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Reading Between the Battle Lines: The Place of Libraries in a Time of Conflict

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Good evening and thank you so much for inviting me to be here this evening. Trinity has a very special place in my heart. I think we can all recall a moment, on leaving our family home and circle, when we felt that we had arrived at a new version of ourselves. A version that, while still imperfectly realized, has found its long-term direction and its community. I first felt this at Trinity.

I grew up in Tramore, best known as a seaside town, one of seven children. My mother, while she had a powerful intellect and formidable organizational and creative powers, had no career besides raising us. I did not necessarily expect to find myself at university at all, let alone contemplating an academic career. But suddenly, aged 17, here I was.

It's wonderful to see Trinity opened up to the city. My father grew up on Inchicore Road and every day cycled past Trinity on his way to O Connell CBS School. But he never entered under the arch until I was a student and told him it was OK to do so. Trinity wasn't a place for working class boys like him. Today it clearly is.

I arrived and immediately found myself in the library. I used to work in the library, both researching for essays and stacking shelves six mornings a week between 8 and 10. The timing was perfect to avoid interference with my social life. The timing was perfect for another reason too. In those days, the 'new Library', as it was then called, closed at 5pm, which was a regular source of annoyance. I seem to remember we once occupied it after hours in protest. We also developed a work-around: My best friend, Meabh, had a long navy blue cloak, ideal for concealing the scholarly tomes we wished to liberate and bring to my rooms to work on in the evenings. The porters were suspicious but there was nothing they could do, as Meabh walked out with her hidden, heavy load. I would then return the books in the morning when I went to work and shelved them where they belonged. I assure you they were all safely returned. I've never confessed to this transgression before, but I'm trusting that the stature of limitations has run out on the crime.

There is actually a long history of booklovers smuggling books out of libraries. Indeed, one might say that the history of libraries as safe-houses for books is accompanied by a side-history of fugitive libraries, of books on the run. I think of the monks who probably escaped the Scottish island of Iona around 806 AD, fleeing a brutal Viking raid, who arrived in Ireland bringing the exquisite illuminated masterpiece we now know as The Book of Kells, which would eventually be brought to Dublin to keep it safe from Cromwell. I think of the librarians of Timbuktu in Mali who, when jihadists invaded in 2012, bravely formed a secret plan to

evacuate over 300,000 priceless documents, preserving the 12th and 13th century history of Africa. People have always sought to save libraries in the face of attack, often at enormous personal risk. I've never seen libraries as static, nor are they staid. They are repositories of ideas, treasure-houses of identity, and arks that shelter and nurture the living alongside the creative spirits of their ancestors. Sometimes those arks find themselves afloat on stormy seas.

This lecture will be about libraries, and about why they are once more in the line of fire: fighting for their continued existence in the modern world. I want to argue for the enduring value of libraries to the individual and society: as cradles of democracy, models of inclusivity, and bastions of resistance to hostile power.

I think we still have an idea of the library as a quiet place — because our first experience of libraries is of hush: of a space for private contemplation that, like a church, is set apart from the hustle of commerce, the pressure of social negotiation. That is indeed part of the joy of a library: that it offers a place of sanctuary. Yet that reputation for quietness can obscure the high-stakes drama that often attends the quest to preserve libraries as spaces where access to 'the best that has been thought and said in the world' (as Matthew Arnold defined culture) is free to all.

At this moment, we are facing multiple threats from those who would like to concentrate enormous power in the hands of a very few individuals. In a digital universe dominated by corporate media where it is possible, in the immortal words of Steve Bannon, to 'flood the zone' with 'expletive deleted', libraries may yet prove the front line of a new battle against digital sewage spills: the erosion of fact, the enclosure of knowledge, and the theft of creative rights and rewards. For all these reasons, we need — actively and passionately — to defend them.

