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SCOTT SHERMAN

PATIENCE
AND
FORTITUDE

POWER, REAL ESTATE,
AND THE FIGHT TO SAVE
A PUBLIC LIBRARY

 MELVILLE HOUSE
BROOKLYN • LONDON

PREFACE:
**"THERE WILL NEVER BE
AN END TO THIS LIBRARY"**

This is a book about a world-class library that lost its way in the digital age.

In the late spring of 2011, Katrina vanden Heuvel, editor and publisher of *The Nation*, asked if I might be interested in writing a profile of Anthony Marx, the Amherst College president who had recently agreed to lead the New York Public Library (NYPL). "Lots of unhappy rumblings about how oligarchs"—on the Library's board of trustees—"are taking over too much of a major cultural institution as it celebrates its centennial," vanden Heuvel wrote. She envisioned a story about a "clash of civilizations at the outpost of civilization."

The New York Public Library was an institution that mattered to me personally: as a writer, I had depended on the grand building on 42nd Street for twenty years, and had

come to see how fully it embodied its nickname: “the people’s library.”

It was a place for both Shakespeare scholars and shoeshine boys. When the building turned seventy-five in 1986, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who had toiled as a boot-black in Times Square in the 1940s, recalled: “It was the first time I was taught that I was welcome in a place of education and learning. I would go into that great marble palace, and I would check my shoeshine box. A gentleman in a brown cotton jacket would take it as if I’d passed over an umbrella and a bowler hat.”

I accepted the assignment, and soon reached out to a prominent academic librarian. Halfway through our conversation, he mentioned—rather casually—that the NYPL would soon remove the entire collection of books from the iron-and-steel stacks inside the 42nd Street building and send them to an offsite storage facility in Princeton, New Jersey. This was troubling news: the stacks’ three million books were the heart of the institution.

When I asked about this project, NYPL officials confirmed their intentions: the books would leave the building as part of a “Central Library Plan” (CLP), a wide-ranging reconfiguration of services, and the stacks would indeed be demolished. The CLP had been born in June 2007 and was announced to the public nine months later at a little-noticed press conference featuring the novelist (and NYPL trustee) Toni Morrison, who called the plan “truly astonishing.” The CLP aimed to consolidate three Midtown libraries into one

colossal circulating library inside the 42nd Street building, which would undergo a \$300 million renovation by Norman Foster, the British architect. (Frank Gehry had been on the shortlist for the job.)

The project was derailed by the recession of 2008. Fortunately, I began my reporting as it was quietly being revived. My story, which appeared in *The Nation* in December 2011 under the headline “Upheaval at The New York Public Library,” launched a controversy that raged for two and a half years and resulted in more than forty stories in *The New York Times* alone. The debate accelerated in December 2012 when Ada Louise Huxtable, the eminent ninety-one-year-old architecture critic, excoriated the project in the pages of *The Wall Street Journal*; it continued to escalate after her death a few weeks later. The dispute would eventually draw in a cast that included Tom Stoppard, Gloria Steinem, Susan Sarandon, Garrison Keillor, Salman Rushdie, Malcolm Gladwell, Donna Tartt, Art Spiegelman, and the Rev. Al Sharpton. The wrangle over the Central Library Plan, wrote *Publishers Weekly*, amounted to “the biggest public outcry a public library project has ever generated.”

The battle to save the NYPL was conducted by a small group of writers, professors, independent scholars, and historic preservationists, who viewed the institution as a sacred public trust. For these critics, the CLP was nothing more than a set of tawdry real-estate deals, a desecration of a historic building, and a betrayal of the NYPL’s founding mission. In the words of a leading activist, the historian Joan

Scott, the campaign was about “saving a major institution for the public good.”

On the other side were the Library’s trustees, who insisted that the NYPL had to be pruned and modernized for the digital age, when many public libraries have prioritized spaces for community engagement and coffee shops over books and bookshelves. The trustees argued that by “monetizing non-core assets”—that is, selling the NYPL’s own real estate—the plan would generate up to \$15 million per year in badly needed revenue. For inspiration, the NYPL’s leaders did not look to other libraries, but to FedEx, Netflix, and Barnes & Noble; they also put their faith in Google, which was scanning millions of books from research libraries across the nation, including the NYPL. To counter the opposition, Anthony Marx rallied construction unions and Teamsters and accused the critics of “elitism”; their intent, he suggested, was to preserve the 42nd Street Library as an exclusive sanctuary for scholars and intellectuals.

