

Race to Save Break-up of a Great Library

Derek Ingram writes from London

The greatest library in the world of material on the British Empire and its successor, today's 50-nation Commonwealth, has been under threat. The recession and other factors meant it could no longer be maintained in its traditional central London home. An appeal was launched to save it from being broken up and sold. So far £2.3 million has been raised towards the £3 million needed. Gemini News Service reports the race against time to save a priceless asset.

A library is a living organism and whatever its theme it must be as much about the present as it is about the past. Indeed, what is contemporary is soon history. A library needs to be tended like a garden and added to, whether with items from the distant past or about people and events that made yesterday's news.

Once a library is put away under sheets or split up and divided into many parts the organism is dead. The resource is lost. A building can be restored. A library, its books, manuscripts, letters and journals, is a product of decades, maybe centuries, of collection, and cannot.

For several years a great library in London has been facing the threat of destruction. It is now within sight of being saved, but its future life has still to be assured.

The library of the Royal Commonwealth Society in London, founded in 1886, contains not only the most comprehensive record in existence of the history of the British Empire, but goes far beyond that. It carries the story right through to the transformation to today's Commonwealth with a growing mass of material on each one of its 50 independent member countries.

If you want to find the historic report of the Monckton Commission of 1960 that led to the break-up of the Central African federation and the independence of Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe you will find it there, but so also will you find the report of the Commonwealth Observer Group on the Guyana elections last year.

You can find original letters written by such figures as the legendary, controversial Cecil

Rhodes as well as accounts of the Commonwealth Eminent Persons Group mission to South Africa in 1986 and reports of addresses made in the hall right next to the library by a host of recent Commonwealth figures like Sonny Ramphal, Kenneth Kaunda, Julius Nyerere and Michael Manley —

texts that will be studied by future scholars of Commonwealth history, authors and makers of films and radio programmes as they have been for over a century.

The danger to this living library came when the Society, which has no official funding and exists on the subscriptions

of its worldwide membership, found that after years of financial struggle, it could no longer sustain it. The Society's deteriorating and uneconomic building in the centre of Trafalgar Square on one side and the River Thames embankment on the other — had

to be rebuilt. The cost of maintaining the library and of housing it in such an expensive area could not be met. It had to be found a new home and money had to be raised to ensure its future. Otherwise, it would have to be auctioned off, which meant almost inevitably it would be

broken up around the Commonwealth — or even outside it. Steps had already been taken to begin this process last year when it began to be realised in Britain and elsewhere that this just could not be allowed to happen. No comparable collection of material documenting the history of the

world's biggest empire, the transition to Commonwealth and its contemporary development exists. In 1992 the problem of a home was solved. An offer came from Cambridge University Library to house the collection in a new extension which is to have first-class fa-

cilities to maintain the 350,000 books, as well as the quantities of manuscripts and 70,000 photographs, many of remote areas of the Empire taken more than a century ago. The sum necessary to save it all was large — £3 million — and there was precious little time to collect it. With the world in recession, the timing was hardly propitious.

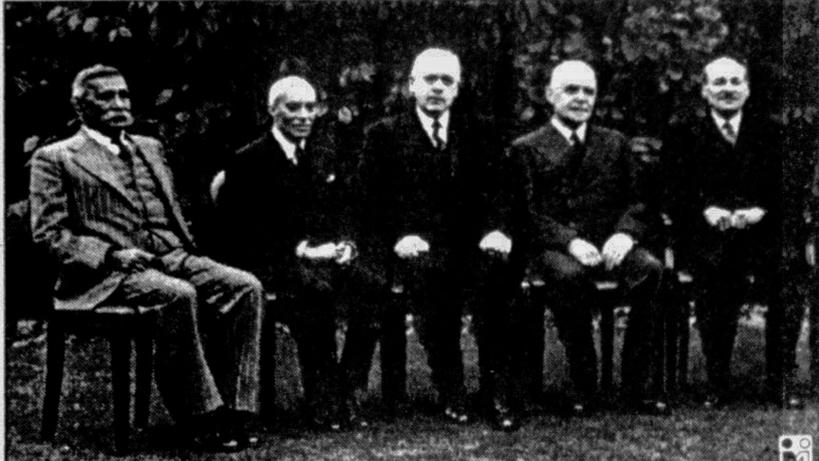
A high-powered committee was set up in London with the Prince of Wales as Patron and the Chief Emeka Anyaoku, the Commonwealth Secretary-General as Honorary President. Members included the Canadian newspaper owner Conrad Black, Thomas Pakenham, whose recent acclaimed book Scramble for Africa was partly researched in the library, and industrialists Sir Patrick Sheehy and Algy Cluff. Pakenham says the library "is of exceptional quality." He adds: "I could not have written Scramble for Africa without it."