History of libraries as cultural nerve centers

The world's oldest libraries (that we know of) were in the Middle East and North Africa. The Royal Library of Ebla in Syria was created around 2500 years BCE; the Hattusha archive in Turkey; the Library of Nineveh in Iraq, and of course the famous library of Alexandria in Egypt, were all thriving intellectual centers in the millennium before the birth of Christ. The Ebla and Nineveh libraries contained tens of thousands of clay tablets marked in cuneiform, labelled and stacked in wooden holders vertically by size and subject, like the books in a modern library. Indeed, the clay tablets look from a distance remarkably like the computer punch cards of my childhood. These records were used for administration and trade, but the presence of a dictionary reveals that Ebla's scholars also had a bi-lingual

teaching program (Eblaite to Sumerian) and held what may have been the world's first medical conference. The library fostered cross-cultural learning and diplomacy, just as libraries do today.

The library of Ebla, which was only re-discovered in 1975, shows that Ebla had a sophisticated system of governance, with a Council of Elders who advised the king, a series of tax codes, and a remarkably participatory culture where women played a role in religious and economic life. When the royal palace was destroyed by fire, the clay tablets, fortunately, were baked, enabling their survival. They have re-shaped historians' perspective on the ancient world: where Greece and Rome were once claimed as the fountainheads of modern civilization, it is now possible to see how aspects of participatory government and a society 'cultivated by all the arts of polished life' were already well-developed in the Arab world of the Eastern Mediterranean, as Edmund Burke put it, 'whilst we were yet in the woods'. One of the functions of a library is this. It is not only a store of useful knowledge for current consumption but a time-capsule that conserves history, culture, language, identity for future generations. It 'takes the long view of civilization'. The libraries of Ebla, Nineveh and Hattusha were vital bulwarks against the attempted erasure by western powers of Arab claims to early cultural precedence and sophistication.

Public libraries have also been essential to the establishment of more democratic systems of access to information and education, enabling a shift from private to public knowledge – an historically radical experiment in political power-sharing. Marsh's library in Dublin (just a10 minute walk from here) became one of the first public libraries in 1707, at a time when neither Oxford nor London had such an institution. Libraries were at that time more usually the exclusive domains of clerics, scholars, and rich collectors. The founder of Marsh's library, Archbishop Narcissus Marsh, was an impressively enlightened individual: a Provost of Trinity, and an early enthusiast for the Irish language. He appointed as his first librarian Élie Bouhéreau, a Huguenot from La Rochelle. Bouhéreau had fled France when the law on religious toleration was revoked and members of his community were given a stark choice: to convert to Catholicism or leave. When Marsh met Bouhéreau he was impressed that the Frenchman was a published scholar and had a collection of books worth £500 pounds. So Bouhéreau was hired to come to Ireland, with a stipend and free accommodation, as long as he contributed his books to the new library. This wasn't perhaps a hiring agreement we'd endorse today, but it does emphasize how the history of libraries and the history of international sanctuary in times of conflict are closely intertwined.

Libraries were torchbearers of the Enlightenment, modelling a more inclusive society where anyone might become a reader or a writer. As Edmund Burke argued: 'People will not look forward to posterity, who never look backward to their ancestors.' Not everyone can

inherit a grand home or the golden chairs of their forebears; but in the library, we have access to the grand designs and mental furniture of our collective ancestry: a source of pride and inspiration and potential emulation.

Creating a national library would become a priority for laying claim to modern statehood. Romantic nationalists of the 18th and 19th centuries emphasized the need for a 'national literature' — that to claim a national identity you needed a literary language and tradition, and a national library to collect and study it. After the Partition of Poland in 1795 the contents of the national library were confiscated; one of the main priorities of the Polish exiles in Paris became to recreate a 'national library' in exile, the Bibliothèque Polonais de Paris, which was opened in 1838 and is still in existence today. The Bibliothèque du Roi in Paris was nationalized within days of the declaration of the First French Republic and successive governments in the middle of a war spent time and money trying to ensure it was a comprehensive record of French literature, demanding that every province provide copies of any book they held which the national library didn't already have. When Ukraine became independent for the first time in 1918, a National Library was one of the first institutions of state it established.