It was a charged battle over books, real estate, and architecture, and about the future of an institution that its former president, Vartan Gregorian, called “a treasured repository of civilization.” As Gregorian told *The New Yorker* in 1986:

Libraries keep the records on behalf of all humanity . . . endless sources of knowledge are *here*. We have books in three thousand languages and dialects. I can take you through here from Balanchine to Tibet. There are esoterica on synthetic fuels, neglected maps of the

Falklands which were suddenly in demand at the time of the Falklands War. And Warsaw telephone directories from the years of the Holocaust, often invaluable as the only source of documentation of who lived where, in order to substantiate claims for retribution. There will never be an end to this library. Never!

In the 1890s, a group of wealthy men—bankers, corporate titans, philanthropists—came together to create the New York Public Library. These men were cautious individuals with a sense of proportion, who understood the fragility of the institution they had built. Over a century later, the CLP became a project closely tied to another wealthy man: the billionaire Mayor Michael Bloomberg, whose personal friends and family members initiated it. Unlike their late nineteenth-century predecessors, these individuals lacked prudence: they applied radical, free-market solutions to complex institutional problems. In the end, elected officials in New York City had to save the NYPL from its own trustees.

1

“A Great Work”

“It was Tim Costello who told me to get out of his bar and walk a few blocks to where I’d see two lions, and to go in there and get myself a library card,” the writer Frank McCourt recalled in 1997. It was the early 1950s, and McCourt had just arrived in New York from Limerick, Ireland. He entered the building at 42nd Street and climbed the marble staircase. “Up on the third floor, I discovered Paradise: the great reference room with its hundreds of index-card drawers. I asked a librarian if it would be all right to look in the drawers and he said, ‘Of course, of course, anything you like.’”

In a 1956 essay, Meyer Berger, a celebrated columnist for *The New York Times*, called the 42nd Street Library “a romantic and mysterious place beyond musty routine.” For me, a freelance journalist for years, the romance and mystery are most palpable at 10 a.m., when the building opens its doors. At that hour, sunbeams stream through the tall

windows of the Rose Reading Room, glazing the long wooden tables. Chairs lightly scrape the floor; librarians murmur to one another; serenity prevails. In his memoirs, Henry Miller recalled the “good feeling” of working here, in a room “the size of a cathedral, under a lofty ceiling which was an imitation of heaven itself.”

Before long, this place will be full—mainly with tourists taking pictures, but also with historians chasing sources, students studying for the LSAT, fact-checkers poring over galleys of magazine articles, people doing crossword puzzles, elderly men dozing. But at this early hour the room contains only a few individuals: a graduate student in a black miniskirt lost in a book by Roland Barthes; an African American gentleman in a suit, his hair streaked with gray, hunched over a bulky volume containing the *Proceedings* of the Jamaican legislature; a young man with a shaggy beard, tapping away at his phone, his guitar case leaning against the table. In frenetic Manhattan, this is an incomparable sanctuary.

Sitting at one of the long wooden tables, I sometimes think about the geniuses and luminaries who toiled in this building. After he arrived in Greenwich Village, but before he began to write his own songs, Bob Dylan came here to read nineteenth-century newspapers on microfilm. “I couldn’t exactly put in words what I was looking for,” Dylan wrote in *Chronicles: Volume One*, “but I began searching in principle for it, over at the New York Public Library . . . a building that radiates triumph and glory when you walk

inside.” On those reels containing old editions of *The Savannah Daily Herald*, *The Pennsylvania Freeman*, and *The Brooklyn Daily Times*, Dylan encountered the raw material that would fuel his imagination—news items about “reform movements, anti-gambling leagues, rising crime, child labor, temperance, slave-wage factories, loyalty oaths and religious revivals,” as well as stories about William Lloyd Garrison and Abraham Lincoln.

In the NYPL’s Allen Room, Betty Friedan composed *The Feminine Mystique* and Robert Caro wrote *The Power Broker*. The list of notable people who have used the 42nd Street building over the years would be nearly impossible to compose, but it would surely include, among many others, Leon Trotsky, Bertolt Brecht, Willa Cather, Francis Ford Coppola, Jacqueline Onassis, Grace Kelly, Marlene Dietrich, Vladimir Nabokov, Joseph Mitchell, Pete Seeger, Isaac Bashevis Singer, Arthur Miller, Norman Mailer, Lou Reed, Philip Roth, Oliver Sacks, Joan Didion, Orhan Pamuk, and Stephen Colbert.

