrounding streets.[59] The library, although public and open to everybody, was to serve the needs of this student community. Catechising education was at the heart of Bray's and SPCK's programme 'to reinvigorate Anglicanism', making Sharpe's proposal in line with Bray's aspirations.[60] Sharpe combined a zeal for a reformation of manners, religious conformism and social cohesion with pragmatic considerations. The school was to 'reconcile [the students] early to the National Church' and give them 'the opportunity of learning Latine &c, and

[54]Ibid., p 28.
[55]Ibid., p 28.
[56]Sharpe, "Rev. John Sharpe's Proposals," 347.
[57]Ibid., pp 346–47.
[58]See, for example, Esther Helena Arens, "Flowerbeds and Hothouses: Botany, Gardens, and the Circulation of Knowledge in Things," *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung*, 40, no. 1 151, (2015), 265–83.
[59]Sharpe, "Rev. John Sharpe's Proposals," 343.
[60]Rose, "The Origins," 183.

a Regular or Academical formation of their principles and manners'.[61] The library itself was to be physically located in the school, not the church, and the 'room over this having a stair on the outside may be proper for the publick library'.[62] A 'well-chosen library' was one of the four cornerstones of this project, along with an appropriate teacher, a convenient 'house' and a 'set of good Rules and orders', emphasising the significance of a strategically populated library in experiments of social control.[63] Sharpe acknowledged that 'the Genius of the people so inclined to merchandise, that they generaly seek no other Education for their children than writing and Arithmetick'.[64] His acknowledgement of the types of practical skills sought by the parents of his perspective students might explain the emphasis he placed on multilingualism, arguing that it would be advantageous for the prospective teacher or schoolmaster to know Dutch and French, as 'a collateral advantage of learning both Dutch & French which are very useful accomplishments to scholars, as well as to travellers or traders', not to mention the large Dutch community of the former New Amsterdam.[65] Sharpe also suggested that the linguistic environment of New York would encourage the students from all over the colony to 'learn Hebrew here as well as in Europe, there being a Synagogue of Jews, and many ingenious men of that nation from Poland, Hungary, Germany, &c', combining religious and commercial motivations.[66] These examples show that the library was to be one element of a larger educational landscape of the school and its surroundings, expanding the meaning of 'public' beyond access and sources of funding.

Another important context for Sharpe's proposal is the developing culture of opening up private book collections for public consumption. Although not exclusive or even particularly new to the early 18th century (one only needs to be reminded of the original Bodley or Cotton collections), late Stuart and early Hanoverian England and Britain witnessed a flourishing of private collectors and a fundamental change in the practices of bibliophilia and book collecting.[67] Three collections, representative of larger trends, provide clear context for Sharpe's proposal: those of Hans Sloane, Narcissus Marsh and Richard Ellys.[68] All three of these collectors had extensive private libraries which they made available to visitors and which they had ambitions to make available to the wider public for the public good. Marsh succeeded at establishing the first public library in Ireland, even though there was considerable opposition to his proposal (the story of Jonathan Swift's vehement opposition to the idea provides for an entertaining tale of intellectual and personal rivalry).[69] Sloane's library

[61]Sharpe, "Rev. John Sharpe's Proposals," 342.

[62]Ibid., 344.

[63]Ibid., 342.

[64]Ibid., 341.

[65]Ibid., 343.

[66]Ibid., 343.

[67]Jean Viardot, "Naissance de la bibliophilie: les cabinets de livres rares," in *Histoire des bibliothèques françaises tome II: les bibliothèques sous l'Ancien Régime, 1530–1789*, ed. Claude Jolly (Paris: Promodis, 1988), 269–289, 270; Giles Mandelbrote and Yvonne Lewis, *Learning to Collect: The Library of Sir Richard Ellys (1682–1742)* (London: National Trust, 2004), 17–18; and Louis B. Wright, 'The Book Collector as Public Benefactor', in *The Private Collector and the Support of Scholarship: Papers Read at a Clark Library Seminar* (Los Angeles: William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, 1969), 3–23, 10–12.

[68]On Sloane see Arnold Hunt, 'Sloane as a Collector of Manuscripts', in *From Books to Bezoars: Sir Hans Sloane and His Collections*, eds. Alison Walker, Arthur MacGregor, and Michael Hunter (London, 2012), especially 191 and 200; on Marsh see Murial McCarthy, "Archbishop Marsh and His Library," *Dublin Historical Record*, 29, no. 1 (December, 1975): 2–23; on Richard Ellys see Eleanor Greer, "The Social History of a Library: Four Stages in the Life of the Collection of Sir Richard Ellys (1682–1742)," (Unpublished PhD Thesis, The Warburg Institute, 2022).