Libraries under Threat

It is, then, perhaps unsurprising that libraries have historically been targeted in political attacks and in war as cultural nerve centers, whose loss is a bitter blow to morale and social functioning.

According to Ukraine's Ministry of Culture, Russian attacks have destroyed 228 Ukrainian libraries and damaged another 678 since the start of the full-scale invasion of 2022, with over 6 million library books going up in flames. This was not the only literary target. The BBC reported in August this year that Russia had hit printing presses and publishing houses across Ukraine in a series of attacks, destroying 12 million books ahead of the new school year. It seems clear that the erasure of Ukrainian language and culture is being deliberately pursued through this strategy of textual assault. It is a 'systematic attack on the very idea of Ukraine'.

We can trace a long and sobering history of similar attacks. In 1992 in Sarajevo brave library staff members formed a human chain to try to evacuate precious materials from the National and University Library of Bosnia and Herzegovina under relentless Serbian shelling and sniper fire. 14 people died and 126 were wounded on that day. Richard Ovenden's seminal work, *Burning the Books: A History of Knowledge Under Attack* describes the charred fragments of paper that fell for days afterward on Sarajevo, like black birds. He

concludes that the destruction of books should be seen as an early warning signal in conflict – where books are targeted, people will be next.

Destroying libraries is a particular hallmark of political attacks on groups asserting a new and contested philosophy. In 1791 conservative mobs in Birmingham, who may have been partly sponsored by local sheriffs, destroyed the priceless library of prominent scientist and dissenter Joseph Priestley: the discoverer of oxygen. He fled to America. A couple of decades later (in 1814), the British set fire to Washington, burning down the nascent Library of Congress and using the books as fuel to destroy the Capitol.

It is never just about the books and archives: it is what they represent and enable. The destruction of linguistic heritage is often part of a concerted campaign to crush independence and marginalize identity. It can also involve attempts to evade scrutiny and restitution – as was true of large-scale destruction of records of detention, torture, and state-sanctioned assassination by the apartheid regime in South Africa. The wholesale removal of Iraq's national archives (mostly to America) has, Ovenden argues, materially hampered rebuilding efforts in that country. Whereas the fact that East Germany retained its Stasi archives proved important to the truth and reconciliation process that followed reunification. If attacking hospitals attempts to destroy the body of a nation, attacking libraries tries to destroy its soul.

Not all libraries rapidly go up in flames. Many die slowly, from injuries inflicted by cuts. Since 2010, some 800 public libraries have closed in Britain (a fifth of national provision): falling victim to government austerity policies and cash-strapped Council budgets. Poorer communities are disproportionately affected. Of the libraries that remain, some are maintained by volunteers. This loss has been part of a wider pattern of the 'loss of the commons', as public assets have been stripped and sold off to private buyers. The campaign group Locality estimates that in Britain half of all public land has been sold off since the 1970s, with nearly 4000 public spaces and buildings in England sold into private ownership each year. In many communities that once had youth centers, swimming pools, assembly rooms, and other free public places of relaxation, the library is the only public building still standing – making it all the more important as a 'warm space', where, for example, homeless people are not only tolerated but welcome – but also isolated. Only this month, the British Library put forward a plan to take three of its public reading rooms out of circulation, turning them into for-profit spaces for business meetings.

In America, meanwhile, public libraries have faced record levels of censorship and book banning. In 2025, the American Library Association tracked 4,235 unique book challenges, with pressure groups (such as Moms for Liberty) and government officials initiating 92% of them. Over one-third of these challenged titles centered on the experiences of LGBTQ+

individuals and people of color. Since 2021, PEN America has tracked nearly 23,000 book bans in school libraries nationwide. They report actions that pressure public libraries to censor and 'exert ideological control over the circulation of ideas' in public spaces, including putting prejudicial stickers on books, withholding funds over curation decisions, and the harassment and dismissal of library workers. PEN expressed the fear that the totality of these actions is 'undermining the ability of public libraries to be beacons of intellectual freedom for our diverse, democratic society'.

