

## Chapter X

### Access to the British Museum Library: Public and Government Opinion, 1810-1836

In 1811 Joseph Planta noted in a report to the trustees that the British Museum was the only public library in the United Kingdom. All others were the property of select bodies or corporations. The British Museum had about 70,000 volumes,<sup>1</sup> and many of the monographs, periodicals, manuscripts, and reference works could not be found anywhere else. As a result, the procurement of a Reading Room ticket became essential to many lawyers, clerics, scientists, historians, and other scholars and students. Access to the British Museum galleries had been radically simplified by 1810, but entrance to the library remained highly exclusive. The trustees justified the precaution on the grounds of security. It was not until 1822 that a prospective reader could obtain a ticket by a recommendation from someone other than a trustee or officer.

The administrators valued the idea of research and kept the library open five days a week and during the summer. Despite this schedule, the days and hours the library was accessible was a contentious topic and ranked with the application procedure as the most serious item for debate. Opinions were sent directly to the trustees or aired in the press and in Parliament. In this context it is important to analyze attitudes towards who should use the library and how it related to a museum public. In the following section we will study first the public's opinion, then the government's, and finally the testimony at the Committee hearings of 1836.

On 14 October 1814 The Times printed a lengthy letter to the editor that prompted Henry Ellis to note that there was a spirit of hostility towards the Museum. The writer, 'A Citizen',

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<sup>1</sup>Original Letters and Papers 3 (14 December 1811): fol. 1014-16. In A History of the British Museum Library 1753-1973 P.R. Harris stated that the volumes contained "perhaps 140,000 items, since a large proportion of the stock consisted of pamphlets, tracts and academic dissertations which were often bound several to a volume." (p. 34) See also p. 26 where Harris discussed library statistics and how it was difficult to know for sure whether figures represented volumes or items.

asked if the editor had attempted to find his way into the library. "The present conception of the Managers appears to be, that of closing up the library to all but a privileged class." Although a letter from a person of known respectability would suffice on the continent, 'A Citizen' was irate that 'by a late regulation' no one could be admitted to the Reading Room without the recommendation of a trustee [or officer]. When, in December 1812, a Harleian manuscript was discovered to be missing, the trustees abolished the acceptance of recommendations from third parties. The decision inspired the letter from 'A Citizen'. He said the policy was difficult and disheartening for the country curate or the foreigner and argued for a dramatic change to make the library as public as possible for "every man who has a literary enquiry to make." He suggested that people in the learned professions should have access by producing testimonials, and other people 'of respectable appearance' should produce a letter of a professional man residing in London. The librarians should be allowed to admit people based on recommendations from housekeepers in London. Rare and valuable volumes could be restricted to viewing in the presence of a librarian, and a five pound security deposit could be levied on all readers to guard against theft and damage. He concluded by asking, "Is the library of the National Museum to be for the use of those who keep the keys, or of those who pay for the books?"<sup>2</sup> The reference to the financial support indicated that 'A Citizen' thought that the library was public, because people paid for it. The description of who should be allowed to use the library is similar to Habermas' educated and propertied 'public'; therefore, when he asked if the books were for those who paid for them, he was indicating that a 'public' was the basis for the financial support.

'A Citizen' identified the heart of the problem. There were many people who, by profession and good character, could justify using the library, but did not know a trustee or an

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<sup>2</sup>The Times (14 October 1814), p. 2d.

officer. In The Times 'A Member of the University of Cambridge' discussed the difficulties of obtaining access to the Reading Room in 1817 and said that a member of Parliament had informed him of at least a dozen other people who had complained of similar difficulties. Although Parliament had made an effort to give the public a freer admission, nothing had really changed.<sup>3</sup> Francis Hopkins, an assistant surgeon in the Second Life Guards, wrote to the Museum and said that he could not supply the necessary recommendation but asked to be reconsidered because his position and profession were sufficient guarantee that the privilege would not be abused.<sup>4</sup> Two years later Lionel Berguer was in a similar predicament and had been advised that a recommendation was necessary. He had no recommendation but asked Planta to submit the application to the trustees anyway.<sup>5</sup> Both men hoped that exceptions would be made, so the letters were couched in civil terms, but it was clear that they did not approve of the system. Another applicant, Mr. Bellenden, was combative and blatant in criticizing the procedure. On 26 January 1820 he wrote to Planta demanding to know why he had to submit a written recommendation. "I am a member of Lincolns Inn of several years standing at the bar and a fellow of the Royal Society", and he thought that Planta was bound to admit him unless he could show rules to the contrary.<sup>6</sup>

In spite of the game with Planta, Bellenden's justification for a ticket was the same as Hopkins's and Berguer's. A person's profession or position in life should qualify or disqualify him. None of the men advocated an abandonment of any form of statute. They simply wanted a system whereby a student could enter the library without exceeding hindrance. Mr. A. Herbert

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., (10 October 1823), p. 2c.

<sup>4</sup>Original Letters and Papers 4 (10 July 1818): fol. 1471-72.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 4 (13 January 1820): fol. 1574.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 4 (24 January 1820): fol. 1575-76, 4 (26 January 1820): fol. 1577-78.

thought the "instructions are such as cannot be conjectured before hand, so that a poor student may walk from Hammersmith or Tower Hill to learn which day he may call again, if he has aristocratic connections to recommend him to the trustees."<sup>7</sup> Like 'A Citizen' he thought that the library had assumed upper class bias and was not open to the people who really could use it or needed it.

As the press and magazines had printed public discontent with the application procedure, M.P.s had been concerned with access to the library. On the face of it members of Parliament concentrated on the application procedures, the amount of time the library was open, and the security of the collections. In reality they were debating the functions of the library and whom it should serve. At the same time a transformation took place whereby Parliament demonstrated the extent of its authority over the British Museum.