[69]Muriel McCarthy, "Swift and the Primate of Ireland: Marsh's Library in the Early Eighteenth Century," *Dublin Historical Record*, 27, No. 3 (Jun., 1974): 109–112.

eventually served as a nucleus for the British Museum Library and later the British Library, both British national public library collections. Ellys' library is currently the largest library of the National Trust, so in a roundabout way it finally made its way to public ownership and access (although, as Eleanor Greer points out, the physical, logistical and institutional accessibility of the collection could be much improved).[70] John Sharpe's personal collection could not rival those of Sloane, Marsh or Ellys, all much more serious bibliophiles with significantly larger means to further their collections. However, his proposal demonstrates that regardless of the size of his collection, he thought of it in a similar vein.

Sharpe's proposal is especially interesting because it took the established concept of the 'provincial' library as its basis and expanded it into a wider type of institution. It represents a synthesis of two distinct strands of 'public' libraries in early modern Anglophone imagination – established European institutions often visited by scholars and educational travellers, and humble parochial libraries of provincial England. Sharpe's library, proposed to be set in colonial New York for the educational benefit of multi-cultural and multilingual colonial society, and coupled with the influence of a very different type of 'public' libraries, clearly shows that Sharpe inherently envisaged the concept of a public library as transcultural and global.

The Global and the 'Publick' in Thomas Bray's Library Designs

Thomas Bray's relationship with the concept of the 'public library' was more complicated than the evidently transnational nature of his thinking about library designs. He rarely, if ever, referred to his libraries as 'publick', but he also used the signifier 'publick' to discuss a plethora of issues related to the setting up and running of his libraries. Bray differentiated between subscription-based 'Lending Libraries' and 'Parochial Libraries for the Foreign Plantations', neither labelled 'public' but both interwoven with 'publick' features.[71] According to the auditors' report into Bray's accounts from the 6th of March 1701/2, these categories were not clearly defined.[72] On the one hand, there were libraries for 'ministers' and 'people'; on the other, the books for 'Lay-men's' libraries were sent 'for the Ministers in the Plantations to give & send among the People'.[73] According to Bray's designs, the books were to be deposited for the 'Publick Benefit' in the lending libraries.[74] The funding model was to be based on a subscription basis, a 'Publick Design', which would provide the subscribing gentry 'the privilege of Borrowing' the deposited books.[75] Bray expected booksellers to provide some books for free on the account of large orders put forward for the lending libraries; those books were to be set aside for the parochial libraries.[76]

The other significant context of Bray's operations and Anglican voluntary societies is the changing nature of political bodies, public welfare and 'civil societies' in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. The formation and activities of Reformation societies in the 1690s and 1700s was not without controversy. Following Finlayson, Slack has argued that

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[70]Greer, "The Social History of a Library," 9.
[71]Thomas Bray, *An essay towards promoting all necessary and useful knowledge, both divine and human, in all the parts of His Majesty's dominions, both at home and abroad* (London, 1697), 3.
[72]SPG Finances VI, 2.
[73]Ibid., 2.
[74]Bray, *An essay*, 3.
[75]Ibid., 4.
[76]Ibid., 4.

a 'mixed economy of welfare' was established by 1740, building on both pre- and post-Reformation ideas and institutions.[77] Voluntary societies formed part of a wider picture of 'corporations, trusts, trading companies, parish vestries, [and] religious combinations' which proliferated in early modern England.[78] Voluntary societies were accused of fragmenting the Church, but their defenders argued that only tyrannies would prevent 'meeting to consider of useful projects and inventions'.[79] As Slack argues, 'by the 1720s that argument for rights of association had plainly been won, thanks among other things to suspicion of the arbitrary powers of Crown, municipal corporations and [...] parish vestries'.[80] All of this demonstrates that voluntary societies such as the SPCK which collected subscription money for the establishment of Bray's libraries, were a part of a complicated landscape of fragmented religious and political bodies, which means that drawing binaries between 'private' and 'public' participation, funding or influence is not reflective of the realities of civic life. Elements we might associate with 'public' libraries today, such as state (as expressed in central or local government) provision, taxpayer funding or a sense of public responsibility are inadequate to reflect the complex 17th and 18th century realities of public welfare provision. Slack does not discuss libraries in his work, focusing on hospitals and workhouses, but they were a part of the fabric of this landscape. W. M. Jacob conceptualises late-17th- and early-18th-century English library projects as 'philanthropy' rather than 'public welfare', whilst stressing the role of Corporations and parish ratepayers in funding and running them.[81]