Thinking about the new wave of American literary censorship recalled to me the Ireland of my own childhood, and the zest with which my mother enjoyed reading J P Donleavy's The Ginger Man (1955), which was at the time banned for obscenity. She dies six weeks ago. Our local library sustained her in her later years. When I went to the library to print out the obituary I had written, I asked if she had any books out on loan. I was told that she had returned them but had several on reserve.

I think if a book can't touch a nerve, it isn't achieving the friction of intimacy. It isn't a stimulant: it's just a sedative. In any real relationship, there is risk – the risk of offending someone, troubling them, even shocking them. Libraries ought to be physically safe spaces (where people can read without being harassed) but mentally, they should be dynamic spaces, where people can be both shaken and stirred. The attempt to control what people read is never far from the attempt to control what they can say and see and be. It is thus vital to protect the public face of reading – and for that public face to be as diverse and as daring as that of society itself.

One of the joys of my live over the past dozen years has been to serve on the board of the Booker Prize Foundation which celebrates great writing. Just this week we announced the 2026 winner: M Hohn Harrison, for his genre bending novel *The End of Everything*, selected from a wonderfully diverse shortlist of very different but equally fabulous books.

How Irish libraries succeed in remaining central to their communities

Happily in Ireland, libraries continue to be supported and that is, I think, a sign of a healthy, liberal democracy. It's also the case that per capita Ireland has had more Booker nominations and, I think, more winners of the Booker than any other nationality. Visits to public libraries around Ireland have increased by two million in the last two years: new figures show that almost 16 million visits were made to Ireland's libraries in 2025, compared with nearly 14 million in 2023. There has also been a spike in borrowing from libraries, with more than 22.8 million items issued last year.

Just this past weekend, in Tramore, I discovered the night access My Open Library scheme when walking past a lit up library on Friday and Saturday night. I think this is a terrific idea and plan to tell everyone I know about it.

Ireland does so many things right. The Dublin History Festival, which just celebrated its 14th year and is jointly run by Dublin City Libraries and City Council is a prime example of national ambition and local innovation in action. This year the festival featured some 350 events over a fortnight in over 100 venues. It was a roaring success. (I know because friends who were among the 16,000 attendees can't stop talking about it.) Librarians have serious organizational abilities and there is a case to be made for getting them out from behind the stacks and into positions where they control the stakes. Such triumphs show the tremendous possibilities for libraries to consolidate and reinvent their position at the center of modern life. But there is no room for complacency.

In recent years, since becoming President of the Andrew Carnegie Foundation, I have made it my personal mission to return to our roots and to support libraries and help equip them for the future — to give them what they need to adapt to serve new audiences, whether than means updating buildings, investing in new technology, or providing new services.

Reinvigorating Modern Support for Libraries and what they do

As you will know, Andrew Carnegie, the Victorian steel magnate and philanthropist, made the foundation of libraries the keystone of his legacy; he founded more than 2500 public libraries in the United States and abroad. Born into a working-class family with slender means and limited opportunities, he had personally experienced in boyhood the power of the library as a vehicle for self-improvement and often expressed the view that 'A library outranks any other thing a community can do to benefit its people. It is a never failing spring in the desert.' His family emigrated from Scotland to America and he went to work as a bobbin boy in a factory in Pittsburg at the age of 12. At the time a local merchant allowed the boys who worked in the factories to visit his private library once a week and borrow a book. Carnegie wrote movingly about how important this was to him and how he educated himself through those borrowed books. When he amassed a personal fortune, he resolved to build free public libraries so that others would have unfettered access to knowledge. He famously declared that 'There is not such a cradle of democracy upon the earth as the Free Public Library, this republic of letters, where neither rank, office, nor wealth receives the slightest consideration'.