The NYPL’s librarians have a predilection for scrutinizing the names on the paper call slips. In the mid-1980s, a staff member, Bob Dumont, noticed that Mario Vargas Llosa, the Peruvian novelist, was seated at one of the long wooden tables, lost in a marathon bout of reading. Dumont admired Vargas Llosa’s novels and wanted to chat, but he gave the writer his privacy.

Many years later, in 2008, Dumont again saw Vargas Llosa at one of the long tables; he was researching the life of Roger Casement, the Irish nationalist patriot and human

rights activist hanged by the British in 1916. Dumont started a conversation, which they soon continued at an Irish pub around the corner. The librarian then arranged for Vargas Llosa to visit the NYPL's Berg Collection, where he was shown a writing pen that belonged to Dickens; a portable writing desk used by one of the Brontë sisters; a typescript of Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*; Virginia Woolf's diaries; and a rare photograph of Jorge Luis Borges. Vargas Llosa, who received the Nobel Prize in literature in 2010, would repay his debt to the NYPL: when the controversy over the Central Library Plan erupted in early 2012, he was the first major writer to sign a petition opposing the Library's decision to demolish its historic book stacks and sell its real estate.

Of course, most NYPL users have toiled in obscurity. In his essay, Berger described a graduate student from Harvard who was busy with a monumental project in the Library's basement. His task was to read and organize the voluminous archive of Moses Taylor, a nineteenth-century merchant and founder of the City Bank of New York (which evolved into today's Citigroup), whose papers were discovered in sixty-three chests in a warehouse on the New York waterfront. The tale, as told by Berger, appears fanciful, but it is true:

By the end of 1954, the Harvard man had spent three years in the basement, working on the project without pay. He became one of the palace's most mysterious figures, a tall, handsome fellow who moved below street level among brooding shadows, with a white

and crimson bathrobe over his street clothes, wearing a miner's mask to filter out the heavy brown dust that spurts from old papers. The Manuscript people are grateful for his labor of love. They said, "We couldn't have done it for years to come and it would have cost easily between \$6,000 and \$10,000."

Later, in a book, Berger revealed the student's name, Roland Taylor Ely, and offered additional details about his exertions underground: "Few know his identity or his purpose even now. He smiles easily, though. He likes to tell how he fought boredom in the cellar one day, rigging a Boy Scout trap of cardboard to catch a mouse, which he let go." Ely is gone, but the Moses Taylor Papers remain in the depths of the 42nd Street Library: 326 boxes, 132 linear feet, call number MssCol2955.

Despite its name, the New York Public Library is a private nonprofit organization, not a government agency. It was born in 1895 from the consolidation of two nineteenth-century libraries owned by wealthy men: merchant John Jacob Astor and philanthropist-collector James Lenox. The Astor Library building (which is now the Public Theater, on the edge of the East Village) contained 260,000 volumes in history, literature, science, and art; its users included Nathaniel Hawthorne. The Lenox Library (which occupied the site of what is today the Frick Collection) specialized in

Milton, Shakespeare, and Bunyan. By the 1890s, both libraries faced a shortage of funds, and a far-sighted decision was made: using \$2.4 million from the estate of former governor Samuel Tilden, the two would be merged into one central library, in the heart of bustling Manhattan—a library that, its founders hoped, would rival the British Museum and the Bibliothèque nationale in Paris.

New York Mayor Robert Van Wyck, a creature of Tammany Hall, at first resisted the creation of the NYPL. But newspapers, notably Joseph Pulitzer's *New York World*, initiated a crusade to bring it to fruition. When the mayor changed course, the *World* wrote: "The idea that . . . a public library was for a small class of rich men and bookworms has been destroyed."

A library in Manhattan on the scale of the British Museum, built on the site of the old Croton Reservoir, would be a massive undertaking; the trustees needed a visionary to carry it out. They found one: Dr. John Shaw Billings. Phyllis Dain, in her 1972 history of the NYPL, referred to Billings as "probably the most versatile librarian that the United States has produced." He was also one of the most outstanding physicians of his era, a polymath whose interests included hospital construction, sanitary engineering, and medical bibliography.

