**History in folios**

B Y F.S. AIJAZUD D IN 2021-03-04

LIKE other living organisms, libraries too die. They may survive for 700 years as Oxford`s Bodleian Library has done, but even that venerable institution is succumbing to infirmity.

Readers of my last column complained that there had been omissions in my mention of libraries that had been vandalised or destroyed throughout history. They are advised to access Google where they will find a lengthy but even then incomplete list of libraries that are remembered only for their ashes. Alternatively, they might find an answer in the last time they themselves visited a library.

Anyone who has grown up without a book as a sibling has had a deprived childhood. The seeds of my library were sown in my head, when, at a young age, I went to sleep to the sound of a book being read to me. As a student in England, I had access to the local public library that offered a limited range of titles to locals with even fewer interests. Two books a week spread over three terms a year made me wiser beyond the school curriculum. This habit continued during my professional tutelage when, particularly after high-pressure exams, I read voraciously, my mind devouring everything. The mind, though, as the aphorism goes, is like the stomach. It is not how much it consumes that matters: it is how much it digests.

I have lost count of the number of books I have read, just as I cannot recall the quantity or quality of meals I have eaten. With sadness, though, over the past 50 years, one has seen libraries like the Liaquat National Library in Karachi gradually crumble and disintegrate in the cavernous Frere Hall.

One has entered the Punjab Civil Secretariat library in Lahore, hopeful, only to discover that a light-fingered bureaucrat had years ago pilfered a precious tome. One has watched the Dyal Singh library in Lahore on Nisbet Road, Lahore, being suffocated gradually by motorcycle outlets.

And one has mourned the extinction of owner-manned bookshops, where, for instance, the stock of books was stored in a lof t and each desideratum would be thrown down to customers like a shoebox through an aperture in the ceiling.

Future bookshops will exist in another empyrean, a virtual world where books will be images without substance. Gone the physical pleasure of holding a book or hearing the crackle of an ancient page or savouring the smell of a weathered leather binding.

Over a lifetime devoted to books, the memory of some I have seen or handled remains fixed in amber. The first, a richly illuminated manuscript of The Book ofKells,inscribed in 800 AD by four Christian monks. The volume is in the Trinity College Library, Dublin, where irreverent American tourists can be overheard asking Irishmen for `Kelly`s Book`.

The second, seven volumes of an embellished Holy Quran, prepared in Cairo in 704-5 AH (1304-6) for Sultan Baybar. It is one of the oldest dated Quran of the Mamluk period and is now in the British Library. It is exhibited page by page periodically, to minimise exposure to damaging sunlight. To view it even through glass is to experience the hand of God working through the fingers of man.

I have held the only surviving manuscript of Book I of John Milton`s poem Paradise Lost (c.1665), kept in New York`s Pierpoint Morgan Library. There, in my palm, lay its opening seminal words: `Of Man`s first disobedience....

A similar thrill occurred when I held the exquisite Dara Shikoh album in the thenIndia Of fice Library, London. Prepared between 1632-1644 for the Mughal prince Dara Shikoh, the eldest aesthedc son of emperor Shah Jahan,Istood transfixed upon reading the touching autograph inscription bythe hapless prince to his `closest intimate friend Nadira Banu Begam`.

More fortunate than Dara Shikoh was the Chinese emperor Chi`en-Lung (17111799). The books he commissioned were inscribed on slabs of jade, and included his poems painstakingly incised in gold. These masterpieces are in the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin.

Another unforgettable moment happened in the palatial Metropolitan Museum, New York, where I examined folios from the priceless Shahnameh prepared for the 16th-century Persian monarch Shah Tahmasp. That eighth wonder of the literary world contained originally 258 miniatures. It was vivisected by rapacious collectors who preferred to own a part rather than admire the whole.

And which volume to me is more precious than all of these works put together? It has to be the first copy of my first book, received fresh from its publishers. I held it in my hands as tenderly as one would a newborn.

First time parents will recognise the feeling. That child of mine will never age. It will be held by descendants yet to be born.  The writer is an author www.fsaijazuddin.pk