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For the Love of Libraries

— Reconstruction in Leuven —

by Caroline Mills

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The aroma from my mug of latte spirals ever closer to the mammoth tangerine-orange lampshade dangling above. The modish and moody grey interior walls of the café on Leopold Vanderkelenstraat shut out the sound of the bustling streets of Leuven. It is registration week at the university and Leuven's restaurants and bars are competing for the attention of this year's new intake of students.

ABOVE: Library of the University of Leuven (photo © Ivan Vander Biesen / dreamstime.com).

I'm reluctant to plunge a teaspoon into the milky froth of my coffee and destroy the barista-drawn heart so tenderly applied. It's a work of art. But needs must. While others in the café tap away at laptops or chat about university matters, I reflect on a photograph of a man with a barbered moustache, white hair and bushy eyebrows. The photo is a portrait of Dr. Henry Guppy CBE, a stiff-upper-lipped Englishman who has a decisive frown. His starched white collar, protruding above his dark three-piece suit, seems to stifle any likelihood of a smile.

One of the most gratifying features of this response is that all classes of the community... have participated in it. The list of donors [includes] not only the names of institutions... and of individual collectors ... but also the names of struggling students and working men whose gifts consist, in many cases, of treasured possessions.

Dr Henry Guppy, commenting on the register of donors to the Leuven library.

Henry looks stern. Yet, everything that I have read about this man suggests kindness, generosity, modesty, service and compassion. I have only ever known Henry in black and white. But his red blood runs through my veins. He is my great-grandfather.

I have come to Leuven to see Henry's Belgian legacy — the city's University Library, a striking building at the head of Monseigneur Ladeuzeplein. The library's Renaissance demeanour — all Flemish frills and furbelows — would suggest that, like the university, the building has stood for centuries. But its architectural style belies the truth. Less than a century has passed since the foundation stone was laid in 1921.

I step outside into the late summer sunshine, dodging shoppers, sightseers and students and stroll the short distance to Ladeuzeplein. The streets are thronging as the tinkling carillon bells from the tower of the University Library sing a delicate tune (it is actually the *Reuzegom*, a Flemish drinking song), followed by a more sonorous clang which marks the full hour.

I glance at my watch for unnecessary confirmation and note the date — 25 August. It stops me dead as the significance of the timing of my visit strikes me with a blow as forceful as the chiming bells now coming from the Univer-

sity Library. For it was on the 25th of August 1914 that German troops torched the Belgian city of Leuven. Within 24 hours, the 600-year-old library of the Katholieke Universiteit, now known as KU Leuven, was destroyed.

During four days of carnage, one in eight city buildings was razed to the ground. Many were rebuilt, with a stone plaque indicating those that were damaged. The destruction of Leuven, in particular the library as an act against culture and education, provoked international indignation.

THE LOSS OF A LIBRARY

Leuven is a city with an illustrious history of scholarship and learning. From 1425, it was home to the very first university in the Low Countries. The present KU Leuven styles itself as the lineal descendant of that first university. By the mid-17th century, the research library — in those days



RIGHT: The Great Reading Room of KU Leuven with its reimagined appearance following the fire of 1940 that includes a double balcony with triangular panelling (photo © Ioan Florin Cnejevici / dreamstime.com).

based on Naamsestraat (with a facade onto Oude Markt) — was seen as on a par with those in Oxford, Florence and Prague.

The library fire of August 1914 destroyed more than a quarter of a million books and more than a thousand priceless *incunabula* together with the entire archives of the university. One manuscript remained unscathed. Enigmatically named *volume 906*, it was a parchment collection of letters dating back to the 16th century — that it was spared was due only to a wayward history professor who, contrary to library rules, had taken it home to study.

The story of the Leuven library fire epitomised the barbarity of the German invasion, styled by the French media as *viol de la Belgique* (the rape of Belgium). The English press picked up the theme, referring to the “rape of Louvain” — using the French name for Leuven.

