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Situating the imperial archive: the Royal Empire Society Library, 1868–1945

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Abstract

This paper explores the Library of the Royal Empire Society from its foundation in 1868 to the mid-twentieth century. It begins by considering the production of imaginative geographies of the British Empire not only by the materials in the collection but also by practices and technologies of assembling, classifying, cataloguing and display which went on in the Library. The architecture, spaces and experience of being in the Library are considered as integral to these imaginative geographies and the role performed by the collection. The second part of the paper considers the ways in which the Library was imagined as a centre of calculation for imperial, economic and geopolitical concerns and some theoretical and methodological issues involved in understanding how and by whom the Library was used. The Royal Empire Society Library offers an insight into the interplay between imperialism and wider concerns about knowledge, vision, order and control, as well as highlighting the importance of recognising the specificity of different types of knowledge space.

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We made our way into the sub-basement, a vast cellar of early colonial history ... a distant banging interrupted my researches. It was strange how deep in these caverns of imperial archives, noises in the building mingled weirdly with pictures from the past. The boom of the first floor dining-room gong seemed to echo the war drums of the Papuan headhunters. The creaks and rumbles of the lift shaft just above my head reached a crescendo as I came to the story of the ambush by warriors of Captain Shields, RA in the Bazuto jungle. It was also

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curious that the sound of hymn-singing from the Methodist Assembly in the adjoining building drifted in just as I reached a vivid description of the conversion by the missionaries of the crocodile-worshippers of Lake Nyesa.¹

In his novel *Palm Court*, Robert Overton describes the experience of the main character, a colonial judge, in the Royal Empire Society Library. Robert Overton is the pen name of Ronnie Knox-Mawer, who was himself a colonial judge and user of this Library. The extract above illustrates one of the central themes of this paper, namely the ways that the architecture and atmosphere of libraries and archives shape the knowledge held in these spaces. Recent work across the social sciences has signalled a ‘move from archive-as-source to archive-as-subject’² and this shift has raised questions about the practices by which materials are collected, ordered and displayed within sites of knowledge creation and preservation. Postcolonial engagements with the form of such sites have focused on the insights they can provide into ‘the colonial order of things’.³ Studies concerning the history of science have illustrated the importance of situating knowledge not only in intellectual context, but also in ‘social space and physical setting’.⁴ Through oral histories and archival work, this paper examines the imaginative geographies produced by the Royal Empire Society Library and the people, spaces and practices that contributed to these visions.⁵

The Royal Empire Society (RES) began life as the Colonial Society in 1868 as a learned society, where ‘scientific, literary and statistical investigations in connection with the British Empire’ could take place, and as a social club providing ‘a place of meeting for all gentlemen connected with the colonies and British India’.⁶ Members were drawn from those with an interest in Empire; mainly those in the Colonial Service, the armed services, the clergy and the academic community, based both in Britain and overseas. The Society’s name has changed several times, the organisation becoming the Royal Colonial Institute in 1870, the Royal Empire Society in 1928 and assuming its current name, the Royal Commonwealth Society, in 1958.⁷ Based in Northumberland Avenue in Central London from 1885, the Library and the building also evolved through the years. The headquarters were completely rebuilt to a design by architect Herbert Baker in 1936 to include a much larger space for the Library.⁸ In the 1990s the building was redeveloped again, this time

¹ R. Overton, *Palm Court*, London, 1979, 111–114.

² A. Stoler, Colonial archives and the arts of governance, *Archival Science* 2 (2002) 87–109, 94. See also the special issues on Archives, *History of the Human Sciences* 11 (4) (1998) and 12 (2) (1999); C. Withers, Constructing ‘the geographical archive,’ *Area* 34 (2002) 303–331.

³ Stoler, Colonial archives and the arts of governance, 87.

⁴ D. Livingstone, The spaces of knowledge: contributions towards a historical geography of science, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 13 (1995) 5–34, 28.

⁵ Oral history interviews were carried out with Library users, members of the Library Committee, Librarians of the Society and RES employees. Although these interviews formed a larger part of my original research (which spanned 1868–1990) and do not figure substantially in this article, their memories and observations have informed parts of this paper.

⁶ Objects of the Society, *Proceedings of the Royal Colonial Institute* 1 (1870) 20.

⁷ In this paper the shortened form, RES, is used generically to describe the Society from 1868 to 1958.

⁸ Herbert Baker was involved in many of the key imperial buildings in the early years of the twentieth century in South Africa, New Delhi (with Lutyens) and in London where he designed India House and South Africa House. For his work on the Bank of England, see I. Black, Imperial visions: rebuilding the Bank of England 1919–1939, in: F. Driver and D. Gilbert (Eds), *Imperial Cities: Landscape, Display and Identity*, Manchester, 1999, 96–113.

with no space for the Library Collection and with a large portion of the original building sold off to pay the Society's debts. In 1993 the Collection moved to its current home at Cambridge University Library.⁹ Apart from MacKenzie's brief account of the Collection's development and holdings, and Reese's institutional history of the Society, the Library itself has not been the subject of research.¹⁰

In this study the Library collection is understood as creating imaginative geographies of Empire which are actively produced through the everyday practices of the Library staff and users. Registering recent debates about sources and methods in geography, Driver has stated that 'we do not have to choose between representation and practice or performance' and his work on sketch making and exploration has illustrated how the production of representations is itself performative.¹¹ If geographical knowledge is seen as 'constituted through a range of embodied practices – travelling, seeing, collecting, recording, mapping and narrating'¹² then we must extend this to the practices which take place in the Library – classifying, cataloguing, browsing, and reading – and examine these practices alongside the material content of the Library. In this paper the work inside the Library is considered as an important and often neglected part of the wider networks of colonial administrators, collectors, travel diaries, maps and cameras which moved in and out of the Library and produced 'knowledge' about the world.

The paper also explores the extent to which the Library performed as a centre of calculation.¹³ Latour discusses the creation of new technologies which allow knowledge, people and things to become mobile, stable and combinable, enabling 'the mobilisation of worlds', so they can be brought to a central point.¹⁴ This paper contends that the RES Library aimed to impart a 'principle of credibility'¹⁵ allowing those who worked there to become 'familiar with *more places*'¹⁶ and that this vision for the collection dominated the practices of the librarians, the structures they put in place and the way that space of the Library was designed and ordered. However, an approach that draws on the idea of centres of calculation risks overemphasising the cohesive, centralised and unified nature of imperial archives such as the RES Library. Others have provided alternative accounts of colonial power that foreground the fragmentary, incoherent and temporary nature of

⁹ For an eloquent and informed account of the recent upheavals of the RCS Library, see T. Barringer, The rise, fall and rise again of the RCS library, *African Research and Development* 64 (1994) 1–10.