Thomas Bray's parochial libraries in North America were funded through the infrastructure of the voluntary SPCK and subscriptions. Bray raised a total of £2483 15s by the middle of July 1699.[82] Some of the large individual donations included Lord Weymouth (£200), Sir Thomas Cooke (£100), Bishop of Lichfield (£122) and Princess Anne of Denmark (£42). For comparison, all of 'Lawyers and Physitians' donated just over £12 and individual merchants and tradesmen donated just over £98, showing that any potential picture of the funding model as focused on some sort of popular appeal or a middling sort civil society is limited. Significantly more donations came from 'Societies and Companies', including the Proprietors of Carolina (£30), the Colony of Carolina 'at present and in promise' (£225), the Colony of Bermudas (£10), the Royal African Company (£32) and the town of White Haven (just over £16). Just over £621 came from the SPCK, itemised by donor. This itemisation demonstrates that 'public subscription' was a more complex affair than donations of individual members of the public. The Bishops, Deans, chapters and colleges donated in their clerical institutional capacity, individuals such as the heir to the throne had public role and significance, RAC was a trading joint stock company, the town of White Haven and the colonies of Carolina and Bermuda were civic corporations, and the SPCK was a voluntary association. This is a perfect example of 'mixed economy' of early 18th century library provision, which complicates any clear sense of what the 'public' in 'public libraries' constitutes.

[77]Slack, *From Reformation to Improvement*, 147–148; Geoffrey Finlayson, *Citizen, State, and Social Welfare in Britain 1830–1990* (Oxford, 1994), 6.
[78]Slack, *From Reformation to Improvement*, 148.
[79]Anon., *A Letter to a Minister of the Church of England Concerning the Societies for Reformation of Manners* (London, 1710), 8.
[80]Slack, *From Reformation to Improvement*, 149.
[81]Jacob, "Libraries and Philanthropy," 6.
[82]See a breakdown in Pennington, "The Beginnings of the Library," 160–161.

Bray's vision for his library project was not limited to one location. The colonial project was closely connected with his efforts to improve parochial library provisions in England. The aims and the ideological underpinnings of both the English and the colonial parts of the project were similarly rooted in Bray's desire to improve opportunities for clergy in remote areas in order to strengthen the Anglican church.[83] The colonial libraries themselves were not limited to North American colonies, as the funding was allocated to the Caribbean colonies: for example, around a hundred pounds was allocated for the purchase of books in Antigua, the fourth largest allocation after Maryland, New York and Carolina.[84] The Colony of Bermuda was allocated £99, despite contributing only £10.[85] The allocation of funds in the Caribbean was seen through. For example, a shipment of several hundred books arrived in Spanish Town, Jamaica, on the 30th of April 1707.[86] Libraries were a part of the wider importance of global Anglicanism for Bray. For instance, he proposed the establishment of bishoprics in 'Jamaica, Barbados, Virginia and Maryland', in part to stress his commitment to episcopacy.[87] If religious pluralism was a problem for the committed Anglicans at home, it was even more so in the colonies. As Brent Sirota argues, 'late-seventeenth-century colonial foundations in the mid-Atlantic and the Carolinas simply could not afford the kinds of confessional restrictions that might prove a bar to attracting settlers'.[88] Bray's libraries were supposed to combat religious pluralism and strengthen the Anglican Church in the colonies.

Bray's libraries were also conceptualised as transatlantic and transnational retrospectively following his death. Samuel Smith's 1746 biography of Bray presented Bray's projects as a part of an Atlantic ecosystem stretching from Bermuda to African factories.[89] Smith mentioned that Bray's society actively continued his work, providing books for the 'use of the Eastern Churches'.[90] The real-life SPCK's efforts to produce and distribute New Testament and Psalms in Arabic in Muslim domains in the 1720s show the extent of the interconnected global dimensions of early 18th century Anglicanism. In a particularly interesting twist, the materials initially created for distribution in the Ottoman Empire were requested from the Society by the English chaplain at Narva in 1729 'for the use of poor Christians in the Russian conquests of Persia'.[91] By 1729, still within Bray's lifetime, books produced by the Society he founded became a part of a truly global Anglican network. In this particular case, as Sirota shows, the books were produced to facilitate Coptic and Orthodox Christian education, not to convert them into Anglicanism.[92] The global religious framework was a core part of Bray's library design, as he lamented that 'whilst our Adversaries the *Papists*, are at vast Charges every

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[83]Rose, "The Origins," 179.

[84]See Frohnsdorff, "Before the Public", 3.

[85]Pennington, "The Beginnings of the Library in Charles Town," 160–161.

[86]See a fascinating analysis of the single document which survives to confirm the shipment and its contents https://bookhistory.yale.edu/blog/kelsey-champagne-atlantic-book-shipments..

[87]·Rose, "The Origins," 182.

