

Chapter I

Introduction

On 14 October 1814 a letter in The Times asked, "Is the [British Museum] Library to be for the use of those who keep the keys or for those who pay for the books? Is it to be public or private?" The writer was frustrated by his failure to obtain a Reading Room pass. Two years earlier, the Museum had stopped accepting recommendations for passes from anyone other than members of the Board of Trustees or officers. The question of how broad access should be, however, had been a topic of debate among the trustees and the public since the Museum's creation.

According to Sir Hans Sloane, the Museum's founder, the collection was intended to glorify God and to benefit mankind. He did not want his books, manuscripts, and curiosities dispersed. So, upon his death in 1753, he offered it to the nation "for the use of the public." The British Museum Act (1753) stated that the museum collection was to be "preserved and maintained, not only for the Inspection and Entertainment of the Learned and the Curious, but for the General Use and Benefit of the Publick." The trustees were responsible for implementing this part of the act, but how were they to define the "Publick". By the time the doors of the British Museum opened in 1759, the entrance policy revolved around the key issue of "who shall enter?" How the trustees defined "museum" and interpreted it in the day-to-day operations of the institution, and who gained entrance and who did not, are key questions in an analysis of access to the British Museum.

The trustees applied a set of criteria based on education, behavior, and appearance to define the public. To obtain a ticket to tour the Museum one had to complete a form and return on another day to pick up the ticket, which narrowed the potential clientele to the literate. The procedure was designed to satisfy John Ward, a trustee, who was afraid that an indiscriminate

entrance policy would wreak havoc on the collections. In 1801 Sir Joseph Banks, another trustee, attempted to introduce a fee to keep the uneducated from entering, because he thought they did not know how to behave in a museum. By the time the Museum abolished the ticket system in 1810 and allowed anyone to enter, the trustees had already adopted other means to monitor access.

The writer to The Times said that the readers in the library were friends of the officers and trustees. William Cobbett, M.P., said that the readers were loungers, while Henry Ellis, the Principal Librarian of the Museum, thought that too many clerks used the library. Who, then, were the readers? When the Museum first opened, three professions were predominant: clerics, physicians, and men of the law. Was there a noticeable change in occupations of the readers from 1759 to 1836, or did it remain professional and research-oriented? The trustees and officers maintained a list of the people who were issued tickets for the Reading Room. Many of the readers can be identified by profession or status, and, from this list, it is possible to formulate a description of the readers.

An aspect of the clientele question that deserves examination, is the use of the word, “public”. Even before the Museum opened, people referred to the institution as a public museum. What exactly did they mean? Was the Museum public because the people paid for and supported it? The trustees acknowledged that, because the public helped pay for the Museum by a lottery, they should be allowed to visit the collections. As we examine the use of “public” we will see that, because the British Museum was a publicly supported institution, people believed that it was for everyone.

Because access to the British Museum was difficult and limited, the public began to question the Museum's policies and demanded in newspapers and magazines that the trustees become more open and give an account of their practices and procedures. This strategy was in

accord with Jürgen Habermas's findings in The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere.¹ After the rise of national and territorial states, according to Habermas, the monarch's court became an enclave within a society separating itself from the state. "Public" came to mean affairs related to state, and "private" referred to affairs outside state authority.² As people found certain activities the object of public policy, educated persons came together to form a "public",³ and through institutions such as salons, clubs, and the periodicals, they made public their criticisms of the state and compelled it to justify its actions.

Much in the way that Habermas describes, the British public sought to alter access to the British Museum. The trustees set up access hedged with restrictions, and even those who entered were not wholly pleased. The "public" was unhappy, and there were numerous letters to the editor and articles in newspapers and magazines, including the Athenaeum, the Quarterly Review, the Westminster Review, the London Literary Gazette, and the Monthly Magazine. Some people thought that the Museum should be open more than three days a week and also open in August and September. It would make visits more convenient for foreigners and visitors who lived in the country. Others were angry that they needed a recommendation to use the Reading Room and claimed that the procedure excluded many educated people from the library. The criticism indicated that people were willing to question the policies of the British Museum and challenge the trustees to justify their decisions.

In Parliament the Museum had friends who defended its policies and foes who were sympathetic to the visitors who suffered from difficulties in using the institution. As members of

¹Jürgen Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society, trans. by Thomas Burger, with the assistance of Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1989). Habermas's work was originally published in German in 1962.

²Ibid., p. 11, 18.

³The word 'public' is used throughout the thesis, so in order to avoid confusion, whenever the word is used in Habermas's sense (that sphere outside the state that comes together to confront or question state authorities), then 'public' will be used in quotes. All other uses will be without quotes.