And Dea Birckett, who wrote the much admired book Spinsters Abroad, said: "It's not only the books, but people from the Asian and African worlds who come to use them. When you come here, you not only read about the people who made or were made by the empire, you meet them at the next table. It's living history in London."

The well-organised appeal has had considerable success — more than £2.3 million has been achieved and now the struggle is on to find the last £700,000. Time is short, and it would be doubly tragic if after so much effort the target cannot be achieved.

One last heaven and a heritage can be saved for generations to come.

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1948-A western-suited Jawaharlal Nehru, first prime minister of India, sits (second from left) with British prime minister Clement Attlee (far right) and other Commonwealth prime ministers in the garden of Ten Downing Street.



1983 - Three women prime ministers at the Commonwealth summit in New Delhi. Nehru's daughter, Indira Gandhi, (right) with Eugenia Charles (Dominica) and Margaret Thatcher (Britain)

The Commonwealth Library contains thousands of historic pictures like these

Silence in the House

His wife was nagging even before he had stepped through the door. "So you've come back have you? There's nothing for lunch, I can tell you, but dal and bhaat and korolla bhaji — food fit for a king! Or have you brought something like I told you, fish or meat, hmm?"

Shahed didn't even bother to reply. He had just returned from office, and he was dead tired. All he wanted to do was wash and eat and fall into a dead sleep.

But Najma was shrilling by now. Why don't you answer me, han? Or have you lost your voice, is that it? Or are you such a coward that you can't come and face me and tell me — "No, I haven't bought any fish or meat, because I'm a poor man. And I won't get a raise or a promotion in another ten year's time, because I'm such a bungling, spineless fool. And I shouldn't have married a decent man's daughter. But a peasant's wench, who would have been delighted to lie in this hotel, and stuff herself with panta-bhaat and a sprinkling of salt!"

Shahed bit his lip to keep from swearing, and began to wash his face. Really, his life was hell. There was no escape from her. Now her voice was rising, getting into full gear. "In my father's house," Najma began, and Shahed could have rattled off the rest of it, she had said it so many times. "In my father's house, we had fish and meat everyday, at every meal. At every meal we had fish and meat, and then vegetable dishes, and plenty of fruit afterwards. And everyday we had *dal* or *peethas* or *achar* and *chutney*. Why, even the servants ate better than I do in this house — and we never had less than four in my father's house!"

and face — while the shrew shrilled on — then sat down at the rickety affair which passed for his dining table, and devoted himself to his *dal, bhaat* and *korolla bhaji*, eating with the swift practised strokes of long habit, while his body and soul longed for the oblivion of sleep.

Somewhere at the back of his mind was that old throbbing guilt, the certainty that he had done her an injustice, that he shouldn't have married her. Najma had certainly been better off in her father's house. But her eternal stories about the *dal* and *peethas* and servant's and what nots, were mostly old lies that her overheated imagination had cooked up, and added to from time to time, till she believed most of them herself.

Still, he shouldn't have married her. But his mother had thought her father rich — what with their airs, no wonder. He wasn't. Shahed had thought Najma would bring in money. She hadn't.

What she did bring with her, however, were ideas far above her station, a shrewish temper, a horror of physical intimacy, and a tongue like a whip-lash. Hardly ideal wife material, that. And so here he was, a most ordinary man, and an orphan to boot with one hundred takas in the bank, and shackled to a wife with ambitions nothing could slake or satisfy.

"And look at this sarf you gave me, you call this sarf? I call this *jaati*! This might be good enough for your mother and sisters, but this isn't good enough for the daughter of a Chowdhury family — and don't pretend you aren't listening, because I know you are! You must have got this rag for half

price. Where did the rest of the money go, tell me? For another rag like this for your mother, no? Or did it go to pay the school fees of your sister's brats, han? Of course you won't have the guts to tell me, but if I find out one day that you're passing them money behind my back, you'll hear from me, I can tell you!"

Shahed had often thought of beating her, beating her till she leaned on the wall to keep from falling. But if he once started, he wouldn't be able to stop, he knew that. Anyhow, he hated scenes. And the shrew knew it too. Still, thinking of beating her was half the fun. And as he was a peaceful man, it was a secret treat he allowed himself often.

Shahed was almost through with his meal, when he looked up and saw her eyes upon him. Her eyes were red and swollen, and he realized she had been crying. She looked like a stranger, he had never seen her cry before. "In my father's house..." she started off again.