After the Committee of Supply submitted the report on funding the British Museum in 1815, General Thornton said that improvements were necessary at the Museum. Specifically, he thought greater access to the Reading Room should be given. "At present . . . those country gentlemen and others who had no acquaintance with those trustees or officers, were, however respectable, excluded from any access to this valuable library." Henry Bankes, though, disapproved of greater access. He said "that through improper facilities, many public libraries had been stripped of the most valuable books." He cited the public library of Paris, and reminded the members that several valuable prints had been stolen from the British Museum (in 1806). It was a stinging blow, and all that Thornton could do to avert the damage was to claim that it was a friend of an officer (Beloe) and not an ordinary visitor who stole them.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 5 (1 June 1825): fol. 2041-42.

<sup>8</sup> *Parliamentary Debates From the Year 1803 to the Present Time* 31 (9 May 1815): 226.

Critics that worked to abolish the ticket system and secure an easier means to see the collections had used the French museums as the model the British Museum should copy. At the French national library where a recommendation was not necessary, anyone could use the library. 'A Citizen' adapted the procedures at the French national library for the British Museum when he rhetorically asked whether books were stolen from the Paris library. In the case of the library, French examples backfired, and Bankes used them to defend the Museum's policies and to show the dangers of expanding access to readers who were not known by an officer or trustee.

Three years later both sides were more entrenched on the issue when the House debated purchasing Dr. Burney's library. General Thornton said he could have agreed with the vote with more pleasure if admission had been greater. Admission procedures to the library were a difficulty for "strangers, to whom it was allowed as a matter of favour rather than of right."<sup>9</sup> While Thornton made an issue of having the rules liberalized for a larger public, Charles Long, M.P. for Haslemere and a trustee since 1812, was adamantly opposed to the idea. He said the library was "sufficiently open to those who wished to visit it, and he should not wish to see it more so." He cited the Paris library which "was open to all classes without distinction or check" and had great thefts, and Long "hoped no such system would be adopted here."<sup>10</sup> An increase in theft would be disastrous, but Long failed to say that at the Paris library books could be taken home, which accounted for part of the thefts.<sup>11</sup> Three weeks later Thornton again remarked on access, but it was Bankes' turn to answer. "If any arrangement could be devised, and carried into effect for the advantage of the public, consistent with the necessary means of safety and security with respect to the valuable deposits in the Museum, it would be desirable to afford them. The

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<sup>9</sup>The Times (5 May 1818), p. 2d.

<sup>10</sup>Parliamentary Debates From the Year 1803 to the Present Time 38 (4 May 1818): 504.

<sup>11</sup>Phillips, Modern London, p. 420.

admissions must be regulated with a proper view to the security of what were to be seen or read."<sup>12</sup>

Based on the speeches it is difficult to know precisely how large a library public Thornton meant, but he obviously did not advocate that anyone be granted access in the manner that Long implied in the reference to Paris. In the debate with Bankes, Thornton referred to a library public as ‘country gentlemen and others’ and ‘respectable’, and with Long he referred to them as ‘scholars’. Presumably, he was thinking of men who came from the propertied classes who wanted to use the library for research purposes. Another important aspect was that these people were ‘unknown’. It was a characteristic that harkens to Williams’ and Sennett’s definitions of the public as individuals who were acquaintances and strangers, and it was a definition that was in direct contradiction to the trustees’ definition of the Reading Room public.

The General had come to fight the rule on behalf of the readers, while Long and Bankes sidestepped the issue and defended the rule on behalf of the collections. Prospective readers needed the endorsement of a trustee or an officer, and Thornton thought the rule made the Museum an exclusive institution for friends of employees and trustees. Like Francis Hopkins, Mr. Bellenden, and ‘A Citizen’, General Thornton thought that a person’s profession should be enough security to obtain a ticket when the applicant did not know a trustee or officer, and like these gentlemen, Thornton limited the occupations to people of middle class backgrounds, ‘country gentlemen’, and scholars.

Based on Long’s reply that the Paris library was open ‘to all classes’, it is obvious that he, at least, did not carefully listen to Thornton, but jumped to the assumption that Thornton wanted to open the library to anyone, which might include people who were thieves. Bankes, though, spoke more clearly on the relationship and position of access and security. Greater

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<sup>12</sup>The Times (28 May 1818), p. 2d.

access could arise only when the library's safety could be assured. Any alterations to the student's right to use the books was second to the maintenance of the collection. It was a fine point of interpretation, and Long and Bankes had to contend with the question, "How much security is enough?" In light of Bankes' statement, his position on security began to assume obsessive proportions when, two years later, he said that the library could not allow a greater degree of access with safety. It had "many manuscripts and prints, which curious individuals might damage in the course of their examination."<sup>13</sup> It was clear that the issue was no longer people who might be thieves but people who might want to use the material, and Bankes was against any plan that would accommodate more applicants. In the debate with Thornton he said if a plan could be devised that could secure a reader's honesty and acceptability, he was for it. Now he was stating that the smaller the number of people who had access, the smaller the quantity of manuscripts and prints that would be examined, and the greater the chances that nothing would be damaged or stolen. Bankes wanted to keep the collection in pristine condition, even to the point of not relaxing the statutes.

For the rest of the debate between Thornton and Long, time was taken up by discussion on the Burney Library until Sir James Mackintosh, M.P. for Nairn, ended the session with a summation on access. He believed the rules and regulations "were framed and applied in such a manner as to afford every facility to studious men, with as free an access to the public in general as was practically consistent with the objects of the institution. [Loud cries of Hear, hear!]"<sup>14</sup> Mackintosh's judicial temper struck a chord with the other members, and the cheers did as much to endorse the Museum as the speeches did.

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<sup>13</sup>Parliamentary Debates new series 1 (26 May 1820): 627.

<sup>14</sup>Parliamentary Debates From the Year 1803 to the Present Time 38 (4 May 1818): 507.