[88]·Sirota, *The Christian Monitors*, 230; on toleration policies in Atlantic colonies, see Pestana, *Protestant* Empire, 100–158.

[89]On SPCK's connections with European Protestantism, see Rose, "The Origins," 187; on Smith and his authorship of *Publick Spirit* see Bernard Steiner (ed.), *Rev. Thomas Bray: His Life and Selected Works Relating to Maryland* (Baltimore, 1901), 240–241.

[90][Samuel Smith], *Publick Spirit Illustrated . . .* (London, 1746), 19–20; for the context of SPCK's costly project to translate the Psalms and the New Testament into Arabic and distribute them in the Ottoman Empire, see Sirota, *The Christian Monitors*, 242–243.

[91]Sirota, *The Christian Monitors*, p 243; Newman to Honble Major General Hockmuth, one of the Commissioners of War at Petersburg in Russia, 9 August 1729, HNL vol. 20, f. 43.

[92]Sirota, *The Christian Monitors*, 243.

Year, in promoting their false Superstition in the remotest parts of the World', the Anglicans are yet to adequately 'advance the Glory of their Saviour, by propagating the best Religion in the whole World, either here at home, or amongst their Country-men abroad'.[93] In both practice and immediate historical memory, Bray's public libraries and bookish endeavours were global.

This case study encourages more thinking about the nature of the English engagement with the wider world at the end of the 17th century. On the one hand, the decentralised approach to colonial libraries, led not by the state or not even always by the established Church itself, but by voluntary associations like the SPCK and organisations and individuals on the ground, like the members of local assemblies in Maryland and South Carolina, echoes the recent historiographical emphasis on the decentralised nature of early modern English imperialism and colonialism.[94] On the other hand, both the activities of SPCK and the wider discourses about foreign libraries, evident in English travel accounts, did not only cover the areas of the world where the English had tangible settler colonial interests; the example of the materials created for the distribution in Ottoman lands in the 1720s attests to this. This brings us back to the question of whether English thought, heterogenous as it was, had distinct modes of conceptualising transcultural encounter, depending on the perceived power dynamic between the English and local powers, or whether a more homogenous discourse of superiority, rooted in colonial aspirations, was emerging. Opening up Sharpe's proposal and Bray's library designs to the wider context of the cultural milieu of Sharpe, Bray and their social circles through an analysis of travel accounts is the next step in addressing these issues.

Reading the Global Library in Travel Accounts

Thomas Bray actively promoted reading travel narratives in his library curriculum. Bray's prospective readers were encouraged to learn about the past and present of the world around them. Although the list of the specific travel accounts Bray recommended is significantly shorter than his catalogue of divinity books, they still provide a wide geographical coverage of the world. Bray promoted 'Enquiries into Universal Learning' to further the spread of the word of God, rather than 'a sinful Curiosity'.[95] When it comes to lay people, especially the gentry, Bray insisted that 'that useful Knowledge in History [and] Travels, [. . .] will render 'em serviceable to their Families and Countries, and will make 'em considerable both at home and abroad'.[96] Travel accounts recommended by Bray for his libraries mention libraries outside of England and Scotland.

Bray's *Essay* includes books about encounter.[97] Most of these volumes either mention libraries outside of England or provide detailed descriptions of the author's engagement

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[93]Bray, An Essay, 5, see also discussion in Rose, "The Origins," 179; on SPCK's hostility to Catholicism, see Glenice Siddall, 'The Movement to Reform and Improve Social Manners and Morality in the Years 1678–1738 with Especial Reference to the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge', MA dissertation, University of Birmingham, 1978, 68–70. See also C. M. Haydon, "The Anti-Catholic Activity of the SPCK, c.1698–1740," *Recusant History*, 18 (1986–7): 418–21; Craig Rose argues that Quakerism, not Catholicism, was seen as the key adversary, see Rose, "The Origins," 186.
[94]See Games, *Web of Empire*, 5.
[95]Thomas Bray, *Bibliotheca Parochialis . . .* (London, 1697) 11–12.
[96]Thomas Bray, *An essay towards promoting all necessary and useful knowledge, both divine and human in all parts of His Majesty's dominions, both at home and abroad* (London, 1697), 12.
[97]Ibid., 18–19, 22.

with foreign libraries. Visitors of Bray's libraries could learn about the libraries in Buda, Vienna, Utrecht, Antwerp, Heidelberg, Vatican, Venice, Constantinople, Paris, Ceylon and Veracruz, among others.[98] Maximilien Misson's *A new voyage to Italy* alone has more than forty mentions of the word 'library'.[99] It is challenging to generalise texts written by English and French authors of different religious persuasions as a part of some sort of an English discourse, but their inclusion in Bray's list of recommended books presents a precise and tangible textual corpus, defined and enriched in the early modern period itself. The texts rarely overlap in their geographical destinations, offering descriptions of locations from the Caribbean to Ceylon, and most of them were published in the 1680s, relatively recently before Bray's essay. These texts present a view of a globe full of books and libraries.