Suddenly something inside him snapped, possibly his self-control. He had heard her familiar whine a thousand times before, but this time something red burst inside his head like a shower of fire-works. His throat tightened. He struggled to his feet. His hands and feet were trembling. He couldn't breathe.

Najma stared at him open-mouthed, and backed away. "My God," she thought raced through his head, "she's the coward, after all!" The next thing he knew, his heavy wooden chair was swinging in his hands.

Before he knew what had happened, he had whirled it twice over his head. On the third time round, he got her — squarely on the face. Her head swung back and her neck snapped like a pistol shot. She crashed against the wall, crumpled in a heap on the floor, and lay absolutely still.

And at last, at last, there was silence in the house.

A Midsummer Night's Dream in the 90s

THE storm over the battle of the sexes has calmed down to a point that we hardly notice it. Lately with the incredible and often unbelievable changes taking place all around us we have had little time to notice how quickly men-women relationships have altered. In fact, these are hard times for lovers: after all it is the age of the dreadful disease...AIDS and of palimony suits. Affairs of the heart have become a matter of money, gains, law, politics and even medicine. There is a new pattern emerging. One where boy meets girl or boy, or even girl meets girl and falls in love! But there is more to it before you may start practicing your love for each other. For when you are in love, you inevitably expect that your partner is capable of taking care of you. One must prove that one is "safe" and has not been infected with some sort of a social disease (there are so many of them flying around). All this is checked by the proper authorities, put down on paper and given to individual lawyers for safe-keeping. So that when it's your turn to sue your partner, you can dish out all the dirt and get a lot of money and publicity.

"Shall I compare thee to a summer's day... were Shakespeare's love sick laments to his lover (who is believed to be a beautiful young man) but this is the 90s and a summer's day is apt to be murky with smog, uncomfortably hot and humid thanks to the greenhouse effect. What, I wonder, would the Shakespeare of 'Midsummer Night's Dream' make of us, and what can we make of him? The first thing to note is that despite the ages "love" has

remained unchanged, with the same harsh triangles and unrequited passions still around to make life a mystery. Nor is it new to see men fall for men and women for women. It is no more difficult to recognize its evergreen cast of characters: The impatient suitor trying to persuade his girl to let him share life, the fairweather swain shifting in an instant from rhapsody to rancor, the lovers plotting to escape the tyrannical father. Puck would be an ideal character for today's loveable sounder on TV. He is impish, cute, daring, a trickster and so very bad for his own good and, above all, in keeping with the selfishness of the ages he is never sorry for his actions. The idealizing of love is as old as broken hearts.

In some respects, A Midsummer Night's Dream, with its musical beds, drugs and slapstick comedy seems to be made for this age and time. The scene of two young men playing with their interchangeable girlfriends is not an unusual scene in today's books and movies. We see it in films, hear of it in scandals and read about it in Jackie Collins novels. Then again these things only happen in books.

Nor does Titania's sudden passion for ass-headed Bottom seem unnatural in the age of Ecstasy, when someone who pops a few pills is liable to open her heart to the first person she sees on the road. Pyramus and Thisbe, wooing each other through a hole in the wall, might be model paragons — or paragons — for the safe-sex generation. The "course of true love never did run smooth," observed Lysander. When you see the

deal about reforms and watching these (satellite) programmes helps us understand more about the way business is done elsewhere, said one Guangdong businessman.

Direct Communications, Hong Kong's only direct sales company, said orders began to arrive by fax and phone from China almost as soon as they offered its 'remote shopping' service in late 1991. The orders covered a wide range of products from electrical appliances to clothing and jewellery.

"We had to turn them down in the beginning because we could not work out how to resolve the problem of delivery," said Linda Wong, marketing

by Naheed Kamal

muddle of our times we are apt to overlook the fact that it ever was. History, after all, does teach us something: Cressida was faithless, Romeo was headstrong and unable to imagine any girl in his life save Rosaline — until he saw Juliet, and Juliet was a teenage upstart who repeatedly took advantage of her devoted nurse, her parents and her loving Romeo. Shakespeare too sets an example, the first part of his famed sonnets are dedicated to the act of procreation, the second to his never ending love for his lover and the rest to a mysterious "dark lady" who was not his wife! Shakespeare was a modernist of his time. The first to use the English language as a means of writing books and poems in, up until then the language of literature was Latin. He was also daring and unashamedly proclaimed his love for other women (and men) other than his wife. His times were no less scandalous than ours. In essence love has remained unaltered through the ages. Even though the heart may not have altered, the pressures and restrictions brought upon it have done so. The whole thrust of the play, after all, is that "lovers and madmen have such seething brains", that lovers, in short, are too full of folly, too much aflame, too rich in their imaginations — goes without saying. The problems now are different and perhaps the opposite of yesterday's: Prudence (i.e. the fear of getting AIDS, namely) makes us measure out our hearts with tea spoons. Discretion has become the better part of tran-