¹⁰ J. MacKenzie, The Royal Commonwealth Society library, in: P. Fox (Ed.), *Cambridge University Library: The Great Collections*, Cambridge, 1998, 166–184; T. Reese, *The History of the Royal Commonwealth Society 1968–1968*, London, 1968, 173.

¹¹ F. Driver, Imagining the tropics: views and visions of the tropical world, *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 25 (2004) 12; F. Driver, *Geography Militant: Cultures of Exploration and Empire*, Oxford, 2001.

¹² Driver, *Geography Militant*, 12.

¹³ B. Latour, *Science in Action, or How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society*, Milton Keynes, 1987, 215–257. Grove and Heffernan have also written about centres of calculation in geography: R. Grove: Imperialism and the discourse of desiccation: the institutionalisation of global environmental concerns and the role of the Royal Geographical Society, 1860–1880, in: M. Bell, R. Butlin and M. Heffernan (Eds), *Geography and Imperialism 1820–1940*, Manchester, 1995, 36–52; M. Heffernan: Mars and Minerva: centres of geographical calculation in an age of total war, *Erkundung* 54 (2000) 320–333.

¹⁴ Latour, *Science in Action*, 223.

¹⁵ T. Osborne, The ordinariness of the archive, *History of the Human Sciences* 12 (1999) 51–64.

¹⁶ Latour, *Science in Action*, 224.

networks of imperial knowledge such as those institutionalised in the Royal Empire Society.¹⁷ In this view, the Empire is envisaged as ‘bundles of networks, often overlapping and intersecting, but never unitary, never stable, always contested’.¹⁸ Whilst not ignoring the fragmentary and ambivalent nature of the RES Library and the knowledge and practices it entailed, in this paper the term ‘centre of calculation’ is used to highlight the importance of visions of the Library as a space of and for imperial knowledge in the heart of Empire.

Over the last fifteen years, archives have become the site for much writing about the relations between knowledge and colonial power with many attempting to ‘read against the grain’ to rescue alternative memories and other lives from the colonial archive.¹⁹ Some have gone further, using these insights to consider ‘the importance and possibilities of creating a postcolonial archive’ and documenting projects which draw upon different types of memory to create a more inclusive and democratic record of the past.²⁰ The aims of this paper are more modest. Stoler asks ‘How can students of colonialisms so quickly and confidently turn to readings “against the grain” without moving along their grain first? How can we brush against them without a prior sense of their texture and granularity?’²¹ This article attempts to make sense, in these terms, of the RES Library. Postcolonial engagements with archives also assert that we must think more carefully about our own use of these collections, positioning ourselves within the archive and approaching them as not only material collections but systems of power in themselves.²² James Duncan, concerned with the potential complicity of historical geographers with ‘colonialist practices of power/knowledge’, has thus discussed his own uneasy experience of working in the RES Collection.²³

The following section explores the materials held in the Library and the practices by which they were ordered, producing imaginative geographies of Empire. The paper then examines the ways in which the Library worked for its employees, users and the Society itself between 1868 and 1945 before concluding with a consideration of the ways in which the Library has been experienced in more recent years.

Producing imaginative geographies of Empire

Collecting colonies

The RES collection covers a huge portion of the globe. The number of countries represented reflects the size of the British Empire at its height. In 1894 the Librarian, J. R. Boosé commented that material on ‘every part of the British Empire is represented, from the great Dominion of

¹⁷ The ‘imperial networks’ approach has been advocated in geography by David Lambert and Alan Lester: see, for example, D. Lambert and A. Lester, *Geographies of colonial philanthropy*, *Progress in Human Geography* 28 (2004) 320–341.

¹⁸ Lambert and Lester, *Geographies of colonial philanthropy*, 326–327.

¹⁹ Stoler, *Colonial archives and the arts of governance* (note 2), 99.

²⁰ C. McEwan, *Building a postcolonial archive? Gender, collective memory and citizenship in post-apartheid South Africa*, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 29 (2003) 741–758, 741.

²¹ Stoler, *Colonial archives and the arts of governance* (note 2), 100.

²² Stoler, *Colonial archives and the arts of governance* (note 2); J. Duncan, *Complicity and resistance in the colonial archive: some issues of method and theory in historical geography*, *Historical Geography* 27 (1999) 119–128.

²³ Duncan, *Complicity and resistance in the colonial archive*, 119–120.

Canada to the smallest island dependency ruled by the British Government'.²⁴ The rules of accession were clear; material was acquired when a territory was acquired through the expansion of Empire. 'I once caused consternation by asking for a copy of the Bible' recounted RES member and imperial historian Wyatt Tilby, 'it was discovered with difficulty, and was not, I imagine, admitted to the official catalogue until the British occupation of Jerusalem gave it a legitimate place'.²⁵ The Library evolved alongside the Empire, mirroring its expansion. To quote Wyatt Tilby again: 'the fact that the British Empire does not stand still ultimately involves extensions ... the truth is that we have acquired a new Empire in the East, and shall have to make provision for it, library provision'.²⁶ Legitimate place was also granted to 'countries where British influence was significant' but which were not formal colonies, such as in the Middle East.²⁷ Thus the RES Library embraced not only colonial lands but also the 'unofficial empire', those countries which came into the British imperial vision. The diverse territories that formed the Empire were united by virtue of their collection together in the RES Library. In the Librarian's words, the Library represented 'that which it has for so many years advocated, and is so forcibly expressed in the two words of its motto, "United Empire"'.²⁸

The collection and its space were themselves imagined in geographical terms, as a world in which the reader could travel. Contemporary descriptions drew on distinctly geographical language; 'A journey around the bookshelves reveals the greatness of the British Empire' wrote Ellis Barker, regular Library user.²⁹ Others used prose similar to that employed in the journals of explorers in order to describe the 'provinces' of the RES Library where there were 'bright attractive shelves where books on birds and butterflies most do congregate, and a dry and forbidding desert of a place where parliamentary proceedings and statutes, law reports and other deadly things are immured'.³⁰

Displaying imperial characteristics

The material manifestation of the collection also emphasised the size and influence of the British Empire. To enter the Library was to see books, maps and other materials laid out, representing vast territories in every continent, explored, developed and exploited by Britain. The collection of resources provided 'tangible evidence of the greatness, diversity, and extent of the British Empire'.³¹ Wyatt Tilby envisaged the RES Library as not only great but more permanent than some of the greatest monuments of the imperial heart: 'The library, like the Empire, is building for a hundred years ahead. I like to think of a time when, a century hence, some young student

²⁴ J.R. Boosé, The library of the Royal Colonial Institute, *The Library* 6 (1894) 191–206, 195.

²⁵ A. Wyatt Tilby, Thoughts on the library, *United Empire Special Supplement New Series* 16 (1925) 386–387, 386.

²⁶ Wyatt Tilby, Thoughts on the library, 386–387.