Most of the positive depictions of libraries were confined to continental Europe.[100] As a set of texts, this selection sends the message that the better libraries are to be found in Christian countries, whereas either non-Christian lands or societies whose Christianity is suspect in some way have unsatisfying libraries. George Wheler was disappointed in the library of the Patriarch of Constantinople, which 'had but few, or no Books at all' (although that didn't stop Wheler and his companions from buying 'about twenty or thirty antient Greek Manuscripts [. . .] in a Paper-shop hard by his Door', demonstrating that the collections of the Patriarch must have been not that disappointing after all).[101] This type of rhetoric, showing either disappointment with libraries in non-Christian lands, especially the Ottoman Empire, or the absence of mentions of libraries altogether, contrasted with real-life eagerness and appetite for Ottoman manuscripts and Ottoman learning, displayed by many English and Scottish clergymen, as demonstrated by Simon Mills, Tom McInnaly and others.[102] Echoes of this tension are evident in some of Bray-recommended travel accounts. For example, John Chardin's travel account of Persia does not mention the word library even once but discusses buying and transporting books throughout the text. In one memorable passage, he mentioned an Ottoman customs officer in Mingrelia, who laughed at the books in Chardin's luggage and called them 'Rubbish' not 'worth carrying out of Europe'.[103] He also commented on the respect books and writers command in Persian society, a remark generally reflective of the more positive image of Persia in 17th-century English thought.[104]

These negative perceptions of non-European libraries are evident in Bray-recommended travel accounts of further afield. Robert Knox was critical of the form of Christianity he encountered in Ceylon, calling it 'the best is but Negative, that is, they are

[98]Edward Browne, *A brief account of some travels in divers parts of Europe . . .* (London, 1685), 8, 101, 108, 120, 121; George Wheler, *A journey into Greece by George Wheler, Esq . . .* (London, 1682), 60, 195, 238; Robert Knox, *An historical relation of the island Ceylon, in the East-Indies . . .* (London, 1681), p 189; Thomas Gage, *The English-American . . .* (London, 1648), 23.

[99]Maximilien Misson, *A new voyage to Italy . . .* (London, 1695), vol 1 69–70, 88–89, 103, vol 2 p91, 139, 150, 179, 262, 291 and many others.

[100]See Browne, *A brief account*, 108 on the Jesuit library in Antwerp. Some travellers were disappointed by specific European libraries; see Mission, *A new voyage*, 88–89.

[101]Wheler, *A journey into Greece*, 195.

[102]See Simon Mills, *A Commerce of Knowledge: Trade, Religion, and Scholarship between England and the Ottoman Empire, c.1600–1760* (Oxford, 2020); Tom McInally, *George Strachan of the Mearns Seventeenth-century Orientalist* (Edinburgh, 2020); İsmail E. Erünsal, *A History of Ottoman Libraries* (Brookline, 2022).

[103]John Chardin, *The travels of Sir John Chardin . . .* (London, 1686), 71.

[104]Ibid., 219; See Jane Grogan, *The Persian Empire in English Renaissance Writing, 1549–1622* (London, 2014).

not Heathen'.[105] Although he called the single library he mentioned 'pretty', he also specified that it had about 'thirty or forty books in it', and that the King seized it upon the death of the original owner, a priest.[106] Both by the mid-17th century, when the account was written, and especially by the early 18th century, when it would have been read in Bray's libraries, that number of books was very modest, and the idea of a king seizing and keeping such a small library might tell the readers something about the kingdom in question. Thomas Gage, a former English Dominican friar, wrote and published his account of the Spanish Americas in the uncertain religious and political context of the later part of the 1640s, a decade after his return to England and conversion to Anglicanism. It is perhaps not surprising that his only mention of a library in New Spain was a room 'not above a dozen old Bookes, standing in a corner covered with dust and Cobwebs, as if they were ashamed that the Treasure that lay hid in them, should be so much forgotten, and undervalued'.[107]