Remarkably, some 1358 Carnegie libraries still survive in America. They remain founts of wisdom and still, cool pools of calm in their communities, where everyone is equally welcome and welcomed as equals.

In the last few years, we've decided at the Andrew Carnegie Foundation to reinvest in libraries. In 2024, we gave $4 million to New York, Brooklyn and Queens public libraries to provide English language and work-force training classes for immigrants as well as college- and career-prep courses for teenagers. This was so popular that we then put out an RFP and supported similar programs in ten libraries around the country.

When I arrived at Carnegie in 2023 I innocently asked how many of the 1600 libraries Carnegie built in America still exist. I was told we have no idea, that we stopped funding libraries decades ago. So I said let's find out. This proved more difficult than you might imagine but we tracked down 1358 functioning Carnegie Libraries. We decided to give them each a gift of $10,000 to celebrate the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence. That was the really hard part. New Yorkers calling up libraries around the country and saying we wanted to give them a check for $10K usually resulted in the line going dead. Most of the librarians thought it had to be a scam. We succeeded eventually.

The idea is that the library should be a place where those who have recently arrived in America are safe and relaxed and can find help to integrate and gain the skills and confidence they need to meet the world of employment. Where people bring their kids for story time; where teenagers come to get help with college applications. A zone of tolerance, welcome, and nurture. A trusted, nonpartisan civic hub.

Some original Carnegie libraries have expanded their remit to become makerspaces, where artists can create work. In Wakefield, for example, the original library has become a series of publicly funded art studios and a public gallery; while the library has moved to a different building.

We want to find a raft of ways of returning the Andrew Carnegie Foundation to our roots while also supporting libraries to reinvent themselves. Here at Trinity, that's meant a grant for digitization of mediaeval manuscripts, and support for The Book of Kells project. Now people across the world can zoom in on the fantastic knotwork, the peacocks and snakes and hares and cats that form part of the wild inventiveness of these 9th century gospels. I love in idle moments to lose myself in the vivid woad blue and copper greens, the arsenic yellow, lead-red, the gold and oak-gall black of the illustrations.

I love that the technology allows us to see the complaints in the margins from the teenage monks who worked on the manuscript; the occasional mess-ups by the scribes; the erratic Latin; the wonderfully weird illustrations of men pulling one another's beards, or an ox and an eagle kissing. One of the finest surviving treasures of mediaeval insular art, it is completely brilliant and a bit mad: as James Joyce rightly commented, 'the most purely Irish thing we have'.

We are also giving money to local libraries around the world that serve their communities in very practical and equally valuable ways. In post-apartheid South Africa, for example, we've been supporting both the National Library in Pretoria and libraries in majority-Black townships where literary provision and digital access are challenging for many families.

Research shows the continuing importance of reading for physical and mental health

It is easy, in the Internet age, to dismiss reading books as 'old technology'. I've had Silicon Valley billionaires tell me that nobody needs a library when we all carry one in our pockets. Yet new research confirms the value of reading, showing that for people of all ages, it is a 'superpower for the brain', boosting memory, empathy, and mental health.

Professor Barbara Sahakian and Dr Christelle Langley — scientists at the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Cambridge — not only found that the benefits of reading were widespread but also noted the relative paucity in research around the topic.

Some of the strongest evidence of the benefits of reading came from their recent study of more than 10,000 young people, which found that children who began reading for pleasure early in life showed benefits including: better attention, memory, and executive functioning, greater academic achievement, fewer mental health problems, and healthier lifestyles, including more sleep and less screen time.

They also found that reading was associated with a 33% lower Alzheimer's risk. Regular reading in later life helps protect against cognitive decline and severe mental deterioration.

Further, they established that reading fiction for as little as five minutes can lower stress levels by up to 20% while enhancing focus and problem-solving abilities.