²⁷ *Library Publicity Leaflet* (1975) RCS Collection, Cambridge University Library [hereafter RCS]: Case 43 WBB2.

²⁸ Boosé, The library of the Royal Colonial Institute, 206.

²⁹ Ellis Barker, c.1920 quoted in J.R. Boosé, *Memory Serving: Being Reminiscences of Fifty Years of the Royal Colonial Institute*, London, 1928, 21.

³⁰ Wyatt Tilby, Thoughts on the library, 386.

³¹ P. Evans Lewin, Memorandum on the value of an imperial library, in: *Minutes of the Library Committee* (1927) RCS: Case 44 WBB2.

from New Zealand, after paying appropriate reverence to the ruins of St Paul's, shall walk into the Royal Colonial Institute and, faced with a collection of half a million books, realise the true vastness and extent of the work that has been done by the British overseas'.³² The Library's resources also emphasised a vision of the Empire as a civilising 'force for good' as RES member Ellis Barker wrote to the Librarian in 1920. 'The sight of hundreds upon hundreds of large and well got-up dailies and weeklies from every part of the British Empire, displayed in your Institute, enables one best to focus at a glance the Empire's true significance as an instrument of civilisation'.³³ Here the newspapers and magazines lined up in the RES Library acted as signifiers of the spread of western articulate society.

The collection also told a particular story about the Empire's heritage. Stoler contends that 'colonial archives were both sites of the imaginary *and* institutions that fashioned histories' and the RES Library fashioned a heroic imperial history based on discovery and exploration.³⁴ The first printed catalogue, produced in 1886, was arranged by country and region. However, it contained specific, separate headings for 'Voyages to the Pacific Ocean, Eastern Archipelago etc during the 16th–19th centuries', 'Australian discoveries and expeditions' and 'African travel and exploration'.³⁵ Thus imperial heroics warranted their own category, and were prominently displayed in the catalogue.

According to Pauline Fothergill, who worked in the Library from 1962 to 1970, many of the books published and acquired towards the end of the nineteenth century centred around 'the ubiquitous traveller in Africa'.³⁶ In 1886, the journals of the geographical societies, which sponsored and reported many of the trips of exploration, made up a large proportion of the journal holdings, outnumbered only by those concerned with economic subjects.³⁷ By 1913 the Library was receiving the journals of the geographical societies of London, Liverpool, Paris, Lisbon, Vienna, Madrid, Antwerp and many more.³⁸ The descriptive accounts these journals included reflected the continued popularity of nineteenth-century narratives of exploration. Driver has examined the way in which these stories draw on ideas of heroism and masculinity;³⁹ in the RES Library these accounts produced visions of the brave and noble British men whose labours had created and expanded the Empire. The connection between certain British characteristics and the Empire, made through the collection, is illustrated by the Librarian J. R. Boosé's description of the Antarctic section which held 'the most important publications relating to exploration in the Antarctic Regions, where discoveries have been made which have added to examples previously set by British seamen of patient and intrepid perseverance amidst the most discouraging difficulties'.⁴⁰

³² Wyatt Tilby, Thoughts on the library (note 25), 387.

³³ Ellis Barker, c.1920 quoted in Boosé, *Memory Serving* (note 29), 21.

³⁴ Stoler, Colonial archives and the arts of governance (note 2), 97.

³⁵ *Catalogue of the Library of the Royal Colonial Institute*, London, 1886.

³⁶ Interview with Pauline Fothergill, 20th June 2005, private address.

³⁷ *Catalogue of the Library* (note 35).

³⁸ P. Evans Lewin, IX. – The library, *Royal Colonial Institute Yearbook* (1913) 30–32, 31.

³⁹ Driver, *Geography Militant* (note 11).

⁴⁰ Boosé, The library of the Royal Colonial Institute (note 24), 204.

Classification: producing imperial order

The RES Library produced a particular story not only about the history and characteristics of the British Empire, but also about the characteristics of the people who lived in it; ‘other’ peoples were made different through the classification imposed. The classification scheme used was introduced in 1910 by Percy Evans Lewin, the new Librarian. Evans Lewin was an experienced colonial Librarian who had worked in South Africa and was in the employ of the South Australian Public Library when he received the offer of the RES job. Already a Fellow of the Society, he accepted the post, and used the long journey back to England to devise an appropriate classification for his new Library.⁴¹ Instead of using a generic system such as the Dewey Classification, the classification in the RES Library ‘was peculiar to [its] special needs’, designed by a Librarian experienced in the management and ordering of collections within the Empire.⁴²

The classification divided materials by geography – with a numerical code denoting different countries – and then by subject – with each category allocated a specific letter. Category E, ‘Ethnology and Anthropology’, which included the subheadings E:2 ‘Crania’ and E:3 ‘Evolution from former types’ and Category F, ‘Manners and customs – more especially of native races’, in which F:1:5 refers to ‘*Rudiments* of art’, illustrate the way in which ‘native’ people were imagined by the Librarian who compiled this order.⁴³ The use of the descriptor ‘rudiments’ is loaded with assumptions about culture and development which code western as normal and advanced in comparison to the ‘other’. The category ‘Manners and Customs’ also illustrates the uneasy mixing of ‘native’ and ‘western’ which colonialism brought about. ‘Sports, games and amusements’ (F:9) consisted of ‘War Dances’ (F:9:3) alongside ‘Football’ (F:9:6) and ‘Cricket’ (F:9:7). Category G, ‘Folklore and Religious Beliefs’ containing such categories as G:2 ‘Totem’ and G:5 ‘Juju and Fetishism’, drew a deep classificatory divide between these ‘exotic’ indigenous religious practices and those of Christianity (and the other major religions) which had a whole category to themselves: P ‘Religion, Missions, Church’.

Category M, ‘Political Questions’, provides further evidence of the way other places and people, and their capacities, were imagined. Though the classification was not put in place until 1910, categories such as ‘Duties of white men towards black’ (M:6:2) illustrate a continued belief in the superiority of the British over ‘others’, and the civilising mission of Empire, which remained deep into the twentieth century. This moral geography is underlined in the even more overt value judgements in the subheadings ‘Social Evil’ (M:9:5:4) and ‘Civilisation of Africa’ (M:6:4). We are reminded that the categories used by the RES drew upon and defined not only a vision of Empire but also of Britain and the characteristics of the British. The creation of a separate heading, ‘Administration of tropical dependencies and general questions of tropical colonisation’ (M:5:5), reveals the manner in which ‘tropical’ areas were considered in different terms to other colonies, and in need of specific solutions. Much has been written about ‘tropicality’ and the way that global space was ‘parcelled into a series of bi-polar antipathies:

⁴¹ D. Simpson, A century of the library, *Royal Commonwealth Society Library Notes New Series* 138 (1968).