In England, Henry Guppy, Head Librarian at Manchester’s John Rylands Library (JRL), read

Henry Guppy appealed initially to his library governors to help Leuven, and before long an initial consignment of 200 volumes from the John Rylands Library had been earmarked for Leuven.

those headlines. The JRL was established in 1899 with Guppy at the helm. It was conceived in the fine late Victorian tradition of independent libraries, maintaining that status until 1972 when it was assimilated into the University of Manchester library network.

Henry appealed initially to his library governors to help Leuven, and before long an initial consignment of 200 volumes from the John Rylands Library had been earmarked for Leuven. It was one of the first responses from outside Belgium.

Henry did not stop there. He appealed to the English-speaking world to help create a new library collection, with the John Rylands Library undertaking responsibility for the custody of donations while the University of Leuven was without a home. Henry promised that a register of names and addresses of donors would be implemented “for presentation with the library, to serve as a permanent record” and the collection would be catalogued “so that when the time comes for its transference to its new home, it may be placed upon the shelves... and be ready forthwith for use.”

FROM LITTLE ACORNS

What followed was more than ten years of devotion by Henry Guppy to not only fill the library shelves at Leuven, but also obtain a building in which to place those shelves. Within twelve months of launching his appeal, through abundant letter writing to academic and ecclesiastical institutions, aristocratic houses, publishers and individuals, more than 8,000 volumes had been received in Manchester with donations arriving from across the world.

Henry had also made progress with his appeal in America, approaching library colleagues in notable American academic institutions and collectors. One correspondent was Belle da Costa Greene, personal librarian to the American fi-



LEFT: Treasured fragments — the charred remnants retrieved from the fire of 1914 by Henri de Vocht and presented to Henry Guppy, ‘the great restorer’. These remnants are in the John Rylands Library archives (photo © Caroline Mills).

RIGHT: Letter from Leuven – one of the many letters received over the eleven years that Henry Guppy helped to reconstruct the University Library in Leuven (photo © Caroline Mills).

nancier JP Morgan. Morgan was one of the world's richest men, and an avid collector of art and books. His remarkable private library is now Manhattan's Morgan Library and Museum.

Henry received a cablegram from Belle da Costa Green offering "to provide a centre in New York to which contributions from that side of the Atlantic might be sent." In the course of their correspondence they agreed that with the cooperation of the United States it should be possible not only to replace the incinerated contents of the library, but to provide a new building to house the books.

That vision became reality on the day of the Armistice when an appeal was raised in America for a new library building to be designed by American architect Whitney Warren, with a carillon tower dedicated to American engineers killed during the First World War. American colleges, schools, public libraries and other organisations, including the New York Police Department, came forth with subscriptions.

BOOKS BY BOAT

But Henry Guppy's work was far from over. In January 1919, upon hearing that the University of Leuven had reopened its doors to students for the first time since 1914, Henry renewed his appeal for books. There was, of course, no library build-



ing yet in place but by October 1919 temporary premises had been secured to serve as a library in the Spoelberch Instituut on Naamsestraat. More than 21,000 volumes had now been received and catalogued in Manchester, with further large consignments in transit from Bombay, Toronto and Sydney.

Henry Guppy made arrangements for The Cork Steamship Company Ltd, which had direct steamers from Liverpool to Ghent and Antwerp, to transport the new library to Leuven free of charge and, in December 1919, the first consignment of

A TRIO OF LEUVEN CARILLONS

The musical melodies of the carillon in the library tower at Leuven recall a strong tradition in the Low Countries. Luc Rombouts is the carillonneur who looks after the musical voice of KU Leuven. Luc's repertoire extends from Beethoven to Bob Dylan and John Lennon. During the university term, you can usually hear Luc playing KU Leuven carillon concerts on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 19.00. There is of course also automated playing of the carillon to mark the passing hours of the day.

Luc Rombouts also regularly plays on a second Leuven carillon at Leuven's Groot Begijnhof. It's a

more modest instrument, but one which still captures the musical spirit of the Low Countries.