Another endorsement came from William Smith, M.P. for Norwich, who in 1820 "thought there never was an instance in which the trustees of any institution had more completely seconded the views of parliament than the trustees of the British Museum had done. The improvements introduced by them, in the last 10 or 15 years, must strike every man who had visited the Museum before and since that time."<sup>15</sup> Smith had an idyllic impression of the relationship between the British Museum and Parliament as that of subject and master, and the speech was indicative of the Museum's obedience to Parliament's views. The Museum was subject to the trustees, who in turn had to heed the mood of the government as the institution became increasingly dependent on treasury support.

On two occasions Thornton had been defeated because opponents of reform had three persuasive arguments on their side. The first was a fear of theft. The British Museum had valuable prints, and the Paris library had had books stolen. Implicit in the argument was the purpose of the British Museum. The trustees had the responsibility of maintaining the collections for future use. The manuscripts and many of the books were irreplaceable and expensive. The trustees were not guarding the library for themselves but for the nation. So without having to go into any detail, M.P.s simply referred to the procedure in Paris and the results, and it convinced other members that the Museum's policies were justified. The second argument rested on the assumption that there was nothing more the trustees could do to improve the procedure. No other change was necessary, for the rules were fair, generous, and were tailored to the library's purposes. Because the rules had these qualities, anyone who was suited to use the Reading Room could meet the criteria. M.P.s who favored the statutes as they were found no argument with that logic. Finally, reform failed, because Parliament did not want to change the definition of a library public. Throughout the period newspapers, magazines, and

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<sup>15</sup>Parliamentary Debates new series 1 (26 May 1820): 627.

individuals had criticized the trustees for not making the Museum or the library more accessible and allowing more respectable, professional, or studious people to enter. In reality they were blaming the wrong group of people. When Mackintosh concluded his speech, he received cries of 'Hear, Hear'. Smith said that the British Museum seconded the views of Parliament, or in other words, the Museum did what Parliament told it to do. Long, Bankes, Mackintosh, Smith, and M.P.s who supported their views wanted access limited to friends and acquaintances of the trustees and officers. It did not matter that prospective readers were qualified in terms of character and in their purposes for using the library. Many citizens were kept from the debates on access in Parliament because they did not meet the voting requirements, nor could they stand for office. The debates were conducted by propertied men who defended an exclusive policy that made it extremely difficult for people not in that group to enter.

As long as advocates of reform used the same rhetoric, members of Parliament, who were trustees, and others had the winning answers to defeat them. Thomas Lennard had been elected an M.P. for Ipswich in 1820 and was presumably aware of the previous debates, so in an effort to achieve greater access to the library, he approached the issue with a twist. He complained it was difficult to use the library, but by acknowledging and using the previous arguments Lennard shifted the problem from 'France' and 'theft' and laid it at the feet of the officers. He based his mandate on the thesis that the British Museum "supported as it was at the public expense, the utmost possible facility should be afforded to the access of the public, but especially to those individuals who were devoted to literary and scientific pursuits." If it were said that it would be imprudent to expose the British Museum's collections to strangers, then additional officers should be appointed to take care of them. Throughout the speech he stuck closely to issues of finance and access, which were in line with the concept of a 'public' museum, one the people supported. The arguments were similar to Thornton's -- the people had a right to use the library, and that it should not be treated like a favor.

In anticipation of preventive measures from other members, he shrewdly added that additional officers would be unnecessary if it appeared that there were "already several officers receiving salaries without any corresponding duty to perform."<sup>16</sup> To prove the point he moved that the Museum provide an account, first, of the number of applicants to the library, and the collections not generally shown, [coins and medals, prints and drawings] and the number of admissions in consequence of the applications for the past five years; and, second, of the annual salaries of employees.

Sir Charles Long did not object to the motion but wanted to clarify the Museum's operations. He emphasized the difference between the library and the Museum when he said that there were "two classes of persons who required admission." The first consisted of people who came for a general inspection of the Museum. The other class "was the much more important one; it consisted of literary men and artists. . . ." He recited the same reasons heard many times before for having some restriction on admission, the fear of theft and occurrences in France. Realizing the reasons were trite, he said the question was then "whether the restraint adopted at the Museum was too great?" Long let the numbers speak for themselves when he added that there were forty-three trustees and several principal officers to whom any application could be made.<sup>17</sup>

Any attempt to interpret Long takes us back to the question: 'Who were the men responsible for recommendations?' 'A Citizen' and 'A Member of the University of Cambridge' complained that they did not know any of the trustees, who were men of high rank in society. Half the trustees were M.P.s, all of whom held important positions of state. All but two of the fifteen elected trustees were lords, noblemen, or bishops. These men would hardly come into

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., new series 4 (16 February 1821): 723.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 724-25.

contact with the vast number of 'studious' people who were otherwise qualified to use the library. William Grenville refused to recommend William Hone because he did not know him, and the Rev. Stonestreet resided on Gower Street but did not know an officer or trustee to recommend him. The Museum had eleven officers, all of whom came into contact with qualified visitors. Whether they were willing to recommend someone they came to know through a visit to the Museum depended on the officer. Planta admitted that he recommended people on their appearance and a brief conversation, while Ellis turned down Mr. Denniss, even though he thought he was respectable. The officers worked in London, so the person outside the metropolis had little chance of gaining their acquaintance and a recommendation.

The Museum submitted the information, but it did not satisfy Lennard. The Museum claimed that it never refused admission to anyone unknown or unrecommended but postponed the application until the person could supply a reference.<sup>18</sup> Lennard charged that if the postponement was continued until the person could get a recommendation, it must amount to a refusal.<sup>19</sup> He thought that all that was necessary was to determine if the applicant was respectable, which was the same qualification that the trustees and their supporters in Parliament were looking for. The difference lay in how the Museum determined respectability, honesty, or character. Lennard wanted an easier or broader means that would permit an unknown public, while the trustees insisted on measures that would guarantee a known public.