⁴² P. Evans Lewin, The library, *United Empire New Series* 27 (1936) 695–697, 696.

⁴³ P. Evans Lewin, *Suggested List of Subheadings for use in the Library of the RCI*, 1910.

the salubrious and insalubrious; the superior and the subordinate; the moderate and the intemperate'.⁴⁴ In this context, the separate classification in the RES Library suggests not only an opposition between 'advanced' Britain and the 'backward' colonies, but also a division between 'tropical colonies' and other territorial possessions. Here again imaginative geographies produced by the classification 'promoted a moral obligation to intervene and a political mandate to control'.⁴⁵ The categories used to describe other peoples and their practices provide a clear indication of the way that 'logical categorical order easily becomes social and moral hierarchy'.⁴⁶ The categories imposed by the Librarian and crystallised in the classification system were hard to escape from, both for the reader and for the person, space or object that was so placed.

The Empire in a box

Classification is not the only process involved in creating and curating a collection. Another, 'on which [the Library] stands or falls, and without which it would be useless, is cataloguing'.⁴⁷ Cataloguing, like classification, is a technical activity in which seemingly mechanical decisions actually reflect and reproduce a certain vision of the world. It is 'skilled work, involving, apart from routine labour, a full knowledge of the principles of cataloguing as applied to this specific library, as well as a wide knowledge of affairs'.⁴⁸ The librarians would pick out relevant articles from within journals and these were then outlined on a card and added to the subject and author catalogues by other staff members. In this way the librarians were 'the arbiters' of what could be accessed, using their own criteria to decide what subjects and places should be noted.⁴⁹ Decisions about what to collect and how to catalogue and order material were taken by staff who had rarely visited the places that the material described.⁵⁰ This underlines the confidence that those in the centre had in their ability to order knowledge about other places and is resonant of the imperial project as a whole.

The introduction of a card catalogue (Fig. 1, overleaf) in 1910 alongside the new classification enabled the materials in the RES collection to be more easily accessed.⁵¹ According to Latour, new technologies, such as the RES classification scheme and card catalogue, can be seen in the same light as other technological advances in cartography or navigation which work to 'enhance

⁴⁴ D. Livingstone, Race, space and moral climatology: notes toward a genealogy, *Journal of Historical Geography* 28 (2002) 159–180, 173.

⁴⁵ M. Bell, 'The pestilence that walketh in darkness': imperial health, gender and images of South Africa c. 1880–1910, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 18 (1993) 327–341, 328.

⁴⁶ R. Harvey Brown and B. Davis-Brown, The making of memory: The politics of archives, libraries and museums in the construction of national consciousness, *History of the Human Sciences* 11 (1998) 17–32, 25.

⁴⁷ J. Packman, Librarian's report for 1946, *The Minutes of the Library Committee* (1946) RCS: WBB2: Case 44.

⁴⁸ P. Evans Lewin, Librarian's report for 1940, *The Minutes of the Library Committee* (1940) RCS: WBB2: Case 44.

⁴⁹ Interview with Pauline Fothergill (note 36).

⁵⁰ D. Simpson, From the Librarian's desk: a personal view of forty years of commonwealth studies, *RCS Occasional History Series* (8 December 1987).

⁵¹ The photograph shows the new catalogue drawers in 1936 which were put in as part of the Library's redevelopment. These drawers contained the same cards and the same order that had been used since the card catalogue system's introduction in 1910.



Fig. 1. The card catalogue of the RES Library, 1936. Source: RCS Collection, Cambridge University Library, RCS V(a)15 by permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

either the mobility, or the stability, or the combinability of the elements'.⁵² The classification and catalogue stabilised the information in the Library, preventing it from disappearing from memory at the back of a bookshelf in the basement. The card catalogue and classification scheme can be seen as crucial parts of the Library network which allowed 'thin slices of space and time to become objects' that could be 'held, collected [and] displayed'.⁵³ Not only did the individual cards lead to materials which produced imaginative geographies; the order in which catalogue cards were placed and details written on them reflected and inscribed these imperial visions.

The card catalogue was divided into two main sections. The first catalogued materials by author, the second geographically, with each drawer or set of drawers referring to a particular territory, paper traces of other places recreating 'the world in a box'.⁵⁴ In other ways too the material was organised geographically. For example, Volume 4 of the RES subject catalogue, 'Mediterranean Colonies, the Middle East, India, Burma and the Far East' was described in the preface as covering 'what may be termed the sea-road to the East' reflecting a certain contemporary geographical sensibility.⁵⁵ Here, a way of thinking about the world and its connections based on sea routes which linked the Empire, and particularly India, economically and politically to the 'Mother Country', was played out in the organisation of the printed catalogue.

⁵² Latour, *Science in Action* (note 13), 228.

⁵³ S. Waterman, *Collecting the nineteenth century*, *Representations* 90 (2005) 98–108, 115.

⁵⁴ Waterman, *Collecting the nineteenth century*, 104.

⁵⁵ P. Evans Lewin, *Subject Catalogue of the Library of the Royal Empire Society: Volume 4: Mediterranean Colonies, the Middle East, India, Burma and the Far East*, London, 1937.

A micro-geography of Empire

Material was allocated a code according to its geography first and its subject second, and displayed on the shelves by country rather than topic. In a similar way to the Imperial Institute, ‘at which the five continents of the world were mapped upon the primary compass directions of the site’, the British Museum, and many of the contemporary Empire exhibitions, geography provided the organising principle at the RES Library.⁵⁶ ‘The inner library at the far end was British Empire in general, which was the 1’s, right at the far end by the office was Asia which was the 2’s ... 3 was South East Asia and Sri Lanka, then you had the double doors where you came in and the other side of the double doors you had Africa which was 4, followed by South Africa, 5’ remembers Pauline Fothergill. ‘Then you’d go across to the other side and you’d have North America and Canada, which extended all the way over to the main desk opposite the door. Then you’d have 7 there as well, then you’d have the other side which was your 8’s, Australasia, finishing up with New Zealand, then a little bit of the South Pacific which was 9, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, a few Pacific Islands.’⁵⁷ The layout of the Library by region reflected and recreated a hierarchy within the Empire. Places which were well represented by books and other material resulted in larger areas of shelving. This distorted micro-geography projected some Dominions and Colonies large and rendered others less visible.

The physical layout also acted to unite the territories under a certain theoretical idea. The Inner Library provided a central point from which the rest of the collection should be understood, as Prue Scarlett, who worked at the RES from 1962 to 1997 explained: ‘If you imagine a core and then all the bits coming off it, which were the individual countries, but the individual countries were linked back to and understood through the core’.⁵⁸ The Inner Library held general material describing the theoretical base of Empire, the linking thread which connected the diverse territories in the main body of the Library. Thus the collection was organised in the same way that Empire itself was imagined; it contained a central core where ideas were produced and which acted to unite the diverse peripheral sections.