Raised in rural Indiana, Billings, who had piercing blue eyes and a walrus mustache, served as an army surgeon during the Civil War, during which he performed more than five hundred leg amputations; he also saw duty at the Battle

of Gettysburg. In 1864, he led an expedition to one of Haiti's satellite islands to rescue freed slaves who were stranded in an ill-fated colonization scheme. Dain called him "a man of the world and in the world," one who "inspired affection as well as obedience in those who worked for him."

It was Billings who conceived and designed the new library at 42nd Street, the top floor of which would have a colossal, tranquil, sunlit reading room, built above seven levels of elaborately constructed book stacks. Billings and his collaborator, William Ware, the founder of Columbia University's School of Architecture, wanted books and readers in close proximity.

Six architects, including the preeminent firm of the day, McKim, Mead & White, were on the shortlist, but the trustees selected the little-known John Mervin Carrère and Thomas Hastings, whose proposal was celebrated in the press: "Hail to The New York Public Library!" declared a *New York Herald* article, which predicted that the building "will be a marvel of architectural grandeur."

Work began in 1899; the cornerstone was laid in 1902. Labor militancy impeded progress, but the building was finally completed in 1911. It was designed according to the classical principles of the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris, where the architects were trained. Carrère and Hastings insisted on ornately carved ceilings and doors, as well as variegated marble and tile floors; the two architects oversaw the design of the furniture and the custom-made fittings.

In his 1923 book on the NYPL, Harry Lydenberg, a senior

Library official, provided a fine-grained account of the building's interior: "The Current Periodical Room is finished in French walnut . . . Philippine teak is used for the floor of the trustees room . . . The brownish grey marble [in the Reading Room] is Touraine or Basville marble from France."

The lions guarding the Fifth Avenue entrance were designed by the sculptor Edward C. Potter. In the 1930s, Mayor Fiorello La Guardia named them Patience and Fortitude—virtues, he felt, that city residents needed to endure the Depression.

The final cost was \$9 million, an enormous sum for 1911; even the Library of Congress had been built for less. Ten workmen lost their lives during the construction; twenty others sustained serious injuries. Carrère himself did not live to see the completion of his masterwork: on March 1, 1911, a Manhattan streetcar collided with his taxicab. The NYPL's trustees opened the building, for the first time, to allow his body to lie in state in the rotunda. Six colleagues from Carrère's firm carried the coffin, which was covered with lilies, and two thousand people viewed it during the hour it was displayed. Thomas Hastings lived until 1929.

President William Howard Taft inaugurated the Library on May 23, 1911. When the doors opened the next day, at least 30,000 people streamed inside. The first book requested was Delia Bacon's *The Philosophy of the Plays of Shakespeare Unfolded*, which the new Library didn't own. The second request was delivered seven minutes after the call slip was submitted: the book was a Russian-

language study of Nietzsche and Tolstoy, and the reader was David Shub, a Russian émigré.

Ecstatic commentary about the Library flooded the newspapers. But there was carping, too, from architecture critics. "Although regarded as important and distinguished," Dain wrote, "the new library did not win recognition as a totally beautiful building like the Boston Public Library." But its eminence has grown over time. Writing in *The New Criterion* in 2013, Michael J. Lewis, an architectural historian at Williams College, noted that the 42nd Street Library "is America's finest classical revival building, and it is also our greatest civic building."

Carrère and Hastings also designed a number of the NYPL branch (or neighborhood) libraries, including one in the Hunts Point section of the Bronx, the exterior of which was conceived in "14th century Florentine style." Credit for that branch, and many others, can be traced to the industrialist Andrew Carnegie who, in 1901, pledged \$5.2 million for the creation of sixty-five branch libraries in New York City. (He had a national commitment to libraries, building 1,700 of them across the country.) Libraries fit neatly into Carnegie's bootstrap philosophy. "The fundamental advantage of a library is that it gives nothing for nothing," he declared. "Youths must acquire knowledge themselves."