Lennard then moved that an account of the number of postponed applications to the Reading Room be submitted. The House had grown tired of his raving, and different members (Bankes, Long, Dickinson, and Gurney) testified that the best applications had been devised to let proper people in, and Long challenged Lennard to produce any cases of grievance for getting

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<sup>18</sup>The Times (31 March 1821), p. 2c.

<sup>19</sup>Parliamentary Debates new series 5 (11 April 1821): 155.

a ticket. It was a move that helped bring about the change to access to the Reading Room, for Lennard cited two cases. One involved a Mr. Jones, a lawyer and contributor to the Museum, who for the past three months could not obtain the necessary recommendation. The other case concerned the son of an eminent professor at Geneva who wanted to see the manuscripts of Rousseau's works but could not obtain the necessary recommendation. The examples disproved the smug statements of Long and other M.P.s who boasted that the library was sufficiently open to those who wished to use it. Lennard's motion to have an account of the number of postponed applications to the Reading Room failed; however, in the following year (1822) circumstances over a reader's request for a ticket forced the trustees to modify the application procedures to the Reading Room.

In 1822 Walter Wilson had been denied a ticket because he could not produce a recommendation. Wilson was an author who lived in Bath and had written an installment of The History and Antiquities of Dissenting Churches and Meeting Houses in London, Westminster, and Southwark: Including the Lives of Their Ministers, 2 vols. (1808). A third volume appeared in 1810, and a fourth in 1814. He composed a very cerebral letter to the Museum "wishing to record my opinion as to the obstructed mode of admission to the British Museum. . . ." He wrote that he knew few public men, but "this accidental circumstance ought to form no barrier to my admission to an institution supported by public money, & avowedly open to every British subject." He added humorously that if a friend recommended him, the friend would be in as much need of a recommendation as himself. "If the British Museum is open only to the friends of the librarians, & their friends' friends, it ceases to be a public institution, & a printed list of those privileged persons should be posted in some public place, in order that those who wish to gain admission may know where to apply." He said he lived in retirement in the West but "my name is not wholly unknown to the public." Having traveled 130 miles to conduct research in

public libraries in the metropolis he would return as wise as he came.<sup>20</sup> ‘A Citizen’ hoped to affect change by expressing his views to the public, and while Wilson’s avenue of expression was limited to a few, the point came across, and it had an immense and an immediate effect.

On 11 May 1822 the trustees held a Committee meeting and a General Meeting. It occasionally happened that both meetings fell on the same day. An entry for the General Meeting stated, "That the closing Words in the Statute respecting admission to the Reading Room . . . be altered to ‘Recommendation satisfactory to a Trustee or an Officer of the House.’"<sup>21</sup> At the Committee meeting Walter Wilson’s letter was read, and it was ordered, "That a Letter be written to Mr. Wilson acquainting him that a recommendation from any respectable person satisfactory to a Trustee or an Officer of the Museum will immediately gain for him the Admission to the Reading Room which he desires."<sup>22</sup> Although Wilson’s name was not mentioned in the first entry, the trustees must have talked about the letter and the situation he was in. There was no indication in the trustee's minutes that they planned a revision of the statutes; therefore, Wilson's letter was the immediate, but not the only cause for the amendment. In lieu of the fact that Parliament had for so long been satisfied with access procedures to the library and refused to consider changing them, Lennard's evidence opened many eyes and would explain why the trustees suddenly changed the rules in the following year.

People had written to the Museum, there had been published articles, and Thomas Lennard in 1821 had cited two individuals who were qualified but could not gain access, and although the trustees were not oblivious to criticism, the evidence has shown that the Board intended to stick by the rules. To say it was a coincidence that the trustees changed the statute at

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<sup>20</sup>Original Letters and Papers 5 (29 April 1822): fol. 1725-26.

<sup>21</sup>General Meeting, Minutes 5 (11 May 1822): 1197.

<sup>22</sup>Committee Minutes 10 (11 May 1822): 2814.

the same time they received Wilson's letter runs counter to their past behavior. The trustees, though, may have been talking about the statutes at the time Wilson applied, because in the letter he mentioned that if a friend recommended him, the friend would need a recommendation, and that the library ceased to be a public institution if it were for the officers' friends and their friends' friends. It was very likely that when the officers realized who he was, they offered to procure a ticket on the basis of a respectable referee, and when the letter arrived, the trustees realized that something had to be done.

Wilson's letter was a catalyst that set in motion a reversal of a decision made ten years earlier and satisfied the longings of men like Francis Hopkins and Lionel Berguer. People could have third parties recommend the use of the library. Access had been a difficult procedure for many people, and the Museum suffered from criticism. The amendment reaped good and valuable public relations in newspapers and periodicals.

On 24 October 1823 The Times printed a letter from 'S.C.G.' who wrote, "Without any personal acquaintance with either of the librarians, I wrote a note, containing my name and address, and a wish for a reading ticket. . . ." 'S.C.G.' did not say, but because he did not know a librarian, presumably he submitted a recommendation from someone who knew a librarian or trustee. He needed material on antiquity for a publication and was immediately shown to Mr. Baber, "and that gentleman, with the utmost urbanity and good humour, has given me the information I was in need of, referred me to other sources of information, assisted me to examine the catalogues, and has several times spent half an hour in such assistance." 'S.C.G.' stated that he came from a humble walk of life and was not very well known in the literary world, and his letter helped dispel the notion that the Reading Room was for friends of the trustees and

officers.<sup>23</sup> The account gained support from the editor, because he wrote that the statement had been authenticated.