In the main section of the Library the materials were laid out on open shelving united by their geography – the place or places which they described and explained – with subjects as diverse as poetry, current affairs, agriculture and autobiography shelved in close proximity (although within their classificatory categories). As Richards has commented, ‘the project of amassing knowledge ... usually presupposed ... an invisible interconnectedness among forms of knowledge’ and thus no difficulty was seen in collecting scientific works beside guidebooks and agricultural law.⁵⁹ The aim was to collect everything there was to know about every territory of Empire,

⁵⁶ M. Crinson, *Imperial story-lands: architecture and display at the Imperial and Commonwealth Institutes*, *Art History* 22 (1999) 99–123, 109; A. Coombes, *Reinventing Africa: Museums Material Culture and Popular Imagination*, London, 1994; T. Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, Cambridge, 1988.

⁵⁷ This description is of the Library as it was in the 1960s. The layout of the Library did not alter dramatically between 1936 – when a new building including a new library was opened – and 1991. It has not been possible to ascertain the layout of the Library before 1936.

⁵⁸ Interview with Prue Scarlett, 29th June, 2005, Royal Commonwealth Society.

⁵⁹ T. Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire*, London, 1993, 111.

‘information of a reliable character ... of the most comprehensive kind’.⁶⁰ Based on ‘a system building impulse’ which allowed the imagining of knowledge about ‘the Empire as a concordant whole’⁶¹, this way of approaching and classifying knowledge reflected and reproduced the academic approaches to geography prevalent at the end of the nineteenth century and continuing beyond the 1930s. Synthesised regional studies drew upon a ‘sense of geographical knowledge as broad-ranging, encompassing economic, political and physical elements simultaneously’.⁶² In this conception, comprehensive and all encompassing geographical study was seen as ‘the essential foundation of a colonial domain’.⁶³ By this definition the synthesised knowledge in the RES Library was the essence of the discipline of geography. Coombes argues that in large anthropological and ethnographic museum collections, the choice of geographical over typological organisation reflected the ‘natural’ order as culture was understood to vary geographically.⁶⁴ In the RES Library this geographical arrangement represented not only a theoretical choice based on disciplinary systems of knowledge and assumptions about spatial difference, but also a practical choice concerned with providing Library users with the most utilisable collection. Library users – colonial administrators, researchers, businessmen – wanted to know about particular places in the Empire.

Imagining the library as a centre of calculation

The Royal Charter, received in 1882, described the objects of the Society as ‘to promote the increase and diffusion of knowledge respecting as well [*sic*] our Colonies, Dependencies and Possessions, as Our Indian Empire and the preservation of a permanent union between Mother Country and the various parts of the British Empire’.⁶⁵ Thus the aim of the Society was continued Empire unity, and the Library was to play a key role in informing members and the wider public about countries in the British Empire and the opportunities that they presented. The Society conceived the role of its Library as an information centre of practical use in the running of the Empire. This same conception affected decisions about the architecture and design of the Library space when the RES building was redeveloped in 1936. The new Library was ‘designed for utility rather than as a museum, with minimum concession to show’.⁶⁶ Steel shelves were preferred to the usual wooden ones, and unlike the rest of the building, which was designed for the comfort of members, in the Library there were to be no easy chairs as these were ‘conducive to somnolence’.⁶⁷ This modern design complemented the image – propagated since its foundation – of the Library as an up-to-date information hub.

⁶⁰ J.R. Boosé, *First Supplementary Catalogue of the Library of the Royal Colonial Institute*, London, 1901, iii.

⁶¹ Richards, *The Imperial Archive* (note 59), 7.

⁶² D. Atkinson, Geopolitics, cartography and geographical knowledge: envisioning Africa from Fascist Italy, in: M. Bell, R. Butlin and M. Heffernan (Eds), *Geography and Imperialism* (note 13), 265–292, 271.

⁶³ Atkinson, Geopolitics, cartography and geographical knowledge, 271.

⁶⁴ Coombes, *Reinventing Africa* (note 56).

⁶⁵ Objects of the Society, *Proceedings of the Royal Colonial Institute* 14 (1883) 2.

⁶⁶ Evans Lewin, The library (note 42), 696.

⁶⁷ *Minutes of the Library Committee* (February 1935) RCS: WBB2: Case 44.

Informing Empire business

The introduction, in 1910, of further agricultural and economic subjects in the Library allowed the RES to boast that the collection provided accurate and current information for Empire businesses. The subject section of the card catalogue was made up almost exclusively of country headings and the decision to catalogue agricultural products separately in this section was therefore significant. Nine drawers were taken up, organised alphabetically and divided into animal, vegetable and mineral. The section on agriculture occupied more space in the catalogue than Kenya, Egypt and Southern Rhodesia put together. Furthermore, in 1931, the Library received far more journals on economic and agricultural subjects than on any other area.⁶⁸ The depth of these resources provided evidence that ‘everything that is richest and best can be generated from the soil of the Empire’.⁶⁹

This concentration on economic and agricultural subjects also reflected the perceived requirements of users of the RES Library. ‘Trade journals, both of a technical and commercial character were received, and by their aid the business man [was] able to follow the different commercial movements in the Empire’.⁷⁰ The Librarian, recalling his decision to increase the size of these sections, noted ‘the value of the [economic] collection is demonstrated by the numerous enquiries regarding tropical and other products’.⁷¹ In 1931, for example, the Library received four different journals on the subject of rubber: the *Bulletin of the Rubber Growers’ Association*, *Indian Rubber Journal*, the *Malayan Tin and Rubber Journal* and *Rubber Age*. Evans Lewin believed that one of the key values of the collection was ‘as an aid to the development of the industries of the Mother Country and Overseas territories’⁷² and the Library’s resources allowed RES members, many of whom were involved in colonial trade, to keep abreast of economic events. The holdings in the RES Library helped to support a vision of Empire as economically viable during the interwar years when its popular support was shrinking, compounded by economic problems at home. Organisations such as the Empire Marketing Board promoted colonial trade and offered the Empire as a solution to rather than root of the depression. ‘Britain, it was claimed, linked to her Empire ... could be made less vulnerable to foreign competition’ and the resources of the RES Library provided the intelligence for imperial trade and the evidence of its worth.⁷³

The Library also ‘supplie[d] a mass of information regarding current events throughout the whole of the British Empire’ through its holdings of newspapers from around the world.⁷⁴ These

⁶⁸ P. Evans Lewin, *A List of Newspapers, Magazines, and other Periodicals taken at the Royal Empire Society*, London, 1931.

⁶⁹ Crawford, quoted in S. Constantine, *Buy and Build: the Advertising Posters of the Empire Marketing Board*, London, 1986, 4.

⁷⁰ P. Evans Lewin, X. – The newspaper room, *Royal Colonial Institute Yearbook* (1913) 32–33.