Even though Bray's selection of travel accounts is heterogeneous and does not necessarily represent a stable or coherent 'discourse', these texts have some crucial similarities, both to each other and to the sentiments expressed by Bray. The global library they represent is shaped by political, religious and ideological factors. Although the main purpose of the accounts by authors like Wheler or Gage is not to promote conversion to Anglicanism, the world they paint is in line with the ideas of Bray and Smith decades later. Wheler shows a Greek Church (and Greek Christian culture more broadly) as in need of guidance and patronage, echoing Smith's sentiments of 'Eastern Churches' in 'Syria, Arabia and Egypt' in need of books that will bring back the light of true Christianity to these countries.[108] Wheler's remarks, later echoed in the activities of the SPCK and their 'enlightenment' book production and distribution missionary projects aimed at Ottoman Christians, both predate and anticipate the future Victorian paternalistic interest in Levantine Christians, developed in a clearly imperial framework of the early and mid-19th century.[109] Thomas Gage's views of an insufficiently educated Catholic elites of New Spain speak, on some level, to Bray and Sharpe's chief impulse to educate and improve the Anglican colonial clergy and laity, not to mention general anti-Catholicism of the late Stuart era. Bray's focus on 'our Indian Clergy' who would benefit from the provision of books is especially rhyming with both Knox's descriptions of the native clergy of Ceylon.[110] Here the sentiments and discourses related to tangible imperial projects, like those in North America, reverberate in the wider discourses discussing areas of the world where the English had no such immediate plans of intervention, conquest or domination. Books and libraries, or absence thereof, become a cultural differentiating factor in the global library, which indicates what sorts of societies might need further intervention and missionary activity.

Beyond the role of libraries in conversion and cultural differentiation, travel accounts present a window into early modern English conceptualisations of *public* libraries. The accounts available in Bray's libraries provide some discussions of libraries, past and

[105]Knox, *An historical relation of the island Ceylon*, 188.
[106]Ibid., 189.
[107]Gage, *The English-American*, 23.
[108][Smith], *Publick Spirit* pp 19–20; for the wider political context of English relationship with Christians in the Middle East, see Mills, *A Commerce of Knowledge*, pp 108–131.
[109]Jon Parry, *Promised Lands: the British and the Ottoman Middle East* (Princeton, 2022), 278–297.
[110]Bray, *Bibliotheca Parochialis*, 20.

present. These mentions provide a direct link between Bray's libraries and the wider discourses of the global public library in English texts. Various ideas of the role of public libraries can be teased from these texts. The French Protestant traveller Maximilien Misson's *A new voyage to Italy*, one of Bray's selected travel texts, used the phrase 'public library' to refer to Bibliothèque de Genève.[111] Edward Browne stated that he had seen many unicorn horns 'both in Publick Repositories, and in Private Hands' in his discussion of the English Church library and cabinet of curiosities in Utrecht'.[112] Here Browne set up a private/public dichotomy for repositories of books and rarities. George Wheler mentioned Hadrian's 'Palace [...] with a publick Library and Schools, for teaching the Liberal Arts and Sciences' in Athens, conceptualising the public library as a part of Roman imperial governance in Greece.[113] For Wheler, Hadrian's establishment of a public library was a part of a wider programme of Roman imperial investment into public buildings in their Greek domains, including temples, restoring Athens to their former glory. Public buildings went hand in hand with 'many Priviledges [such] as their publick Games'.[114]

This set of overlapping but distinct criteria for deeming a library 'public' is representative of the wider corpus of 17th-century travel accounts and cosmographies available to Anglophone readers. A close reading of more than thirty printed and manuscript early modern English travel accounts shows that a variation of the phrase 'publick library' was often employed by English and Scottish travellers and authors of geographical and cosmographical treatises. It is important to remind the readers that the authors of travel accounts belonged to a relatively narrow and homogeneous social group of gentry, clergy, scholars and, less often, aristocrats. The actual visitors to these places could also include the servants of the group described above, but they rarely if ever left their own impressions of the places they visited.[115] Some of these people might be Bray's intended readers, especially the wealthier clergy and rural gentry, but not all colonial readers would neatly fit into these categories. A number of libraries were identified as 'public' or 'publick' by English and Scottish travellers. They include the Bodleian Library, Bibliothèque de Genève, King's Library Paris, St Victor Abbey library, a library in Basel, Zentralbibliothek Zurich, Burgerbibliothek of Berne, Leiden University Library, Ambrosiana and the university libraries of Bologna and Pisa.

Access was an integral part of conceptualising the 'public library' in early modern English travel accounts. Richard Lassels believed that 'good bookes should be as common as the sun, seing they are the lights of our mindes and made publick by the presse'.[116] All libraries should be accessible, as is shown in his description of the Jesuit Roman College 'a faire Library description hauing no fault in it but the common fault of most Libraries, to-wit, Locks and keys to it'.[117] Gilbert Burnet, whose history of the Reformation was a Bray libraries staple, described the Ambrosiana in terms of free access, as 'furnished with store of Good Books, and free for all persons, as well strangers as Citizens, to enter into and