Two years later on 18 November 1825 there appeared a letter to the editor in The Times from 'Syntax'. In two and a half columns he covered a host of complaints and criticized the British Museum's access policies. He thanked those who had suggested and promoted the creation of the British Museum, and the members of Parliament and others who supported it through time, attention, and donation. But, he said, the best intentions had gone awry, because the employees abused their positions "by excluding others, as much as they can, from participating of [sic] what is committed to their charge. . . ." According to Syntax, if a person was in a hurry and applied to Mr. Planta for admission, and had met the criteria, the Principal Librarian would claim that he had transferred the power of admission to Mr. Ellis and would speak with him. "He may perhaps do so - in a week, or a month, but more probably never, for a thousand to one you never hear any more about it." If you returned and spoke with Planta, and he referred you to a librarian other than Ellis, the other librarian might not feel obliged to assist you with a temporary pass. Syntax acknowledged that caution should be observed when admitting people, but he was indignant about the necessity of a recommendation from trustees or officers, who were usually out of London in August and September, "or have some respectable introduction" from someone else. Residents of London, some of whom were housekeepers, and who paid taxes, "persons of literary pursuits and literary character" who were respectable should not need a ticket to use the library.<sup>24</sup>

The editorial brought two responses from the public. The following day there was a letter from 'C.M.', who wrote, "On showing a recommendation from a literary friend, Mr. Ellis

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<sup>23</sup>The Times (24 October 1823), p. 3e.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., (18 November 1825), p. 4a-c.

immediately gave me a ticket for the reading-room. . . . My friends have been admitted with the same ease." He went on to defend the staff's conduct and said, "I have always found Mr. Keats, the attendant in the reading-room, could tell me the titles of rare books on subjects I was studying."<sup>25</sup> A letter from 'Demarchus' appeared on 21 November, and in it he virtually called Syntax a liar. "Had he only displayed as strict an adherence to truth and candour, as he has shown himself destitute of their indispensable qualities. . . ." (Based on Planta's efforts to reform access to the Museum and his confession that he recommended applicants whom he thought were entitled to the privilege but were not acquainted with an officer or trustee, Syntax's accusations against Planta sound false.) Demarchus agreed that admission should be made as easy as possible, but he thought it was ludicrous to suggest an abolition of a reference, and thought the present arrangement was convenient enough. Because of the possibility of theft, the library could not adopt indiscriminate admission.<sup>26</sup>

Like art or theatre critics, the writers who criticized or defended the British Museum saw themselves as educators for the public, as well as their spokesmen.<sup>27</sup> One of the results of printing books and periodicals was that it was said at the time to be impossible to prevent fallacies from being openly discussed, attacked, and rejected.<sup>28</sup> Most of the previous criticisms in publications had been from a 'public' to the trustees and to the reading public. This time there was an additional addressee, for when 'C.M.' and Demarchus used the newspaper to attack Syntax for his fallacies, a 'public' was communicating with a 'public'. The 'public' which had

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., (19 November 1825), p. 3f.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., (21 November 1825), p. 3e.

<sup>27</sup>Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, p. 41.

<sup>28</sup>Antoine-Nicolas de Caritat, marquis de Condorcet, Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind, trans. June Barraclough, with an introduction by Stuart Hampshire (New York: Noonday Press, 1955 (First published 1795)), p. 100.

been unified in demanding easier access to the Museum and the Reading Room, had broken into groups with tension and conflict between members. As the trustees never spoke openly about what they did or about the affairs of the Museum, the writers could take advantage of the public's ignorance, and hope that by the strength of their argument and from personal experience with the British Museum, they could persuade people that their opinion was the correct one. All three men listed the Museum officers by name to give credence to their testimony, and the intimacy with the proceedings in the Reading Room made them look like authorities on how the library should serve the readers. By bringing into the open details that would have remained unknown to all but a few hundred people (readers with passes) and publicly embarrassing or praising the officers by name, the 'public' had turned the newspaper readers into voyeurs.

There were others who followed Demarchus' suit and applauded the library's statutes. In a letter to The Times 'R.A.' said that he enjoyed and valued access to the Reading Room and "obtained it through the introduction of a respectable householder, and know it to be equally accessible to every person on the same condition, having myself since obtained an admission for a friend of my own. . . ."29 In The Quarterly Review for June 1826 there was an article on scientific institutions in England. The author rejoiced "that a more accommodating spirit has of late years been shown in affording admission to the reading-room of the British Museum," and the public had taken advantage of the liberality.<sup>30</sup> Three years later The Westminster Review published an article on the proceedings of the Record Commission. It was a highly inflammatory attack on the difficulty of obtaining free access at the Tower, the Rolls Chapel, and other public record offices. Amid the author's outrage over the practices, he wrote, ". . . but there can be no objection to some certificate or proof of character being necessary before admission is granted,

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<sup>29</sup>The Times (21 April 1832), p. 3c.

<sup>30</sup>The Quarterly Review 34 (June 1826): 158.

in the same manner as at the British Museum; whilst, to guard against caprice, the proof of moral respectability alone should be the sine qua non."<sup>31</sup> Nicholas Harris Nicolas virtually repeated the Review's article in his book on the state of historical literature. ". . . There can be no objection to some certificate or proof of character being necessary before admission is granted, in the same manner as at the British Museum."<sup>32</sup> He furthered the admiration of the library's accessibility when he criticized the policies for the Patent Rolls, because they tended "to prove the impossibility of prosecuting historical inquiries without the same free and unembarrassed access to all the public muniments as is permitted to the manuscripts in the British Museum."<sup>33</sup>

During the ten year period (1812-1822) when recommendations had to come from a trustee or an officer and a few years thereafter, there emerges a description of the kind of person who used the library and the kind of person that critics thought the British Museum library should serve. Hopkins was a surgeon, Bellenden was a lawyer, and Wilson was a church historian. The writers to The Times did not state a profession, but from the context of the letters assumptions can be made. 'A Citizen' wanted access for people in the learned professions and people "of respectable appearance", 'A Member of the University of Cambridge' was a student or faculty member who knew an M.P., 'S.C.G.' came from a humble walk of life and was not known in the literary world, 'C.M.' had a literary friend, and 'R.A.' had a ticket and was able to recommend friends for tickets. The M.P., Thomas Lennard, cited Mr. Jones, who was a lawyer, and the son of an eminent professor at Geneva. As we may recall, Kenneth Hudson stated that the lowest level of a potential museum public could have included the lower middle class, shopkeepers, clerks, minor civil servants, and aspiring and respectable artisans. Except for

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<sup>31</sup>The Westminster Review 10 (April 1829): 402.