⁷¹ P. Evans Lewin, The library, in: *Annual Report of the Royal Colonial Institute for the Year ending December 31st 1921* RCS: WBB2: Case 43.

⁷² Evans Lewin, Memorandum on the value of an imperial library (note 31).

⁷³ S. Constantine, Bringing the empire alive: the Empire Marketing Board and imperial propaganda, in: J. MacKenzie (Ed.), *Imperialism and Popular Culture*, Manchester, 1986, 192–231, 195. The resources of the Library were also used by the RCS Trade and Industry Committee in order to answer queries from traders and manufacturers: see Reese, *The History of the Royal Commonwealth Society* (note 10).

⁷⁴ Boosé, The library of the Royal Colonial Institute (note 24), 205.



Fig. 2. The Newspaper Room of the RES Library, 1936. Source: RCS Collection, Cambridge University Library, RCS V(a)17 by permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

were kept in a newspaper room adjacent to the Library from 1936 (see Fig. 2).⁷⁵ This image shows the scale of the newspaper holdings; in this room the majority of British newspapers were held and alongside them were publications from every territory of Empire (and some outside), including titles as diverse as the *Hawkes Bay Herald* (New Zealand), the *Diamond Fields Advertiser* (Union of South Africa) the *Barbados Agricultural Reporter* and the *Tribune Congolaise*.⁷⁶ Newspapers numbered over 300 in 1894 and reached a peak of over 700 in 1913.⁷⁷ ‘Fellows from overseas and resident fellows who have returned to the Mother Country find the newspaper room one of the most useful features of the Institute, for by means of the current papers they are enabled to keep in close touch with events in the portion of Empire with which they are connected’ commented the Librarian in 1913. By ‘reflecting the political and social life of their respective spheres’⁷⁸ these newspapers allowed readers to know not only current trends in economic and trade issues but in the political and social life of the places where they had interests.

Training Empire builders

Librarian Evans Lewin’s 1927 memorandum ‘on the value of an imperial library’ illustrates clearly the link he envisaged between imperial theory and the successful administration of Empire;

⁷⁵ This newspaper room was severely damaged on 16th April 1941 when the building was hit by a bomb. As a result of post-war reconstruction the Newspaper room became the Inner Library described earlier in the paper.

⁷⁶ Evans Lewin, *A List of Newspapers, Magazines, and other Periodicals* (note 68).

⁷⁷ Boosé, *The library of the Royal Colonial Institute* (note 24); Evans Lewin, X. — The newspaper room (note 70), 32.

⁷⁸ Evans Lewin, X. — The newspaper room (note 70).

he saw the Collection as especially valuable for those ‘studying questions upon which their future career as imperial citizens will be based’.⁷⁹ The RES Library was seen as a way of introducing the Colonies to British citizens, ‘the circulation of information through its books has undoubtedly ... [served] to educate the British public throughout the whole of the United Kingdom’ in order that they understood their duty in service of the Empire.⁸⁰ Evans Lewin added ‘it is merely a platitude to say that the student of today may be the statesman or administrator of tomorrow...it is precisely here that the library of the Royal Empire Society performs a notable service by placing within his reach the essential materials of research’.⁸¹

The classification scheme contained fifty-six subheadings dealing directly with the various theories of imperialism and possibilities for administration of Empire. The section ‘Comparative Colonisation’ which was developed in the years preceding and directly following World War I and which took as its subject ‘foreign colonisation’ (i.e. that of other European powers) provided additional useful information for statesmen. It allowed a comparison between ‘methods of administration ... and the progress of exploration’ in the British Empire and the empires of other colonial powers.⁸² This is illustrated by books in the collection such as Dr Mumford’s *Africans Learn to be French* described in the Librarian’s book review as ‘of importance as illustrating the differences between French and British methods in Africa ... a subject of vast importance to the future of Africa’. The future of Africa was not only considered in the materials of the collection; the Library was also utilised by key policy makers such as Lord Hailey, who drew on rare African publications in order to complete his influential *An African Survey* (1938) on ‘African policy and development’.⁸³

In addition to the materials themselves, the RES published subject bibliographies which acted to guide people through the articles held in the Library, tracing particular paths and manipulating the collection to answer pertinent questions of the day and produce certain visions of the scope of the Library. The publication of *A select bibliography illustrating relations between Europeans and Coloured Races*, *A reading list on Native Administration in Africa 1898–1938*, *A reading list on Native Labour in the British Colonial Empire, Southern Rhodesia and the Union of South Africa* and *A bibliography of Italian Colonisation of Africa, with a section on Abyssinia* selected certain information from the mass of knowledge in the Library and presented it as vital reading.⁸⁴ These bibliographies both responded to and reproduced the centrality of Africa in the European colonial imagination during the interwar period.

⁷⁹ Evans Lewin, Memorandum on the value of an imperial library (note 31).

⁸⁰ Boosé, The library of the Royal Colonial Institute (note 24), 195.

⁸¹ P. Evans Lewin, Notes, *Library Notes* (1938) 1, courtesy of Rachel Rowe, RCS Librarian, Cambridge University Library.

⁸² D. Simpson, Colonisation by European powers: resources of the Royal Empire Society, *Royal Empire Society Library Notes with a List of Accessions New Series* 16 (1958) 1.

⁸³ P. Evans Lewin, Book notes, *Library Notes* (1938) 5.

⁸⁴ P. Evans Lewin, *A Select Bibliography Illustrating Relations between Europeans and Coloured Races*, London, 1926; P. Evans Lewin, *A Reading List on Native Administration in Africa 1898–1938*, London, 1938; P. Evans Lewin, *A Reading List on Native Labour in the British Colonial Empire, Southern Rhodesia and the Union of South Africa*, London, 1938; D. Varley, *A Bibliography of Italian Colonisation of Africa, with a Section on Abyssinia*, London, 1936.

Italian interest in Abyssinia was also reflected in the Library's holdings during the 1930s. The Librarian's 'Book Notes' for 1938 discussed *The Territory of Lake Tsana: economic possibilities in North West Ethiopia* and argued that this book, published under the auspices of the *Instituto Coloniale Fascista*, revealed the plans of the Italians in this area 'in which Great Britain has such vital interests'.⁸⁵

Though a lack of funds had caused the Comparative Colonisation section to suffer in the early thirties, 'a special effort to maintain it was made in the mid-1930s when German claims to colonies became pertinent'.⁸⁶ The Library prided itself on its 'excellent specimen[s] of German Colonial Propaganda ...[kept] for reference purposes ... to keep its members informed of [its] nature and aim'.⁸⁷ The collection also continued to receive the journals of many European Geographical Societies, which in the interwar period were involved with shaping the geopolitical visions of the European powers.⁸⁸ The Library thus not only supported the *British* imperial project practically and imaginatively, but also aimed to educate about rival territorial claims.

