

## And Finally... On Theological Libraries

Let me take you on a behind the scenes tour of New College Library, Edinburgh. Holding over 260,000 printed books as well as archives and manuscripts, New College Library is certainly one of the largest and most significant theological libraries in the United Kingdom. Over 40 percent of our shelf space is taken up by Special Collections of older and rare material. As you look at the massed ranks of the leather- and vellum-bound volumes in our historic collections, I wonder if you find yourself thinking a question that I've often asked: 'What are these books—and what do they mean?' For me, that's not a theological question (as preachers and teachers, that's your job to understand, not mine) but about their meaning as a collection. Where did these books come from? Why were they collected? Why were they arranged this way?

History provides some answers to these questions. The founders of the Free Church of Scotland also founded New College Library, and they shared their passion for Christ with a passion for libraries. Do you see the portrait of Thomas Guthrie, poised mid-sermon, hanging above our Special Collections reading room? Before public libraries existed, Guthrie and his wife founded a parish library at Arbirlot in Angus. William Cunningham, Professor of Ecclesiastical History and librarian at New College, published a proposal to form libraries in every Free Church manse. These men saw libraries as the arteries of the church, enabling ministers to deliver the life blood of Christ's gospel to the body of Christ.

On your tour, you'll see some of our treasures: the first edition of Erasmus's Greek New Testament from 1516, a 1561 Geneva Bible, a 1611 King James Bible. These books are thunderclaps that heralded the storms of religious change. But my own favourites include a sixteenth-century book of hours, its original binding embossed with the name of its previous owner, Margaret Nicol. Or a tiny 1621 psalm book with a beautifully embroidered binding, bearing the inscription, '*This is my mother's book, which she did read in at the age of 86 without the help of spectacles.*' Each page turned is like a raindrop in the steady rain of a former owner's life of faith.

Donors give books like these to a library as a memorial of a life's journey, hoping that the library that holds them will always remain. Unfortunately that is not always so. Between 2010 and 2017 over four hundred UK public libraries closed, and academic libraries are not immune. In 2018, Heythrop College Library and Ushaw College Library faced uncertainty as their colleges closed. But closures are not inevitable; the Heythrop and Ushaw libraries were saved by new university partnerships. The beautiful stained glass windows and church woodwork in New College Library are a physical symbol of the historic partnership between the Church of Scotland and the University of Edinburgh that has sustained the library and its collections.

So please discover your library's collections, wherever and whatever they are, and engage with them. Nurture strong partnerships between church, college and library that enable the seeds our predecessors planted in their libraries to keep bearing fruit today. Above all keep asking the question 'What do these books mean?', and keep writing and speaking the answers into your life of faith.

CHRISTINE LOVE-RODGERS  
Academic Support Librarian (Divinity),  
University of Edinburgh