<sup>32</sup>Nicolas, Observations on the State of Historical Literature, p. 175.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., p. 179.

'S.C.G.' the letters point to a middle class background, but those people who wanted to make access easier requested it for people in literary, professional, or similar backgrounds, which more closely resembles Habermas' public of jurists, doctors, pastors, officers, and professors.

Gender was not an issue in the debates. General Thornton mentioned that it was "country gentlemen" who had difficulty obtaining a Reading Room pass; otherwise, there were no other allusions toward a gender bias among M.P.s. The number of women who used the library was small, and of those people who wrote to the trustees, M.P.s, or to The Times who can be identified by sex, it was men who had written. There were no letters in The Times or periodicals in this period advocating access for poorer or less learned members of society, and throughout the mid and later 1820s favorable correspondence appeared in publications resolutely commending existing access policies and the people who administered them. It was the property owners and professionals who sought the use of the library and saw the library designed for their purposes.

Adversity in the record offices prompted Nicholas Harris Nicolas to make a comparison with access to the Reading Room. The contrast flattered the Museum's policies. With the easier procedures, there was the possibility of a wider variety of applicants and readers. As the number of readers grew, the traditional scholar or researcher might find himself sitting next to a businessman or novel reader. As the following section shows, by the mid-1820s these new kinds of readers were dissatisfied with the thirty hours the library was open, because the service did not meet their needs.

On 9 October 1823 The Times published an unsigned article, written by the editor, and he commented on the remarks of a 'literary correspondent' who complained to the newspaper "of the short portion of each day during which the library" was open. The arrangement left six hours for "the most industrious scholars and authors" to consult "those authorities which are no where to be found but in the Museum." The editor suggested that if candlelight could not be introduced

because of the risk of fire, then admission should begin at 9:00 a.m., and between Lady Day and Michaelmas the rooms should remain open until sunset. "Any addition to the number or salaries of attendants would be, it is presumed, but a secondary consideration, compared with the more extensive facilities thus afforded to antiquarian and historical research."<sup>34</sup> On account of the editor's disinterested view, he was able to advocate an extension to the hours in an objective manner.<sup>35</sup> The Times had published critical items about the British Museum when a practice needed reform, and it published favorable ones when reform had occurred or when the Museum had performed its responsibilities. In this case the editor did not wait for the 'literary correspondent' to do anything, but printed the newspaper's position on the issue.

Over the years critics had given the impression that the Museum was well-funded, and the reason access was difficult was that the employees squandered the money. The British Museum did not have spare resources. Asking for more money risked more criticism from parliamentarians and the public, and M.P.s were sensitive to criticism. Years after the purchase of the Elgin Marbles Frederick John Robinson, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, stated in the House, "Even upon the occasion of a vote for the purchase of that magnificent collection of the remains of ancient art . . . great opposition was manifested. It was said, that the burthens of the people should be relieved, before the public money should be applied to any such purposes."<sup>36</sup> The newspaper had printed many stories on the government budget and the British Museum, so while the editor was aware that the reform he wanted was costly, it was ridiculous to assume that the number or salaries of attendants was a secondary consideration.

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<sup>34</sup>The Times (9 October 1823), p. 2b.

<sup>35</sup>The Times had published a letter from the editor before about making the library more accessible. See 28 April 1815, p. 3.

<sup>36</sup>Parliamentary Debates new series 10 (23 March 1824): 1382.

The editor of The Times addressed the argument of extending the hours at the library for 'scholars and authors' engaged in critical examination of the manuscripts. Presumably, he meant people, such as clerics, historians, and others, whose work permitted a daytime use of the library but could use more than six hours a day for their tasks. The London Magazine and The Westminster Review proposed similar plans for increasing the hours, but with the idea of helping persons whose occupations prevented a convenient daytime use of the library. The writer in The London Magazine said the hours of ten to four were the hours of business, "which none but professed authors or loungers can give to reading", so it was of no benefit to individuals who were "engaged in the middle of the day."<sup>37</sup> The contributor to The Westminster Review wrote, "The British Museum is of great utility to the republic of Letters"; however, he claimed that the persons who read the most were professional men, and they were engaged in other pursuits during the hours the Reading Room was open.<sup>38</sup>

The two articles indicated a different concept of the library's function, for by the 1820s a sufficient number of people in business and other occupations needed to use the library. While the potential readers were of a middle-class background, the diversity in occupations demanded an expansion in library services. A growing number of people wanted to use the library part time. Whereas the cleric, professional writer, and antiquarian could rearrange their timetables so that they could spend days or weeks at the library regularly, those professional men and others engaged for set hours during the day were very restricted when they could attend. These new demands could not have been much more than a generation old, because in 1803 Planta abolished the later hours, and there was no evidence of a public outcry. The writers to The

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<sup>37</sup>The London Magazine new series 3 (December 1825): 534.

<sup>38</sup>The Westminster Review 3 (July 1827): 107.

London Magazine and to The Westminster Review thought the Museum was serving one section of the public well enough, but it needed to remain open in the evenings to assist others.

There was no unanimity among the public for extending the hours. Syntax, introduced earlier, thought the idea was wrong. He admitted that it would be preferable for those people who liked to take two hour lunches to have the library remain open until 6:00 p.m., "but I am persuaded, that whoever employs the time well, from ten in the forenoon till four in the afternoon, would think six hours' hard work at a stretch abundantly sufficient for the present. . . ." <sup>39</sup> Syntax thought in terms that would suit the student or researcher. Although it was an assumption that everyone should be able to work during the day as he did, in reality Syntax was no different to the spokesmen in The London Magazine and The Westminster Review. Both sides spoke for what would best serve them. Professional and businessmen wanted evening hour service because they worked during the day. The difference lay in the extent to which the public should be served. Syntax thought of the daytime researcher only and was against adding more hours. The Times, The London Magazine, and The Westminster Review did not suggest that daytime hours should be taken from the student. Instead, the journals suggested an addition of hours in the evening or a Saturday service.