A geopolitical resource

The perceived importance of the Comparative Colonisation section during the two periods of world conflict in the twentieth century was based on a vision of the Library as an agency with an active geopolitical role.⁸⁹ The personnel of the RES Library, and the collection itself were active in producing intelligence and influencing policies in the two World Wars. Evans Lewin, as a result of knowledge gleaned through his work at the RES, was assigned to work in the Intelligence Department of the Admiralty (Geographical division) in 1917 and the Foreign Office where he 'prepared a report on German methods of colonisation which had an important role in deciding the disposition of the German colonies at the end of World War I'.⁹⁰ At the outbreak of World War II, the RES Library was one of the few to remain open in the Capital.⁹¹ During the early years of the conflict it was used by the Ministry of Information, the Dominions and Colonial Office, the Ministry of Economic Warfare, the War Office, the League of Nations Office and the Free French forces in Britain. Its resources were considered 'of great use in connection with questions concerned with the economic position of Germany vis-à-vis the British Empire'.⁹² Journalists too were significant users of the Library, deploying its resources to bring the story of the Empire at war to the British public.⁹³

⁸⁵ Evans Lewin, Book notes (note 83).

⁸⁶ Simpson, A century of the library (note 41), 5.

⁸⁷ Evans Lewin, Notes (note 81), 3.

⁸⁸ Evans Lewin, *A List of Newspapers, Magazines, and other Periodicals* (note 68); for the influence of these journals, see Atkinson, Geopolitics, cartography and geographical knowledge (note 62).

⁸⁹ M. Heffernan, Geography, cartography and military intelligence: the Royal Geographical Society and the First World War, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* NS 21 (1996) 504–533.

⁹⁰ D. Simpson, *Biography Catalogue of the Library of the Royal Commonwealth Society*, London, 1961, xi.

⁹¹ P. Evans Lewin, Librarian's report for the year ending 1939, *Minutes of the Library Committee* (1940) RCS: WBB2: Case 44.

⁹² P. Evans Lewin, Interim report on the library, October 11th, 1940, *Minutes of the Library Committee* (1940) RCS: WBB2: Case 44.

⁹³ Evans Lewin, Librarian's report for the year ending 1939 (note 91).

According to Richards, ‘the administrative core of the Empire was built around knowledge producing institutions like the British Museum, the Royal Geographical Society, the Imperial Survey and the Universities’.⁹⁴ The Librarians of the Royal Empire Society believed that their Library played a similar role. It collected information relevant to the politics and policies of Empire and set it together, where it could be considered by academics, politicians and those involved directly in the day to day running of Empire, those in the Colonial Service who made up a large proportion of the RES membership at the end of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century.

It is difficult to evaluate the extent to which this version of the RES Library’s role presents an accurate account of its importance as a centre of calculation. The accounts of the Library from this time come mainly from the Librarian’s own notes and contain stories constructed in a certain institutional context. Throughout its history, the Library was starved of funds; from the 1930s its space, materials and continued existence were threatened by crisis talks and cutbacks. Thus the Librarian’s account is in part an attempt to present the Library’s importance internally to the Institution. In addition these stories also helped the presentation of the Royal Empire Society as a learned institution; possession of a Library conferred status on the Society itself.

We must be wary of attributing an excessively imperial sensibility to those creating, ordering and labouring in the Library. Librarian Evans Lewin’s interest lay in providing information to a wider audience than that which the Society embraced. Comprehensive subject catalogues in book form published between 1930 and 1937 extended the reach of the Library, allowing ‘the value of the library [to] extend beyond those who could visit it’ and therefore the mobility of the information in the collection as it travelled outside of its London base.⁹⁵ These catalogues reflected a wider concern of the Librarian to involve the Library within wider networks of professional Librarians and collections. An advocate of inter-Library cooperation both within Britain and across the Empire, Evans Lewin and his staff attended bibliographic conferences across Europe and were involved in providing recommendations of resources for other Libraries across the Empire, the foremost of these being Nairobi public library.⁹⁶ There is no doubt that the Library became part of the dense official and unofficial networks of institutions involved in providing intelligence as part of the war effort and information about the Empire. However, alongside these geopolitical circuits it was also conceived as part of wider bibliographic knowledge networks which embraced wider concerns and users than those directly involved and interested in the geopolitical future of Britain and its Empire.

Consuming the Library

Recent arguments amongst historians over the impact of imperialism on British culture and society turn on to the need to engage with the *consumption* of imperial propaganda alongside

⁹⁴ Richards, *The Imperial Archive* (note 59), 3–4.

⁹⁵ D. Simpson, An internationally famous library, *Royal Commonwealth Society Centenary Souvenir*, 1968, 57.

⁹⁶ Librarians report for the year ending 1929, *The Minutes of the Library Committee 1886–1991*; List of books for Nairobi Public Library, *The Minutes of the Library Committee 1886–1991*, October 28th 1930.

its production.⁹⁷ Porter, for example, has argued that, especially before 1880, few people knew much about, or were interested in, the imperial project. Those using the RES Library were, however, much interested and involved in the business of empire, either as fellows of the Society or as researchers and students. Although there is little detailed information about the users of the RES Library between 1868 and 1945, we do know that the Library was available not just to RES members but anyone with a genuine interest – as adjudicated by the Librarian – in its resources.⁹⁸ Though the Librarian did note the more prominent users – such as Lord Hailey – and their distinguished roles within the control, development and protection of the British Empire, other users of the Library were less well documented. When they are noted, these users sometimes subvert the categories envisaged when the Society was set up. For example, despite the deepening crisis in Europe during 1939, ten of the 133 student tickets issued were to researchers from Germany, though their interests were thoroughly vetted before they were allowed into the Library.⁹⁹ In addition to use by occasional researchers, the library was routinely used by RES Fellows visiting the building or staying on site.¹⁰⁰ For this group, who most often utilised the current newspapers, popular histories, biographies and fiction, the Library was a further leisure activity offered by a gentleman's club rather than a formal information centre.¹⁰¹

This article began with the claim that we must take seriously all the practices involved in the production of knowledge, including those within the Library. Classification, ordering and display are some aspects of this process; browsing the shelves, using the catalogues, reading and book borrowing are others, and these activities are more difficult to access in the past.¹⁰² The 'geography of reading' and its call for 'an appreciation of the local and social construction of textual meaning' has opened our eyes to the fact that we must be cautious to consider not only *who* was reading in the Library, but *how* they were reading.¹⁰³ Unfortunately, however, this information is for the most part absent from the archival record of the Royal Empire Society. More recent experiences of reading in the RES Library are briefly considered in the conclusion.