On 11 November this year, devotees of carillons will converge on Park Abbey, a monastery in the Leuven suburb of Heverlee. The bells of Park Abbey have been silent since August 1914 when marauding German troops set fire to the abbey and destroyed the bells. But this autumn, a new carillon is being installed at Park Abbey. A replica of an 18th-century instrument, it is being styled a *Peace Carillon*. It will sound for the first time on Armistice Day, which this year marks 100 years since the end of the First World War. ■

books — 5,000 volumes — was dispatched to Leuven, accompanied by a card catalogue. By July 1925, the 12th and final shipment of books from the John Rylands Library was received in Leuven. A total of 55,782 volumes or 681 cases of books and priceless manuscripts had been sent from Manchester.

The appreciation of the University of Leuven was boundless. “Our debt of gratitude towards the John Rylands Library is very great indeed and can never be forgotten,” wrote one professor. “It is going to be, for its best part, an English library,” a detail confirmed by the delighted Rector Magnificas Monseigneur Ladeuze: “Whatever dimensions the new library ultimately attains, the English gift will be kept apart, both on the shelves and in the catalogue. It is to be an English library in the heart of Louvain.”

The lion (below) and the eagle (opposite) that keep the evil serpent ‘in check’ at the foot of the balcony staircases in the Great Reading Room (both photos © Caroline Mills).



I chat to Demmy Verbeke, who heads the Arts division in KU Leuven’s library. Demmy explains that the library was built as a monument but that it is still an active library.

The English library may have existed when the new library building opened on America’s Independence Day, 4 July 1928. But, it is unlikely today’s students will touch the books that passed through Manchester.

On 16 May 1940, the new University Library came under attack and, once again, burnt down. Of the 900,000 volumes on the shelves then, only 15 manuscripts and barely 15,000 books survived. Of the building, little more than the carillon tower remained intact.

Henry was crushed to see the library and the donations destroyed, yet he at once determined to help once more, launching his campaign with an article entitled “Twice-Raped Louvain” which was published in the weekly *Spectator* on 31 May 1940. The University Library was restored and reopened in 1951. Sadly, Henry died in 1948 and never realised the library’s second rebirth.

A BUILDING FOR BOOKS

“The style of architecture is very appropriately to be that of the 17th-century Flemish Renaissance,” was how Henry had described the future library in 1921, “and it will be constructed in brick and stone of local origin... On the ground floor, there will be a great open arcade, fronted by a row of fine arches.”

It is through those arches that I now step to gaze at the arcade’s brick and stone vaulted ceiling. Outside, the library appears a blaze of gold and glory but I am immediately drawn to the warmth of the coloured glass-lead windows that cascade little rectangles of soft pink, yellow and green light upon the interior floors.