[111]Misson, *A new voyage to Italy*, 262.
[112]Browne, *A brief account of some travels*, 101.
[113]Wheler, *A journey into Greece*, 344.
[114]Ibid., 344.
[115]For travel and servants in a slightly later period, see Richard Ansell, *Servants Abroad: Travel Journals by British Working People, 1765–1798* (Oxford, 2024).
[116]Richard Lassels, *The voyage of Italy . . .* (London, 1670), 212–213.
[117]Ibid., 212–213.

make use of'.[118] Travel accounts, frequently written to be used as guidebooks, often specified the conditions of access to libraries. For example, in his day by day diary of a visit to Paris in June 1679, the young educational traveller John Harwood described his unsuccessful visit to the St Victor Abbey library: 'ye {Public} Lybrary wch is very well stock'd wh books & open three dais in ye week for strangers to Study in, viz on Mondais, Wendsdais, & Frydais'.[119] In this line, the word 'public' is crossed out but still visible in the manuscript. He stated that 'this is ye onely Lybrary in all Paris yt is made Publick use of'.[120]

Access is key to a rare positive depiction of a library outside of Western Europe which comes from the account of the French Catholic traveller Jean de Thévenot, who mentioned 'an excellent Library, where are all sorts of Books in all kinds of Languages in great plenty, and *may be seen by those who have the Curiosity*' in Ethiopia.[121] Although Thévenot's book was not on Bray's list, it matches the profile of the type of book he included – it covers a specific region, it was published in English in the 1680s and it was translated from French. He did not visit the library (or indeed the country himself), relying on the words of the Ethiopian ambassador in Cairo 'who assured me, that he had been in that Library, and I fancy it is the old Library of the Ancient Aethiopians'.[122] Thevenot's rhetorical construction of Ethiopia is inseparable from the political and religious context of the country – converted to Catholicism due to Jesuit influence under the previous king, Susenyos I, it reverted to the Tewahedo Church after his death, according to Thevenot, due to the influence of the king's widow, Queen Wald Saala, 'a great Enemy to the Jesuits, and no Catholick'.[123] In this context, the mention of an 'excellent' library in the 'same place' as the royal burial ground, 'a Church there of the same name, in time of the Jesuits', rhetorically appropriates the Ethiopian library as a Catholic Jesuit project, making Thevenot's positive description of the library less of a break with the discourses represented in Bray's selection of travel texts.

A whole host of 'public' libraries mentioned by these travellers were located in Switzerland, in a very specific administrative and political context. Another type of library often designated as 'public' were university libraries, including Leiden. In these cases 'public' could mean 'scholarly', reminiscent of Chatham and Sharpe's proposals. Additionally, university libraries were often seen as 'public' by observers, partly due to the funding arrangements. For example, Philip Skippon mentioned that Leiden's oriental manuscripts were 'brought out the eastern parts at the expence of the publick'.[124] Burnet called a number of Swiss libraries 'public', including Zentralbibliothek in Zurich, the University Library in Basel and Burgerbibliothek of Bern.[125] Burnet did not discuss access to these spaces, potentially because he did not encounter any issues with accessing them. However, he paid close attention to the origins of the book collections and

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[118]Burnet, *Some letters*, 244.
[119]John Harwood: Journal of visit to Paris, Cambridge University Library, MS Add.7968, 29 r.
[120]Ibid.
[121]Jean de Thévenot, *The travels of Monsieur de Thevenot into the Levant . . .* (London, 1687), 240, my italics.
[122]Ibid., 240.
[123]Ibid., p 238; for the context of the wider situation in Ethiopia, see Wendy Laura Belcher, "Sisters Debating the Jesuits: The Role of African Women in Defeating Portuguese ProtoColonialism in Seventeenth-Century Abyssinia," *Northeast African Studies*, 13, no. 1 (2013): 121–166.
[124]Philip Skippon, *An account of a journey made thrȯ part of the Low-Countries, Germany, Italy, and France* (London, 1732), 400.
[125]Burnet, *Some letters*, 40, 193.

indicated when they were left to the 'publick Library' by a previous owner.[126] One of the most interesting examples is his discussion of the Faesch family library in Basel. Burnet stated that it 'belongs to the Family of Fesch, and that goeth from one learned man of the Family to another; for this Inheritance can only pass to a man of Learning, and when the Family produceth none, then it is to go to the publick In Basil'.[127] Here there is an expectation that a library should be in possession of worthy custodians, and that it has civic value to the 'public' of Basel. Private property only belongs to this family on the condition that they are 'learned' enough to do it justice; otherwise, it passes to the 'public' (as it eventually did when it entered into the collection of Basel University Library in 1823).[128]

At a first glance, there is a world of difference between the Ambrosiana or Leiden University Library and the types of local book collections set up for the benefit of poor clergy in remote English colonies. The differences in terms of scope and purpose of the book collection and the demographics of expected visitors are vast. However, there are both semantic and conceptual similarities between these types of libraries. Not all grand and mighty libraries visited by English and Scottish travellers were labelled by them as 'public'. Specific characteristics of access, civic role and funding models all played a part in directing an author's decision to label a library as 'public'. These characteristics were also at the heart of Bray and Sharpe's library proposals and projects. Their libraries were to be publicly accessible, publicly funded and, most importantly, established for the public benefit.