The city's newspapers rejoiced over the gift. The *World* highlighted New York City's feeble commitment to its public

libraries, which amounted to nine cents per capita, compared to fifty cents in Boston, forty-one cents in Buffalo, and fifteen cents in Chicago. Not everyone lauded Carnegie, however: Upton Sinclair penned a satirical poem about the industrialist, and Mark Twain accused him of vanity. The problem, it turned out, wasn't his vanity, but the terms of his gift: Carnegie built the libraries, but entrusted their financing and upkeep to local politicians, who, in subsequent decades, would not always take that responsibility seriously.

Still, Carnegie's action had deep, lasting results. In 1901, the city possessed a variety of circulating libraries, some of which were located in the slums of the Lower East Side; others were under the control of the Catholic Archdiocese. Carnegie's gift spurred politicians to absorb those libraries into a unified NYPL system that contained both the neighborhood libraries and the monumental structure that was rising at 42nd Street.

The branch libraries, many of which were built with stone fronts, classical columns, and arched windows and doors, were immensely popular, and were administered by enlightened individuals. Though the 42nd Street building was the star of the system, managers took great care to ensure the vitality of the branches. First-rate consultants assisted with the selection of materials: John Dewey, for instance, helped to choose philosophy titles for the neighborhood libraries, some of whose walls contained paintings on loan from the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

In a city of immigrants, the branch libraries formed a

sturdy ladder to the middle class. Civil service employees and teachers found them a congenial place to study for promotional exams; newcomers to the United States flocked to them for books in dozens of languages. The NYPL's Traveling Library Office delivered books to factories, fire stations, hospitals, mental hospitals, prisons, newsboys' clubs, and longshoremen and sailors' reading rooms. More than a million books were delivered by that department in 1910 alone.

The NYPL also blazed a path in children's services. In 1906, the Library hired a dynamic thirty-five-year-old woman, Annie Moore, to run the children's services department, and in her first year on the job she demanded (and received) a \$10,000 increase in her book budget; she also lifted the age restrictions for children in NYPL facilities, a bold reform for that day and age. Dain wrote that Moore had "an uncompromising insistence on well-written, well-made books" for children.

The nerve center of the NYPL remained the landmark structure built by Carrère and Hastings, which, despite its imposing grandeur, quickly became known as a library for the masses. Memoirs by NYPL staff members convey an atmosphere, in the 1920s and '30s, of intellectual devotion and moralism at 42nd Street. In his quirky book *Random Recollections of an Anachronism: or Seventy-Five Years of Library Work* (1980), Keyes DeWitt Metcalf, a senior NYPL administrator, noted that between 1919 and 1937 he experienced

only two minor flare-ups with his boss, Harry Lydenberg, who administered the 42nd Street Library. "The first was when I had missed the review of an important work on anthropology in the *London Times Literary Supplement*. Instead of rebuking me, he quietly asked me how in the world it had happened."

In those years, the Library kept its most sensitive documents—material about sex and atheistic pamphlets assailing the Bible—in a special "cage" surrounded by heavy wire grating on the sixth floor of the book stacks underneath the Main Reading Room. Only two staff members—Mr. Metcalf being one of them—had keys to the "cage." One morning Mr. Metcalf noticed with concern that a book from the "cage" was missing: a poem by a distinguished American author, an "item for which a considerable number of men who made collections of erotica were ready to pay a large sum." He suspected that the thief was one of the unruly "stack boys" whose job was to retrieve material from the vast storage space in the heart of the building.

That very afternoon, returning home on the subway, Metcalf noticed that a young man seated next to him was holding the purloined book. The librarian followed him off the train and accosted him on the street. "I told him I had seen him reading the stolen book and that I was going home with him to see what else he had there":

He took me through the house, including his own room. There were practically no books or papers to be

found. He convinced me that this was his first offense. He told me that he had obtained the book by taking a rod from the shelf-list drawer and pushing the volume under the grating on to the stack aisle floor, and then with a broom handle taken from the janitor's closet he had been able to push it along and work it out under the door into the main stack aisle. The book was thin and was easy to push under the door. I told him not to come back to the library and that the case would not be taken to court.

In the early decades of the NYPL, the trustees were determined to fashion a collection that would rank among the world's finest. Librarians had wide latitude to purchase materials. In 1929, a professor from the University of Chicago went to Europe and surveyed social scientists about the most essential books published for research libraries that year in England, France, and Germany. Metcalf, in his memoirs, quietly acknowledged the results: "The Library of Congress and Harvard had 60 to 62 percent" of the books; "but the New York Public Library . . . had 92 percent."