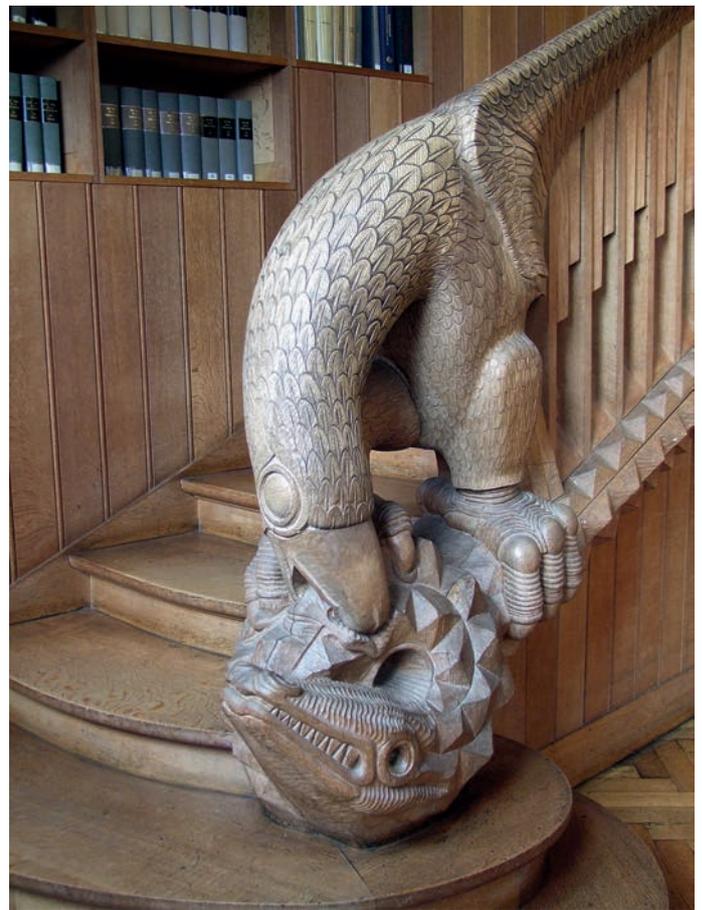
Climbing the gargantuan stone staircase to the first floor and the Great Reading Room, reminders of America’s help are everywhere — carved calligraphic lettering representing college benefactors, a bust of Herbert Hoover, and the bronze sculpture of a financier. I see little to remind me of aid from elsewhere in the world. The carillon tower houses an exhibition of the library’s history on its five floors, each accessed via a narrow, spiral staircase. The exhibition might be

very America biased but at the top of the tower is access to some of the finest views in Leuven.

The Great Reading Room, reconstructed following the fire of 1940, is changed from the 1928 building. There are still long lines of wooden tables with neatly placed matching chairs but now a vast wooden-beamed ceiling towers above and a double row of oak galleries, lined with a spectrum of book spines, show angular wood-panelled inglenooks absent from the original designs. At the foot of each staircase, at either end of these galleries, sits a roaring lion and eagle, symbolically restraining an evil serpent.

I begin to browse the shelves. Here, guarded by the painted portraits of Henry Guppy's two major correspondents in Leuven during the appeal, Cardinal Mercier, President of the University's Board of Directors, and Rector Monseigneur Ladeuze, are reference books in many different languages, some with echoes in their titles of Leuven's English library of yesteryear: *The Cambridge History of Western Textiles*, *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, and *Pevsner Architectural Guides to the Buildings of England*.

I chat to Demmy Verbeke, who heads the Arts division in KU Leuven's library. Demmy explains that the library was built as a monument but that it is still an active library. "I want it to be for our readers, with a modern, up-to-date and usable collection," he emphasises. These words ring in my ears; they are words that Henry used to describe the kind of university library he hoped to



create from the donations supplied in the years of the appeal. "But obviously libraries are changing," adds Demmy. "Modern research libraries rely increasingly on online resources," he adds.

Returning back to the café on Leopold Vanderkelenstraat, I open my laptop and check out the online catalogue of the KU Leuven, and a serendipitous trail through the web brings me to electronic books and journals across the planet. It's a sharp reminder that libraries these days are more than bricks and mortar. As the aroma from another latte wafts up towards the lampshade above, it suddenly occurs to me how the digital world may well help preserve valuable library resources from the perils of fire and war. ■

Caroline Mills is a travel writer with a specialist knowledge of touring Europe. Her passions include camping, walking and fine gardens, all of which she writes about regularly as she tours the continent. Find out more about Caroline's work at www.carolinemills.net.

NOTES FOR VISITORS

Leuven's University Library and the tower housing the carillon are open to visitors daily. The general public may use the library upon application. For sightseers, tickets may be purchased to visit the Great Reading Room and the tower; the admission fee of €7 includes a multi-language audio guide. It should be noted that the top of the carillon tower is reached via several flights of narrow, dimly lit spiral stairs. Find out more at www.visitleuven.be/en/university-library-tower.

The city of Leuven is 30 km east of Brussels. Frequent trains from Brussels Midi or Centraal take under 30 mins to reach Leuven. The one-way train fare is €5.50. Book on www.sncb.be or www.loco2.com.