On one occasion the allocation of hours of service became a heated topic and demonstrated the desire of the library readers. In March 1830 the trustees had intended to shift the library hours to eleven to five. Ninety-two readers signed a petition against the change. The petition has already been discussed, but it is worth examining again to see the public's reaction, because it demonstrates how the readers converged to create public opinion to protect the existing order of the library for their own use. The petitioners said there were two kinds of readers, constant and occasional attendants, and it was a sacrifice of the interests of the majority

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<sup>39</sup>The Times (18 November 1825), p. 4b.

to the convenience of a few. The former came early, were engaged in laborious investigations which could not be prosecuted elsewhere, and the work was important to themselves and sometimes to the public. The occasional readers came late and seldom. Because there was no daylight in the library after four during the winter, the hours would differ in the summer and winter. By opening at 11:00 a.m. and considering the time it took to receive the books and settle in, half the morning would be gone before work began.<sup>40</sup> The Morning Herald announced the proposed change and thought it was "extraordinary that the very moment when so large a grant from the national purse has just been made for the annual charge of the British Museum" that the trustees should plan to alter the hours and circumscribe "the convenience of those who may wish to resort to its public library." The plan was "totally opposed to the convenience of real students and such as wish to resort there for useful and profitable literary purposes. We do not ourselves see why the hours might not be greatly extended. . . ." <sup>41</sup> The petitioners had only themselves to consider, but the Herald could examine the issue from more than one perspective because the paper had no vested interest in the outcome.

The clerks and petitioners forced the trustees and officers to consider the kind of library the British Museum was and the museum public. Was it to be a purely research library only with readers whose preoccupation was long term research and scholarly purposes? Based on the purposes of the Museum the petitioners had a persuasive case. The newspaper and petitioners painted the clerks and those who would use the library at a later hour as a totally different kind of reader, and one whose use of the library was not nearly as important as their own, thereby diminishing the merits of the institution. The petitioners used the Museum for research because the work could not be done elsewhere, and their work was important to them and sometimes to

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<sup>40</sup>Original Letters and Papers 7 (26 March 1830).

<sup>41</sup>The Morning Herald (27 March 1830), p. [2].

the public. An accustomed block of time had best suited their needs, and they did not want an upset in the routine. By implication, the constant readers appeared as the most appropriate people to use the library; therefore, the time frame should suit them. So, while The Morning Herald thought 'real students' should have top priority at the Museum, the newspaper also stood up for other kinds of readers when it asked why the hours could not be extended. For the time being, the library remained an institution primarily for people who could afford to spend the work day there, because the petitioners successfully had the times returned to 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., and the hours were not extended.

The revision to the former schedule was a defeat for office-clerks, but the Reading Room was open daily, and in 1831 the library began a Saturday service. In spite of the increased access the time schedule remained inconvenient to some who asked that the library remain open during the Christmas, Easter, and Whitsun holiday weeks. Items had been published concerning the holiday weeks and the Museum, but there had been nothing specifically on the library until The Times published a letter from 'Parvus'. He drew attention to the library's being closed for a holiday of ten days, but said it would be no holiday for him because he earned a living by 'literary labour'. The other readers were inconvenienced by this unnecessary action, and Parvus asked the editor 'to notice the subject.'<sup>42</sup> The editor supported Parvus' complaint and admitted that the employees were entitled to the holiday but suggested that they take it another day. Another idea came from a Mr. Barry. He wrote to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, an ex officio trustee, because "the management of the Reading Rooms . . . is often alluded to in Parliament, and is in fact a great grievance to the literary public. . . ." Barry thought the public would be willing to pay to use the library during the holiday week. If selected books and manuscripts were set aside in a room under the surveillance of a single officer, readers could pay 2s. 6d. for the

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<sup>42</sup>The Times (20 May 1834), p. 3a.

week or 1s. for a single day.<sup>43</sup> The Museum adopted neither suggestion, and up to the time of the Committee hearings, the library remained closed during the holiday weeks.

Since the mid-1820s the 'public' had debated who could use the library on the basis of when it was open. By 1830 with the reported drop in statistics to the Museum Parliament again took up the issue of access and the Reading Room public. After Bankes submitted the British Museum grant application for the year, a very heated debate ensued. Mr. Jephson stated that there were respectable gentlemen and many clerks in public offices engaged all day at business who could not use the library but would be grateful if an arrangement could be made, and he suggested that it be kept open till 6:00 p.m. Should the issue not be taken up by the trustees, "he would, on a future occasion, bring the matter before the House."<sup>44</sup> Charles Poulett Thomson, M.P. for Dover, recommended a separate chamber from the main building so that candles and fire could be used for night reading. At this time the Reading Room was an oblong and cold apartment,<sup>45</sup> lighted by a range of windows along each side in the upper gallery and at the end. Every morning the staff unlocked the cases housing the reference books that lined the walls of the lower gallery, and readers could deposit books they may require for the following day on one of the few empty shelves. The Reading Room had two rows of tables covered with green baize, with an isle between the rows and isles between the tables and the bookcases. There were fourteen tables with eight chairs each, and with an additional two or three small tables the seating capacity was brought to 120.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>43</sup>Original Letters and Papers 10 (20 June 1833).

<sup>44</sup>Parliamentary Debates new series 22 (8 March 1830): 1353.

<sup>45</sup>Friedrich Ludwig Georg von Raumer, England in 1835: Being a Series of Letters Written to Friends in Germany, During a Residence in London and Excursions into the Provinces, trans. Sarah Austin, 3 vols. (London: John Murray, 1836), 1: 38, 175. Shortly after the Museum opened, the officers complained how cold the Reading Room was. Despite the renovations over the years, the problem was not solved.