Reading, then, isn't just labor to be outsourced to Grok or Claude. It is the neural equivalent of social networking in real life, creating connections, requiring us to show up and work on relationships, to be fully present. To hold multiple ideas, actors, stories continuously in mind. Far from being an outmoded skill, it's an essential road out of the distract and divide, bait and switch economy.

Interestingly, these benefits are conferred regardless of what we read. Romances that once might have been considered trashy, graphic novels, science fiction, all expand our minds, quite literally, as much as more sober books on nature, history or politics. Words are living building blocks for our neural circuits. Like cells, they construct organic pathways of renewal. They are powerful brain food. We talk a lot, in America especially, about 'getting our vitamins', our antioxidants and our superfoods. Probably, we should be thinking about reading as a healthy daily habit, part of a pleasurable routine, like walking in the park, keeping up with our friends, and getting a good night's sleep.

If we aren't thinking about closing public parks — with their proven health benefits — we shouldn't be thinking about closing libraries either.

The 'Digital Deluge' and how libraries help us respond

In recent years, large amounts of money have been expended on controlling human attention. Indeed the Internet— which once seemed such a promised land of free expression, unlimited information, and social connection — has proven at best an equivocal blessing. Dominated by pornography and informed by the attention spans associated with pornography, the Web is a Wild West with a lot of Hustlers and Rustlers and few effective sheriffs. With little meaningful regulation of source material, we have been subject to what Richard Ovenden calls a 'Digital Deluge'. False claims are often deliberately propagated (whether about vaccines or immigration), prompting fear and outrage, and disinformation readily goes viral, becoming difficult to separate from fact.

In house fires, as any fire-fighter will confirm, it is often the smoke rather than the flames that kills you. In modern politics, it is often the smoke machine that is most dangerous. FIMI (foreign information manipulation and interference) is a growing threat in the EU and the US, where President Trump ceased all federal funding of research on the subject. It is characterized by coordinated campaigns involving state media, proxies, bots, and paid actors to manipulate information, targeting political processes and state institutions. Often the campaign exploits grey zones to operate in ways that can avoid illegality, while posing serious harm to democratic processes. The aim is to flood the zone with disinformation (for example, negative talking points regarding climate change, or Ukraine's putative responsibility for the 2022 invasion), to confuse, divide, and create chaos. After the activities of the past week in Ireland around the EU Summit meeting, I hardly need to remind a Dublin audience of this issue.

Libraries are far from immune to this deluge. And indeed, they have been prone to cyberattacks in recent years. However, the very fact of those attacks is a clue to the enduring relevance of libraries and their vital role in acting as bastions of resistance to the billowing smokescreen and the tide of digital sewage flowing our way. They can identify and maintain trusted public resources. They can also prevent inconvenient truths from being erased. In the culture wars, what we can't see (because it's been suppressed by the algorithm, the government, the media) is often as important as what we can. If a President (say) deletes his Tweets, it is difficult to hold his actions to account against his previous public statements. Libraries are key to our defense against the dark art of digital disguise.

Despite the seeming openness of the Web, we have also, in the modern world, to contend with the for-profit enclosure of knowledge. Access to digital material is increasingly by

subscription, so consumers have no absolute ownership of texts. If the 'streaming' service goes down or is withdrawn, or becomes too expensive to access (as has happened to some universities who have been licensing access to research from the 'Big 5' providers) then there is real risk that people can no longer see what is there.

Many of us have also lately been appalled by the alleged pirating by large AI companies of vast numbers of books and other copyright materials created by authors and artists to 'train' AI large language models. AI companies also stand accused of buying, scraping, then wantonly destroying rare books in order to give themselves exclusive ownership of data and market dominance. If true, this smacks of burning down the forest in order to sell back the logs to the people from whom you stole the trees.