Parliament became more aware of the British Museum's operations, some expressed dissatisfaction with its service to the public. As grants from the government increased, many members questioned how the money was being used and why the Museum could not be open more often. As some M.P.s became more in tune with the "public", the opinion in Parliament concerning greater access to the Museum became increasingly similar to the attitude of the "public". At the two Select Committee hearings (1835, 1836) on the British Museum the Museum was forced to open its affairs to public scrutiny and to account for the way it operated. Interrogations revealed the M.P.s' opinions, allowed officers to discuss access to and to explain the purposes of the Museum, and permitted members of the public to voice criticisms of or defend the Museum's statutes.

For more than thirty years the public and some members of Parliament had claimed that foreign institutions, especially those in Paris, were more accessible to the public. As a result of changes that had occurred during the French Revolution, visitors did not need tickets or recommendations to visit the Louvre or the French national library. At the Committee hearings, however, the Museum's officers defended the schedule as the most liberal in Europe. Even before the hearings, two Principal Librarians, Joseph Planta and Henry Ellis, stated that the British Museum was open more frequently than other comparable institutions. Because the officers were examining the number of hours the Museum was open, and critics were examining the admission procedures, they were focusing on different aspects of access to justify their points.

Although historians have looked at different aspects of the Museum, there has been little written on the issue of access. In 1870 Edward Edwards wrote the first serious work about the Museum, Lives of the Founders of the British Museum. Edwards had been an assistant in the library from 1839 to 1850 and drew upon the information he learned during his tenure. The author's prime interest lay in the main benefactors and their gifts. Two years later Robert

Cowtan published Memories of the British Museum. He concentrated on the Museum library during his career as an assistant between 1835 and 1872.

As the Museum became larger, other employees wrote about specific departments. G.F. Barwick's The Reading Room of the British Museum (1929) and Arundell Esdaile's The British Museum Library (1946) were two such examples. Barwick discussed the various changes to the Reading Room and discussed some of the notable people who used it. He supported the assertion that many female readers were admitted in pairs because there was doubt among the officers as to the propriety of a single female reader sitting alone among men. Esdaile gave a general history of the origin of the Museum and its development as a library. He provided a sketch of the difficulty that eighteenth-century readers encountered in borrowing or using books.

More recent titles are J. Mordaunt Crook's The British Museum (1972) and Edward Miller's That Noble Cabinet (1973). Crook, an architectural historian, emphasized the construction and design of the Museum. He wrote a great deal about Sir Robert Smirke's Neo-classical edifice and the conception and design of the Round Reading Room. Crook focused very little on access, although he recited the operating times and the procedures for obtaining a ticket when the Museum first opened. He concluded that the policies reflected “the restricted horizons” of the trustees who distinguished between “the People and the Populace”.

Miller's work was very comprehensive. He was especially interested in the character and personalities of the trustees and employees. Collection development was also an important topic, and Miller included information on numerous donors, important purchases, and collections the Museum failed to obtain. Access, however, was not a major theme, and Miller discussed the issue in a few brief passages. Like Crook, Miller noted the cumbersome restrictions when the Museum first opened. The “conditions of entry were bit by bit made easier,” although he provided very little detail concerning these changes. Miller quoted some of the blistering attacks

about access printed in The Times, and he attributed the harsh restrictions to the trustees' concern over the safety of the collection and to a lack of money to provide better protection.

In A Social History of Museums: What the Visitors Thought (1975), Kenneth Hudson came closest to tackling questions about access and the public. Unfortunately for the historian the book largely failed to live up to the title's expectations. By covering too many museums Hudson often presented a sweeping view of the operation of museums and the public opinions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. He asserted that eighteenth-century museums were run by autocrats who did not listen to advice and measured success by the number of people who came through the turnstiles with little regard for what they thought about the museum.⁴ Hudson could have strengthened his argument and made it a more interesting study by concentrating on the administration of a few museums.

Hudson explained the entrance rules for the British Museum. Among other things, “studious and curious persons” who wanted to see the collection had to apply for a ticket under a cumbersome procedure which Hudson concluded was “expressly calculated to keep the general public out.”⁵ Hudson did not explain the ideology behind the rules or provide a more detailed description of the “studious and curious”. The British Museum, moreover, had abolished the ticket system by the first decade of the nineteenth century, but Hudson failed to mention this change. As a result, the reader is left with an incomplete account of access to the Museum.

Only briefly do Edwards, Cowtan, Barwick, Esdaile, Crook, Miller, and Hudson convey the difficulties of access to the British Museum. Except for their glances at the creation of the rules and a few public criticisms, we are ignorant of the views of the trustees and officers, the public, and the government. Judging from the public's criticisms in periodicals and the debates

⁴Kenneth Hudson, A Social History of Museums: What the Visitors Thought (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1975), p. 6-7.

⁵Ibid., p. 9.

in Parliament, it is apparent that the issue of access to the British Museum was an important topic. The principle aim of this work, therefore, is to discuss and analyze the trustees' definition of a museum, the British Museum officers' perceptions of the Museum's purposes and functions, the creation and amending of the statutes on access, and the public and government response.