<sup>46</sup>"The Reading Room, British Museum," The Penny Magazine of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge 4, no. 237 (12 December 1835): 487-88.

Bankes answered that he was sure the trustees would endeavor to prolong the time the library was open, but it would depend on the time of year, "for under no circumstances should the introduction of fire or candles into so large and valuable a library be permitted." Jephson pressed his point and asked why the Reading Room could not be open on Saturdays and in the summer until 7:00 or 8:00 p.m. when no fires or candles would be necessary. There were several objections at this point. Michael Sadler, the Tory M.P. for Newark, did not think the time should be extended because the library should be a place of reference and not a reading room. Henry Bright, M.P. for Bristol, and Davies Gilbert, M.P. for Bodmin and a trustee of the Museum,<sup>47</sup> were against opening the library on Saturday because the employees would have to replace the books and clean the rooms on Sunday.<sup>48</sup>

The trustees attempted to placate the House by opening and closing an hour later, but the plan failed. Jephson was determined to make the library more accessible to clerks in public offices, businessmen, and others who could not normally use it, and as he said he would if no change was made, in the following year, he again asked why the library could not be open on Saturdays.<sup>49</sup> Bankes said it would be inconvenient to keep the library open on Saturdays, because it was cleaned on that day; however, other members thought it was an implausible reason, and this time they came together as a group. Henry Warburton, M.P. for Bridgeport in Dorset, was surprised that one room, the Reading Room, should be closed on a Saturday. Warburton, Sir John Wrottesley, and Joseph Hume believed that another time could be found to clean the room, and John Wilks backed the opinion by misinterpreting the statistics and mentioning that 1,890 persons visited the Reading Room in a year, averaging fifty persons a

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<sup>47</sup>As president of the Royal Society, Gilbert was an ex officio trustee.

<sup>48</sup>Parliamentary Debates new series 22 (8 March 1830): 1354-55.

<sup>49</sup>Hansard's Parliamentary Debates third series 3 (14 March 1831): 432.

week. The trustees had calculated the number of admission tickets for 1830,<sup>50</sup> and Mr. Wilks erroneously thought it meant the number of visits versus the number of people who had passes. The mistake worked to the advantage Jephson, because it implied that the room was not so busy that a Saturday service would be disruptive to cleaning. Wrottesley called for Banks to guarantee that the Museum would be open on Saturdays; otherwise, he would oppose the vote for the budget and divide the House.<sup>51</sup> No one other than Banks had spoken in favor of the Museum; therefore, against a preponderance of opinion, he had little choice but to take the issue to the trustees.

The Board acted quickly and on 25 April announced that the Reading Room would be open on Saturdays. In the following session of Parliament Alexander Baring paid tribute to the Museum which "in accordance with the suggestions which had been thrown out last year, the library was now open to the public every day in the week, except Sundays."<sup>52</sup>

By the time of the second Committee hearings (1836) the British Museum library was open six days a week throughout most of the year, and procedures for a ticket had been simplified to include recommendations from people other than trustees and officers. There were fewer matters on access to the Reading Room that the Committee had the opportunity to consider. With the issue of an evening library service as the predominant topic, it produced anti-climactic results. John Flint South, a surgeon at St. Thomas' Hospital, thought the Reading Room was open at a time convenient to himself and most literary men, but he had "great doubt

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<sup>50</sup>It is not clear where Wilks obtained the figures, for the number of tickets for 1830 was 1,755 besides 199 temporary admissions. Great Britain, Parliament, Parliamentary Papers (Commons), 1850, v. 1, "Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Inquire into the Constitution and Government of the British Museum," p. 270.

<sup>51</sup>Hansard's Parliamentary Debates third series 3 (14 March 1831): 433.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., third series 10 (29 February 1832): 976.

whether it would be used in the evening for little more than novel reading."<sup>53</sup> Henry Petrie, Keeper of the Records in the Tower, was frightened of the thought of artificial lighting in the library and said, ". . . If I were one of the persons in charge of the Museum, I should never go to bed without trembling."<sup>54</sup> A majority of the witnesses, however, testified with approval to extending the hours in the evening, and for those who gave a reason, it was basically the same thought, that it would be of advantage to people whose occupations precluded the time to go during the day.<sup>55</sup> It was a train of thought that represented numerous readers and M.P.s who, during the 1830s, advocated an evening service.

When the 'public' challenged the trustees over the issue of access to the library, they were arguing about the definition of the Reading Room public to include themselves. A Citizen, Francis Hopkins, Mr. Bellenden, and Mr. Lennard spoke for students, scholars, and people in professions. They were not seeking to expand the public to include the non-educated or the non-propertied; furthermore, they agreed with the trustees that a recommendation was necessary. The contention was over the process for determining who was respectable. Bankes, Long, and Mackintosh said that the procedure to obtain a Reading Room ticket was sufficiently easy for students and scholars to gain access. They wanted a 'known' respectable public. When Lennard proved that it was not easy for students and scholars to get a recommendation, it paved the way for a revision to the Museum's procedures. Readers could have third parties recommend them, and the Reading Room public became a 'known' and 'unknown' respectable public.

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<sup>53</sup>"Report from the Select Committee appointed in the following Season to consider the same subject," par. 1172-73.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, par. 4979.

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*, par. 973, 3402, 3533, 3723, 3904, 4752, 5072.

The debate concerning the hours of service was an issue that matched the ‘public’ against the Reading Room public. The London Magazine, The Westminster Magazine, and Mr. Jephson wanted a later service. They wanted the Reading Room public to include clerks, businessmen, and others whose occupations prevented their coming during the day to use the library. Syntax, John Flint South, Mr. Sadler, the ninety-two petitioners, and The Morning Herald objected to such a plan. To them the Reading Room public should be composed of real scholars, and the library should be used for research and not for novel reading. Although the British Museum maintained its position as a research institution, it compromised on the issue and created a Saturday service. As a result, the Reading Room public was enlarged to include clerks and others who could not conveniently use the library on a work day.

