

Former London Times journalist Michael Leapman was commissioned to produce an accessible introduction to the British Library’s history and collections. In The Book of the British Library he has succeeded admirably. The British Library is one of the world’s principal cultural treasures, with holdings encompassing books, manuscripts, maps, music, newspapers, photographs, sound recordings, stamps and digital media.

Leapman acknowledges that the huge size of the collections meant that he had to be highly selective in his choice of material. He includes treasures such as the Magna Carta, the 7th century St Cuthbert Gospel, early incunabula of William Caxton, Shakespeare’s First Folio and Lewis Carroll’s original version of Alice In Wonderland. He has also included perhaps less familiar items that caught his imagination, such as the rich theatrical material ranging from David Garrick to Terence Rattigan. He ranges in music from Beethoven’s tuning fork to the Hallelujah Chorus manuscript from Handel’s Messiah (also displayed on the Library’s Treasures I-pad app), scientific material (including a rare Benjamin Franklin pamphlet on how to deal with smoking chimneys). Literary manuscripts range from Austen and Brontë to Dickens and Kipling, while ephemera in various physical sizes include soccer fanzines, restaurant menus and even the press used to print the first adhesive postage stamps in 1840.

Leapman writes in his introduction that the British Library, which moved to its current building in St Pancras in 1997 from the British Museum site, ‘was created not through the vision and determination of one person but through a series of sometime random decisions, amalgamations and acquisitions over 250 years’. One person who did play a significant role, and to whom Leapman pays tribute, was Sir Hans Sloane (1660-1753), whose collections formed the basis of the original British Museum Library.

At the time of Sloane’s death in 1753 his collection consisted of nearly 100,000 items, nearly half of them books and manuscripts. Alison Walker, Arthur MacGregor and Michael Hunter, the editors of the collection of essays in From Books to Bezoars: Sir Hans Sloane and his collections, range widely on this topic – Sloane rangers? The book itself results from a British Library 2010 Conference commemorating the
350th anniversary of Sloane’s birth and incorporates much new research.

Sloane’s collections of natural history, ethnographia, antiquities, artworks, numismatics, books and manuscripts are now divided across the British Museum in Bloomsbury, the British Library in St Pancras and the Natural History Museum in South Kensington. By addressing the collections as a whole, rather than as individual collections within those buildings, the editors have been able to reconstruct the intellectual background of the time, as well as documenting their acquisition and historical relationships. Michael Hunter in his Introduction provides an overview of these essays and their linkages within historical and personal frameworks.

Articles treat the impact of Sloane’s travels, including a stay in Jamaica; his widespread connections, both familial and intellectual; and the collecting process that affected every facet of his life. Also included is the first complete publication of the earliest life of Sloane by Thomas Birch. James Delbourgo in his essay, ‘Collecting Hans Sloane’, notes how much has changed since Sloane’s day, ‘not least in the realm of public access. The private cabinet of strange anthropomorphic resembles is now an international museum of global collection’.

This statement is echoed in the British Library’s 2020 Vision Statement: ‘the digital environment provides an immense opportunity to democratise access to content’. This in turn reflects Antonio Panizzi’s often quoted sentiment from the 19th century, ‘I want a poor student to have the same means of indulging his learned curiosity...as the richest man in the kingdom’. Traditions of democracy are strong in the British Library and one hopes this will long continue, particularly in the context of open access to publicly funded knowledge.

Colin Steele
Australian National University