

MARK PURCELL. *The Country House Library*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017. Pp. 352. \$55.00 (cloth).

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During his first party at Jay Gatsby's Long Island mansion, Nick Carraway stumbles upon a "high Gothic library, paneled with carved English oak"; Nick surmises that the room was "transported complete from some ruin overseas." He finds there a "stout, middle-aged man, with enormous owl-eyed spectacles"; perched on a library table, the tipsy bibliophile conspiratorially lets Nick in on the library's secret: the books are real, "absolutely real." Having expected "nice durable cardboard" in the library of a parvenu, "Owl Eyes" is impressed by his host's "realism" as well as his restraint: Gatsby "knew when to stop, too—didn't cut the pages." In brief: the arriviste from the New World has plundered the Old, making off with a Gothic library, and then stocking it with valuable, edifying—but unread—books.

It is a fleeting but telling episode in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), one that riffs on long-standing assumptions about the ways that the moneyed classes acquire and display cultural capital. The ideas that inhabitants of country seats never read the books in their libraries, or that such rooms and their books served merely to establish the social status of their owners, are familiar canards—among several others—at which Mark Purcell takes aim in his engaging and erudite study of one of Britain's most understudied cultural phenomena, *The Country House Library*. Over fourteen chapters Purcell proceeds along several basic premises: that the number, history, and contents of British country house libraries have been generally underestimated, ignored, or misunderstood by architectural and book historians alike; that the history of country house libraries can be traced as far back as the Roman occupation, not just to the seventeenth century, as has been previously assumed; and that these libraries were not just for show, but rather were assembled with care and used routinely not only by their owners but also by household servants, neighbors, and friends. By expanding the definitions both of "country house" (to include suburban villas and nouveau-riche mansions) and "library" (to include "any reasonably substantial assembly of books" [20], with the idea of "reasonably substantial" pegged, necessarily, to historical and material contexts), Purcell achieves an ambitiously long chronological range and archives an impressive number of examples to support his claims.

Purcell opens with a chapter on the presence of books and household libraries in Roman Britain and closes with a discussion of twentieth-century trends (and the motives behind them) to denude, restock, and document extant country house collections. Chapters in between compose a richly detailed and nuanced narrative of the country house library's many functions in private and public spheres. Purcell's chapters on "ordinary books" in the long eighteenth century, and on the sociability of Romantic-era and Victorian libraries, knit libraries and their books into the fabric of family life, while his chapters on Regency-era bibliomaniacs and fin-de-siècle social climbers link book acquisition to shifting seats of social and political authority: from aristocrats to captains of industry. Purcell makes clear how country house libraries, over time, became part of a national narrative, their preservation or loss signaling cultural continuity or decline.

Purcell carefully situates his study at the intersection of Britain's architectural, book, and cultural histories, approaching the country house library as a lived space—that is, in terms of necessary relationships among readers, books, and furnishings as these operate in unique built environments over time. While chapters occasionally devolve into lengthy lists of seemingly undifferentiated examples, Purcell for the most part pulls himself out of the weeds through vivid details about books—their arrangement and accoutrements—and with lively anecdotes about book collectors, readers, and country house denizens. Purcell describes books, the chests or shelves that contain them, and the ladders patrons might perch on as they reach

for the highest tier; “the spaces in which books are kept,” he insists, are “integral to any understanding of their history” (20). Purcell mines everything from letters and diaries to wills and bills of attainder—not to mention books themselves (marginalia, bindings, bookplates)—for evidence of how books were valued affectively and materially, how they were read, and how they dwelled, together with their readers, in country house libraries. The volume’s lavish illustrations highlight Purcell’s attention to detail and careful documentation.

Purcell, formerly libraries curator for the National Trust and currently a deputy director at Cambridge University Library, knows whereof he speaks. Many—though importantly, not all—of the libraries he surveys fall under the care of the National Trust, which superintends roughly 170 country house libraries and their nearly 300,000 books. Purcell makes the case that country house libraries should be preserved *in situ*, but also that those still in private hands be catalogued, that these catalogues be readily available to researchers online, and that owners be held to obligations regarding public access (the public has the right to see books, for example, that have been “conditionally exempted” from taxation). Purcell seems resigned, but also sanguine, about the future of Britain’s country house libraries. While those in private hands might flourish or falter together with their owners, those in public hands will benefit from recent scholarly developments in such fields as cultural and book history and the digital humanities. *The Country House Library* is meticulously researched and liberally illustrated, as intellectually satisfying as it is visually compelling; academic and amateur enthusiasts alike will find much to ponder and relish in these pages.

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ANDREAS ROSE. *Between Empire and Continent: British Foreign Policy before the First World War*. Translated by Rona Johnston. Studies in British and Imperial History 5. New York: Berghahn Books, 2017. Pp. 528. \$150.00 (cloth).
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European diplomacy in the decades prior to the outbreak of the First World War is a well-served field of historical enquiry. The centenary of the conflict has witnessed the publication of several new landmark studies on the topic, notably Sir Christopher Clark’s *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (2012) and Thomas Otte’s *July Crisis: The World’s Descent into War, Summer 1914* (2014). The tendency of these works has been to challenge notions of German culpability for the outbreak of the conflict, or at least to nuance them, particularly in Clark’s case. Andreas Rose’s *Between Empire and Continent* seeks to contribute to this trend by stressing the agency of British diplomacy before 1914 and by qualifying the role Germany played in London’s calculations in that period.

Originally published in German in 2011, this book focuses upon British foreign and defense policy between the 1890s and 1910. Its core argument is that Germany’s behavior was not the primary factor that shaped British decision making during this period. Rather, Rose charges, imperial concerns and lingering rivalries with France and Russia continued to play a key role in the thinking of Britain’s policy-making elites. When Germany did factor into British policy making, he claims, it was largely due to the influence of bellicously anti-German elements in the press, or, as a form of subterfuge, perpetrated as part of the cut and thrust of party or of interservice politics.