

**A LETTER TO THE EARL OF
ELLESMERE, ON THE SUBJECT OF
A NEW ALPHABETICAL
CATALOGUE OF THE PRINTED
BOOKS IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM**

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A LETTER
TO
THE EARL OF ELLESMERE,
ETC.

My Lord,

While I venture, with unaffected humility, to advert to some of the points in the letter of Mr. Panizzi to your Lordship, on the subject of the new Alphabetical Catalogue of the Printed Books in the British Museum, I admit at once his peculiar qualifications, not only for the execution of such an undertaking, but for producing a belief that, if he shrink from the task, it would be the extreme of hardihood for any other man to attempt it.

It would be impossible, perhaps, to find in the three kingdoms a single individual to whom such a duty might with more confidence, on most accounts, be entrusted: few men have so wide and accurate an acquaintance with literature; he has industrious habits of business, energy, acuteness, promptitude, and decision. Therefore, in opposing any thing he may have stated, I am aware of the disadvantages under which I labour, from my own comparative insufficiency, and from the well-founded reliance placed by others on Mr. Panizzi's learning and abilities.

Did I not feel most strongly the opinions I am about to express—were I not thoroughly convinced of their soundness—I should hardly have volunteered to compete against such odds. I might have continued, as I have for many years been, a passive spectator, taking no part in a contest, the result of which, nevertheless, is of vast importance to letters. This is certainly the first time I ever put my opinions on the subject in writing.

Your Lordship was good enough to give me an intimation, that the Commissioners might, perhaps, require the evidence of their Secretary on this great question. This intimation has induced me to step beyond the strict and narrow line of my duties: and, possibly, what I now take the liberty of offering may render needless a *vivâ voce* examination; but, at the same time, I am quite willing to submit myself to any interrogatories, and to go through the ordeal to which Mr. Panizzi has required that persons, who are adverse to his views, should be subjected, in order to avoid (in his own words) “hasty assertions,” “general opinions,” and “vague statements” (p. 18). This threat and warning to witnesses may not look like great confidence on his part; but, in my turn, I challenge a thorough investigation.

Whatever I have to state, I will compress to the utmost, rather relying upon plain facts and plain reasoning, than upon multiplicity of words. My object shall be, to cover as little, not as much paper as possible. Error only needs to be voluminous.

I hope I may be pardoned for saying, in the out-

set, that, during a not very short life, I have been constantly engaged in literary undertakings of various kinds and qualities; some the mere diurnal drudgery of authorship, others of a higher aim, and, I trust, of a more permanent character. For not less than forty years I have been a visitor of the Reading Room of the British Museum. Either the rule now in force was not in existence, or my father had sufficient influence with Mr. Planta, (then at the head of the Institution) with whom he was acquainted, to induce him not to apply it to a youth, who showed an early and an earnest desire for improvement. Since near the commencement of the present century (with some intervals) I have been in the habit of using the library by means of its catalogues of various descriptions; and I most distinctly bear in mind the great facilities derived from the Catalogue of Printed Books, prepared by Sir Henry Ellis and Mr. Baber, and finally published in 1819.

It cannot, therefore, well be urged against me, that I am talking ignorantly as regards a general knowledge of the growth of the library, and of the means of reference from time to time afforded: even if my conclusions are wrong, they have been formed after long experience. With the interior arrangements I do not profess to be acquainted. I am aware that the library has been vastly augmented, and I contend that the means of reference have not at all kept pace with that augmentation, and, as I humbly conceive, with the real wants and just expectations of the frequenters of the Reading Room.

It may be answered, that the additions of books, especially of late years, have outrun the catalogues—that those who were employed to make the latter could not overcome the constant accumulations. As it strikes me, this is a grave fault: either the number of cataloguers should have been increased, which might easily have been accomplished, or the purchases of books should have been diminished—a course to be deprecated.

He who contends that there can be no printed catalogue, is least of all to be blamed for making unlimited additions.

Thirty years have elapsed since a printed catalogue was produced. During that interval, the most extensive and important acquisitions have been made, by bequest, gift, and purchase. It is very possible that the additions since 1819 have been to a greater extent, (including the noble donation of George IV., and the bountiful legacy of Mr. Grenville) and to a higher value, than the whole amount of printed books previously in the Museum. Is it to be said, then, and if said, are we to be satisfied with being told, that there are insurmountable difficulties in the way of preparing and printing a new Alphabetical Catalogue? Are those difficulties *really* insurmountable? *If they are not, they ought to be surmounted.* For the sake of the public, I contend that no pains, no toil, and I will add, no expense, ought to be spared, in order to overcome them. Let who will profess inability, it is not, therefore, to be taken for granted that the achievement is impossible.

Here I entreat your Lordship, with profound respect and deference, to allow me to touch upon the responsibility the Commissioners will incur, if the result of their inquiries upon this point should be that no new catalogue shall be prepared and published. I am sure that they have deeply reflected upon this part of the question; but permit me to ask whether the nation, which has for many years contributed so largely, and which hereafter may have to contribute still more largely, to the expenses of the British Museum, is not entitled to every possible facility in the use of its stores, whether of the library or of any other department? I confine myself here to the library, because on that only the question now arises; and I maintain that unless it can be established, *beyond all dispute and doubt*, that the difficulties are insuperable, and that it is impossible to form and print a catalogue of the books, the public, in these days of progress and improvement, have a right to expect, and will sooner or later compel, such a catalogue to be undertaken and completed.

Her Majesty has been graciously pleased to appoint this Commission "with the view of ascertaining in what manner" the British Museum "may be made most effective for the advancement of literature, science, and the arts;" and what more "effective" method of advancing literature, as regards the British Museum, can be pointed out than enabling persons to become acquainted with the contents of its library? I well know that the Commissioners are the last men in the world to stand in the way of the