Professor of Public Economics, Massimo Florio has referred to the broader pattern of the twenty-first century as a 'privatization of knowledge'. He identifies a paradox: knowledge creation by government-sponsored research infrastructures or by nonprofit institutions, including universities, is increasingly appearing in the form of 'open science' — ideas and data are widely available in the public domain. However, such knowledge is then privatized and commercialized downstream by new oligopolies. Looking back at the two hundred years before the year two thousand, it seemed as if the world was moving toward greater public rights, ownership, and cooperation. In the twenty-five years since the millennium, the movement seems very much in the opposite direction: toward a re-seizing of the public sphere and de-funding of the state in favor of private and corporate power.

In this context, defending the library is no small matter. It may be the quiet resistor that keeps the circuit from breaking.

A New Recognition of Libraries' role

We need, in my view, to fight the deliberate erosion of the public sphere. I think we are beginning to see that resistance grow, and with it a recognition of libraries as vital armories against the destruction of culture, the deliberate taping-over of diverse histories, the suppression of inconvenient truths. Libraries are bright spots of survival; rich ecologies of unique intellectual and social life; precious places, not just historically but now and forever. Their connection with the local— for example, through family history research — is continuously being rediscovered. They are hubs for every kind of network, from creative writing groups to bring-your-baby singalongs to memory cafes for those suffering from dementia.

Our own Seamus Heaney has rightly said that libraries are 'guarantors of literacy and learning and cultivated leisure'. Irish novelist Joseph O'Connor, has frequently praised public libraries, describing his local Carnegie Library in Dún Laoghaire as a 'lighthouse' and

a sanctuary during his youth. He has spoken of his profound gratitude for the librarians who introduced him to contemporary Irish fiction and set him on his path to becoming a storyteller. Booker winner, Anna Burns, has spoken of borrowing library cards from friends and relations to enable her to borrow more books and keep reading. Caitlin Moran, a second-generation Irish novelist who grew up in Wolverhampton credits libraries in her home city for providing the 'greatest possible education a child can have…Our parents didn't give us any formal lessons at all, they were on the extreme end of the hippy spectrum so literally everything I know is from the books that I got from Warstones Library in Wolverhampton and the Central Library'. Writers are always readers first; if we want to make writers, we need to fund the spaces where they grow.

I feel very proud of Ireland's rich cultural ecosystem. I notice that Fingal County Libraries, funded in partnership with Creative Ireland, provides free community access to laptops, 3D printers, and vinyl cutters. Its practical workshops focus on both digital engineering and sustainable textiles, covering laser cutting, fabric printing, and sustainable embroidery. Similar Maker spaces have been created in Galway and elsewhere. The words 'text' and 'textile' have the same etymology – they both refer to something woven. It is apt, then, that libraries should be places where people can print and embroider fabric as well as weaving words. The makers of the Book of Kells would have well understood that wider sense of the book as a piece of art: jeweled; covered in rich fabric; made of vellum; painted in gorgeous pigments. In reinventing libraries as makerspaces, as places of sanctuary, of integration and learning for people from many nations, as defenses against barbarity and torchbearers of humane values, we are being true to their roots as emblems and experiments in a new conception of the good society: warm, welcoming, learned, safe. A place where you can hear yourself think.

I will close now. But I want to thank you again for inviting me and for attending to my impassioned defense of libraries in the modern world. It was Trinity's Old Library that first captured my heart. Its unforgettably beautiful arched oaken roof; its procession of marble busts whose line of thoughtful heads each new student joins with delight and trepidation. It is a joyous mead-hall of memory; an inverted ship, sailing through the saga of time.

We all sense the danger in the air. Risks of conflict in the global sphere have risen. The library is a key castle in our line of defense. It will always be worth saving. Worth investing in and fitting out to be nimble, adaptable enough to withstand the pressures of our time. In this way, we can all identify with the 9th century monk running with The Book of Kells — probably in a leather book satchel slung around his body like a bandolier. Through bog and over sea, through storm and darkness. Bringing the joy and the wonder, the color of the word incarnated as miracle through fire and flood to lay it, safely, in the hands of the future.

Louise Richardson