Conclusion

The account of the Library's collection, practices and uses presented in this paper has focussed on the period between 1868 and 1945. There is another story to be told about the Library in the

⁹⁷ B. Porter, *Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain*, Oxford, 2004; B. Porter, "Empire, what Empire?" Or, why 80% of early- and mid-Victorians were deliberately kept in ignorance of it, *Victorian Studies* 46 Winter (2004) 256–263.

⁹⁸ *Minutes of the Library Committee 1886–1991*, July 21st 1920.

⁹⁹ Evans Lewin, Library report for the year ending 1939.

¹⁰⁰ RES members could stay at the Society's rooms at a reasonable rate. The majority of guests were those visiting London for a few days from the provinces, or those back in the country on leave from overseas postings.

¹⁰¹ J. Packman, Librarian's report for the year ending (note 47); Packman, Report on fiction in the RES library, *The Minutes of the Library Committee 1868–1991*, 1950.

¹⁰² It is easier to discern more about these practices in more recent periods, through the use of oral history interviews.

¹⁰³ I. Keighren, Bringing geography to the book: charting the reception of *Influences of Geographic environment*, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* NS 31 (2006) 525–540, 527.

second half of the twentieth century, and especially the extent to which its peoples, practices and spaces adapted to produce ideas about Commonwealth. Until 1991 the collection remained at the Society's Headquarters in London, as described by Jan Morris writing in 1986: 'an imperial researcher, walking through the lobby to the first floor library, or wandering around the building during investigations into the economic conditions of Sierra Leone in 1902 is more or less enveloped in his or her theme. There may well be Sierra Leoneans at coffee in the Canada Room. There are certainly wall panels of West Africa Teak, and numerous other reminders, social and structural, of the British Imperial Enterprise'.¹⁰⁴ This evocative description raises many interesting issues about the spaces of knowledge and the way that the resonance of such spaces changes as time passes. It also highlights the importance of remaining sensitive to the experience of individuals within these knowledge spaces.¹⁰⁵ My own encounter with the Library was somewhat different; in 1993 the Library moved to Cambridge University Library and the consequences of this shift were more than a straightforward geographical relocation. The Munby Rare Books Room is a fundamentally different type of knowledge space to that of the old Library, with different (more stringent) codes of access and use and altered technologies of classification, order and display providing a distinctive experience. However despite the changed location, my research was conducted on and in what continues to be an imperial collection, containing difficult sets of power relations which are still active today, an issue with which postcolonial work continues to struggle.¹⁰⁶

In order to understand the ways in which the knowledge in Libraries produces imaginative geographies, we must consider these archives as collections in the broadest sense, not only of materials, but also of people, their visions, practices and spaces. Geographers have considered the practices by which people 'out there' in the colonies produced geographical knowledge, but we must not forget the more banal everyday practices of the Librarians and Cataloguers 'at home'. Thinking about libraries and their staff in these terms opens our eyes to the specific processes that go on in these often mundane spaces. Practices of collection, order and display and their attendant technologies bring together materials and make them accessible, but they also impose a certain ideological logic upon them. The micro-geography and architecture within these spaces, and their geographical location in the world add meanings to the knowledge within these collections.

Driver has questioned the extent to which the language of 'centres of calculation' can be applied to sites of more heterogeneous knowledge collection such as the RGS or the RES Library, preferring the term 'information exchange'.¹⁰⁷ As I have shown in this paper, the RES librarians envisaged the institution as a vital centre in the networks of imperial knowledge, somewhere which allowed those who worked in and used it to become 'familiar with more places'.¹⁰⁸ I would argue that central to this powerful vision of and for the Library was its perceived ability to act as

¹⁰⁴ J. Morris, The library of Pax Britannica, *Times Literary Supplement* 4306 (1985) 1138.

¹⁰⁵ A. Burton, *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions and the Writing of History*, Durham, 2006; S. Jackson, *Lines of Activity: Performance, Historiography, Hull-House Domesticity*, Michigan, 2000.

¹⁰⁶ Duncan, Complicity and resistance in the colonial archive (note 22).

¹⁰⁷ Driver, *Geography Militant* (note 11), 37.

¹⁰⁸ Latour, *Science in Action* (note 13), 224.



Fig. 3. The RES Library, 1926. Source: RCS Collection, Cambridge University Library, RCS V(a)4 by permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

a centre for calculation and that this shaped the way in which the collection was ordered, displayed, discussed, promoted and experienced.

We must however be aware of reading too much order into the practices and ideologies that shaped the space of the Library. Although the ordering and display of the collection helped to reinforce certain imaginative geographies of Empire and the world, the practices of collecting, classifying, cataloguing, and displaying were sometimes fragmentary, temporary and unstable. Lack of funding for book acquisition led to a reliance on *ad hoc* donations; lack of adequate staffing meant cataloguing was constantly delayed; lack of space for expansion and war damage (the headquarters were hit by a German bomb in 1941) meant that the order and display of materials was often disrupted. The Library was then, as Comaroff has said of the British colonial state itself, ‘always an aspiration, a work in progress’.¹⁰⁹

An acknowledgement of the sometimes unstable nature of the holdings and practices of the Library, and the difficulties of uncovering the motives of individuals who worked in it, should not mean we lose sight of the significance of places such as the RES Library as ‘spaces of order’ (Fig. 3). To enter the RES Library was to experience a space and aesthetic in which books and worlds were ordered and in which orderly behaviour along certain accepted principles was expected. We must be wary of producing an opposition in our descriptions of these spaces between idealised order and real life ‘fragmentary’ experience.

¹⁰⁹ J. Comaroff, Reflections on the colonial state, in South Africa and elsewhere: factions, fragments, facts and fictions, *Social Identities* 4 (1998) 321–361, 341. This phrase has also been used by Alan Lester to discuss the entire project of British colonialism: A. Lester, *Imperial Networks: Creating Identities in Nineteenth-Century South Africa and Britain*, London, 2001, 192.

Throughout this article, the RES collection has been discussed as both Archive and Library and this slippage between these terms is indicative of the difficulty in defining this unique collection. From the outset the collection always contained so much more than books, rendering the term ‘Library’ somehow inadequate.¹¹⁰ However ‘Archive’ is also problematic, not only carrying strong associations with the past, but also denoting certain conventions of structure, practice and use, schemes of access and rationales for existence which differ from those which accompany a Library space. While theoretical engagements with ‘the archive’ may aid our understanding of the RES collection, we must keep in mind its formal status as a ‘library’ and the specificity of its spaces and holdings if we are to properly grasp its texture. There are many crossovers between the concerns of learned societies, libraries, archives, museums and exhibitions but each has different educational, academic, political and economic priorities. Looking in detail at the RES Library underlines the importance of taking seriously the individual topography of such spaces of knowledge: not only the materials but the people involved, their visions, aims and practices.

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¹¹⁰ MacKenzie, The Royal Commonwealth Society library (note 10).