The Library also received a multitude of items from donors, some of which began to arrive even before the 42nd Street building was completed. In 1899, the NYPL obtained a cache of books and pamphlets on Mormonism—451 volumes, 325 pamphlets, and 52 volumes of newspapers. The letter of presentation, from Helen Miller Gould (Jay Gould's daughter), began:

Dear Sir:—

It gives me pleasure to add the Berrian collection of books and pamphlets on Mormonism to the New York Public Library, for I believe it will be very useful for students to have access to a collection that gives a clear idea of this peculiar form of error. The Mormon Elders are proselyting in many sections of our country, and our people generally should become better informed on the subject of Mormonism in order to be on their guard against these "Latter Day Saints" as they style themselves. Hoping that the books will prove useful . . .

In 1900, the Library received a remarkable art collection from Samuel P. Avery, which contained 17,557 items, among them etchings by James McNeill Whistler, Jean-François Millet, and Charles-François Daubigny, as well as J.M.W. Turner's *Liber Studiorum*, a series of landscape and seascape compositions. In 1907, 239 letters by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels entered the collection. Not long after that, 1,600 volumes and pamphlets on meteorology and terrestrial magnetism collected at the Central Park Observatory found their way to 42nd Street.

A benefactor of the NYPL perished on the *Titanic*. William Spencer, an American citizen who lived in Paris, bequeathed to the NYPL, along with a substantial sum of money, 232 illustrated books with ornate bindings, some of which had taken two years to execute. These volumes

constitute the core of the Library's Spencer Collection, the finest materials of which were sent to offsite storage the day after Pearl Harbor was attacked.

In their quest for international distinction, the Library's trustees frequented the auction houses. Writing in the left-wing *New Masses* in 1939, a skeptic wondered why in 1932, in the depths of the Depression, "when the book stock was being rapidly depleted," the NYPL's trustees paid \$68,000 for a rare fourteenth-century English manuscript, the *Tickhill Psalter*. Yet there were always limitations as to what the NYPL could purchase: in 1939, the Library declined the papers of Franz Kafka; tight finances prevented that acquisition. Then, as now, there was tension between the needs of the branch libraries and the requirements and ambitions of the research division.

A multitude of white faces filled the 42nd Street building in the first decades of its existence; the first black librarian was hired only in 1945. How did black New Yorkers view the NYPL? A clue can be found in James Baldwin's first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953), in which a boy from Harlem gazes at the majestic marble structure:

A building filled with books and unimaginably vast, and which he had never yet dared to enter . . . he had never gone in because the building was so big that it must be full of corridors and marble steps, in the maze

of which he would be lost and never find the book he wanted. And then everyone, all the white people inside, would know that he was not used to great buildings, or to many books, and they would look at him with pity.

The NYPL was beginning to amass a deep archive of materials pertaining to black history and culture. Much credit for this belongs to Arthur Alfonso Schomburg (1874-1938), a Puerto Rican-born bibliophile. Documenting the black experience was his life's work: during one expedition to second-hand bookshops in the 1930s, Schomburg, according to his biographer Elinor des Verney Sinnette, purchased ten different editions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* for twenty-five cents each. In his personal archive were letters by Frederick Douglass and Booker T. Washington; army orders signed by the Haitian revolutionary Toussaint L'Ouverture; and certificates of slave sales. Schomburg was not wealthy, so friends gave him books: Langston Hughes sent him volumes about Pushkin.

In 1926, the Carnegie Corporation, endowed by the industrialist, purchased Schomburg's entire collection for \$10,000 and donated it to the 135th Street branch of the NYPL: the Schomburg Collection was born, and it became a sanctuary for writers, activists, intellectuals, students, and the citizenry at large. In 1938, when the young Ralph Ellison was doing research for the Works Progress Administration, he spent countless hours at the Schomburg and found the

collection "a revelation," according to his biographer, Arnold Rampersad.

Kenneth B. Clark, the psychologist and civil rights activist, has recalled his first visit to the Schomburg at the age of twelve. He was a bookish Harlem boy in pursuit of cerebral adventures, which led him "upstairs to the third floor to that forbidden and mysterious area reserved for adults." Schomburg rose from his desk to greet him; they sat and talked about black luminaries—"men like Ira Aldridge in his role as Othello." The boy became one of those luminaries: in 1954, when the Supreme Court issued its ruling on *Brown v. Board of Education*, it cited research material on school segregation that Clark had gathered at the Schomburg Library.