Conclusion

This article has argued that the idea of the 'public' library in early modern English thought had significant transcultural dimensions and is better understood in a framework that transcends the borders of England. Introducing these ideas through the case study of John Sharpe's proposal, this article explained the context of early 18th century colonial library projects of Thomas Bray, and contextualised the work of both of these men in the wider discussions of foreign libraries represented in travel accounts people of Sharpe's and Bray's background would have read, including the specific travelogues and geographical texts Bray himself recommended as a part of his library curriculum.

This this article contributes to our understanding of the development of the concept of 'public' libraries. The transcultural dimension clearly demonstrates just how varied, diverse and unstable the usage of the label of 'public' in relation to libraries was. The questions of access, funding and purpose are among some of the characteristics that could define a 'public' library. The idea of 'public good' in relation to libraries was also multifaceted, varying from educating the clergy in the cases of explicitly Anglican colonial library projects of Thomas Bray to providing education for a wider range of local patrons, students and gentry alike. The questions of civic

[126]Ibid., 194.

[127]Ibid., 194.

[128]Collecting through the Ages: The Museum Faesch at the Kupferstichkabinett', https://kunstmuseumbasel.ch/en/exhibitions/2023/sammeln-im-wandel-der-zeit. Anon., 'Collecting through the Ages: The Museum Faesch at the Kupferstichkabinett', https://kunstmuseumbasel.ch/en/exhibitions/2023/sammeln-im-wandel-der-zeit.

pride and civic duty also played a role in defining a 'public' library, as Sharpe's proposal, resembling that of Chatham, and travel accounts of civic public libraries such as the Faesch family library. The emphasis on network-based, non-state driven and decentralised approaches to 'public' projects echoes conclusions made by researchers such as Paul Slack in relation to other public projects. The conclusions of this article could expand our understanding of approaching and conceptualising other public institutions and endeavours in early modern England. On the one hand, the focus on access, funding models and social purpose, yielded by the semantic approach deployed in this study, could generate new research questions for other 'public' projects. Further research can use access, funding and purpose as the conceptual starting point for understanding the meaning of early modern 'public' works. Additionally, the emphasis on the global nature of public libraries can open the door into further research on the influence of travel, encounter and colonial projects on conceptualising public access, public funding and public good of other types of projects and institutions, from provisions for the poor to ideas of public ownership of land. Further research can be done into how travel discourses and narratives of foreign 'public' services and 'public' good affected ideas of what it means to be 'public' in the British Isles.

More broadly, this article contributes to two distinct historiographies. First, it builds on recent developments in the fields of social and cultural early modern English history to show that the world was truly all around in early modern England, and that topics which have traditionally been studied in a more insular manner can be rejuvenated and enriched by shifting the focus from England alone to England in the context of the wider world. In the case of libraries, the social and cultural milieu of people like Sharpe and Bray, which included the scholars, clergymen, merchants, gentry and aristocrats who wrote the travel accounts they read, and the financial contributors to Bray's projects, representing at the very least a wide range of the social strata of wealthier Londoners who were mindful of the wider world when they thought of libraries.

Secondly, this article contributes to discussions of the development of colonial and imperial strategies and outlooks among early modern Englishmen. It is in dialogue with the recent literature on the empirical mechanisms of 17th- and early-18th-century English imperialism, demonstrating that in library projects, like in so many other areas, English colonial practices were decentralised and reliant on non-state actors. A more in-depth study of the practices of setting up Bray libraries through local civic assemblies in North American colonies, especially Maryland, South Carolina and the Caribbean, is needed to demonstrate further intricacies and interplays of the established Church, other institutionalised forms of Christianity and local state governance in advancing the English imperial project on the ground. The contribution of this article, however, lies in avoiding excessive compartmentalisation of the web of English involvement with the wider world, and to put the Atlantic developments in the wider context of the English encounter with various areas around the globe. Shifting the focus from colonial practice to discourses of encounter, this article establishes a conversation between library studies and the field of the development of English ideas about geographical and human differences around the world. Although limited in its scope, this study suggests that late-17th-century English discourses about libraries veered towards a more

comprehensive and homogenising outlook about cultural difference, using libraries as an indicator of cultural development and worth.

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