quillizers. The 60s have gone leaving us with new lows over old highs... If dad smoked it why can't I? Our generation yearns for the carefree days of Woodstock, Morrison, Beatles, et al. We've had the chance to rally against all the wars and even had a Vietnam war replica in the form of the Gulf war. But where is the carefree jubilation? Love has always been a messy business no matter what form it takes. That is exactly why it cannot be precisely legislated. If you make romance a thing for lawyers, then callousness and shame turns into crime and punishment. Today we have girls suing their dates for standing them up, and star crossed ex-lovers count emotional costs in millions! We have boys kidnapping and throwing acids just because the girl refuses to return his love for her! Used to be "love means never having to say you're sorry".

Technology has made dangerous liaisons even more formidable. Videos have arrived to catch you uncovered (remember Rob Lowe?) and common-law suitors are betrayed by photographs. Presidential candidates lose out thanks to the amazing tricks of the camera. There is no privacy left for lovers. This is not to suggest caution should be thrown out the door.

Through dawn's door, a shattering blow. We will bring daybreak scarlet in glow. We will destroy the gloom of the night And hindering mountain height

Romance has always required some degree of pre-calculations. In most places and times, marriage has always been a practical arrangement. Indeed, the notion of true love is a relatively recent invention. If disease and paternal suits have put a crimp on promiscuity, it is all for the better. But just because love is not free, does it mean it has to be so costly?

The only thing that separates our age from Shakespeare's seems to be his belief in fairies. Fairies who can solve all our confusions by going above the heads of lawmakers. In fact the past had just as much of a bad time out of it as we do, so there is no use moaning for the Golden Days, because chances are they never did exist. The classic premise of a comedy is a story which ends with a vision of unity and natural harmony. "All's well that ends well." Right?

After all the lunacies of the starlight night are over, the spirits descend to put things right and the lovers awaken only to believe that it was all a dream. The Bard suggests that love is blind and its victims are mad, but only for a night, a brief forgetful spell before reality strikes.

After all, "Life is a tragedy to those who feel. A comedy to those who think." — H. Walpole

China: Stellar Television

THE Chinese Communist Party's vice-like hold on information is being shattered, as more and more people in China install satellite dishes in their homes and tune in to foreign television broadcasts.

US\$600. The dishes are Chinese-made with Taiwanese receivers that translate the satellite signal into one that the TV set can decode.

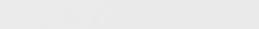
At a price that is affordable in all but the poorest villages, the satellite dishes may be too small for premium reception.

Satellite dishes shatter the monotony of state television. Yajana Sharma of IPS reports, from Hong Kong.

But for the information-starved Chinese, fed up with the tedious and, relentless propaganda of state-run Central China Television (CCTV), the generally more riveting content of foreign satellite channels is more important than perfect reception. Dishes are supposed to be tuned to satellite trans-

sions of the CCTV. Watching foreign satellite broadcasts is illegal without a government permit normally granted only to hotels and public offices.

But it may also be due to a laxer attitude towards foreign broadcasts by provincial governments that are spearheading economic reforms in the border provinces.



Left, Right, Left

by Kazi Nazrul Islam
Translated by John Thorpe

By a drum beat to a heavenly height
From earth beneath and soil's blight
Youth rise in the dawning light
Left now, now right.

Through dawn's door, a shattering blow.
We will bring daybreak scarlet in glow
We will destroy the gloom of the night
And hindering mountain height

The youngest of young, a song will sing
From buried bones, raise the living.
We are the ones, new life will bring
With a new arm of might

Soldier, take your stand,
A hearkening ear, now bend,
Doors that lead to death's portal, a call to life
extend.

Break all doors bolted tight
And march you, left and right

On high the cry to charge is made
The martyr's captain for battle's arrayed
In every direction a marching parade
Rousing the drowsy from night.

When did that kingdom vanish away?
We want that ancient age today
The troubadour's song we'll sing and play
Weep with all your might.

Shed now the pompous throne
Awaken, O you heedless drone
See how the Persian rule sank down
And Russia and Greece and Rome.

They all awoke to fight
You feeble, now ignite
From the dust we'll build anew
The Taj Mahal, unite!
Left, Right, Left