Despite lean budgets and paltry resources, the Schomburg would later acquire invaluable material pertaining to Harriet Tubman, Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson, Zora Neale Hurston, Nat King Cole, Fats Waller, Josephine Baker, Romare Bearden, Amiri Baraka, and Arthur Ashe. Its holdings include the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters Collection; the 1964 Mississippi Freedom Summer Project Collection; the Biafra War Collection; and the FBI files on the Black Panther Party.

The Schomburg Library, always a beacon for Harlem and the black diaspora, wasn't just a place for scholarly contemplation: the American Negro Theater staged plays in the basement, in which the young Sidney Poitier and Harry Belafonte appeared.

The NYPL reached its apogee in the 1940s and '50s. The Library's annual reports from the early 1940s are proof of its professionalism and sense of purpose: they are book-length documents written with flair, and alive with vivid bibliographical details about the research collection; never again would the annual reports reach that level of distinction. The trustees were proud of what they had achieved, and that pride imbued Meyer Berger's 1956 essay, in which he noted that the NYPL had even played a significant role in World War II: "Much of the information that gave Allied commanders a complete picture of the North African and Normandy coasts came from The New York Public Library." Research for the Manhattan Project was undertaken at the Library, and the private sector, too, relied on the NYPL: representatives from *Time* magazine, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, IBM, General Electric, and the Chase Manhattan Bank all used the collections, as did an army of small entrepreneurs and investors who haunted the corridors and reading rooms.

In 1961, when the 42nd Street Library turned fifty, the trustees hired William K. Zinsser of *The New York Herald Tribune* to compose an anniversary booklet. Zinsser was struck by the Library's international acquisitions: "The man buying political pamphlets in the outdoor markets of Ghana this week is quite likely to be acting on orders from Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street." The depth and quirkiness of the collections also stirred the NYPL's chronicler, who listed some of his personal favorites: more than a million playbills going

back to 1750; the programs of every Broadway play for a century; "route books" for circuses and secret material from the Society of American Magicians, "which may be seen only by its members"; 70,000 musical recordings; manuscripts of a Bach cantata, a Mozart symphony, and a Beethoven violin sonata, as well as a lock of Franz Liszt's hair; the records of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes; and dazzling illuminated scrolls of *The Tale of Genji*.

In the NYPL's essence, Zinsser discerned "the quality of freedom":

This is a building that takes no sides because it presents all sides. It grants its visitors the dignity of free access to information. It does not hide the ugly or censor the injurious. These guarantees are woven through every division, and often they take extraordinary form. The Jewish Division owns the biggest known mass of anti-Semitic material; the Picture Collection has hundreds of racist cartoons; the Current Periodicals Room subscribes to subversive magazines.

Dr. John Shaw Billings, the polymath and Civil War veteran, deserves much of the credit for the NYPL's singular triumph. Billings battled cancer of the lip and other ailments, and he passed away in 1913, just two years after the 42nd Street building was completed. A few months before his death, Billings received a letter from a dear friend on the Library's board of trustees:

If we must depart, and before many years we must, we have unselfishly, honestly and capably done a great work, & we have done it together. The Trustees and Executive Committee were not necessary to this present success, altho they ably contributed—You were—so my old friend my affectionate good wishes for 1913.

2

Decay and Renewal

In 1789, Joshua Reynolds executed a stirring portrait of Elizabeth Billington, an actress and opera singer whose death in Venice in 1818 was probably the result of a beating. The painting, *Mrs. Billington as St. Cecilia*, had belonged to one of the NYPL's founders. On October 17, 1956, at the Parke-Bernet auction house in Manhattan, the NYPL sold the painting to Lord Beaverbrook, the newspaper baron, for \$6,500. The same afternoon, the Library also sold a painting by Thomas Gainsborough, for \$20,500; a work by John Constable, for \$30,000; and two paintings by J.M.W. Turner, which garnered \$56,000 and \$47,000, respectively.

A structural weakness at the core of the NYPL made those art sales more or less inevitable. The NYPL was created with a peculiar dual structure: the branch library system, which serves Manhattan, the Bronx, and Staten Island