



If Memory Serves Me...

By Michael McGirr

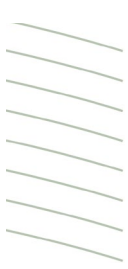
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The keynote address at the 2024 Conference of the Australian and New Zealand Theological Library Association, given on November the 18th at Corpus Christi College, Carlton.

Some years ago, I was asked to launch an unusual book. The author, David Marsh, lived with a fair measure of chaos on the streets of inner Sydney. He gave me an invaluable piece of advice which I am happy to share. He said, “never buy a hat from an op shop. You’ll only end up with lice.” He was speaking from experience. “Don’t steal one, either,” he added.

David was estranged from his family and faced challenges coping with what we like to call reality. He also disliked traffic and sometimes yelled at cars. On top of that, he was a poet whose work, like his advice regarding op-shops, came from experience. Some of his friends gathered about fifty of his poems and printed the collection at Officeworks. This was the slender volume I had been asked to launch at the community centre where David spent many of his days. My speech was interrupted by the arrival of a donation of trays of unsold glazed donuts. The eyes of my audience glazed over at the sight of them.

David’s friends had done something significant which others may have overlooked. They had applied for an ISBN to include on the imprint page of the book. This meant that two copies had to be sent as a ‘legal deposit’ to the National Library of Australia where they would be stored forever and a day. The National Library has enormous warehouses in the Canberra suburb of Mitchell which are the permanent home of tens of millions of items. They have an extraordinary system whereby you can order any item, and it will be ready for you in a day or two. There must be people

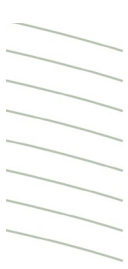


in vans driving up and down all day to fetch stuff and return it. I wonder if they ever stop for a coffee and read some of their cargo.

This system strikes me as a hallmark of a civilisation. If David's great grandchildren went in search of him, they would find his poems and, in his poems, they would find him. Likewise, if any of us have a mysterious great grandparent, it would be worth checking on them in the catalogue of the NLA. Who knows, there may have been a pastor or priest, and you might even find a collection of sermons.

Every library shares in the work of memory but a theological library does this in special ways. A library is not just a place of memory, holding words and ideas that belong to another age. It also reactivates those memories and creates new ones by stimulating the imagination of readers. Scripture is a library. In some translations, the word *biblia* means Library. We all know that scripture both holds with reverence historical stories of faith and inspires future trajectories of faith. A theological library is also a contemplative space, and part of its mission is *lectio divina*, the quiet practice of soaking in those stories. The *Rule of St Benedict* states that every monk should spend a considerable part of each day reading. The rule says that everybody is to be given a book "from the library" at the start of Lent and part of the observance of the season is reading it daily.

Memory is, as most teachers will attest, less well appreciated and nurtured than it once was. Christianity is very much a memory-based religion. In most of our traditions we celebrate the Eucharist, and we have squabbled over the meaning of the phrases "this is my body" and "this is my blood." We might well have devoted a little more time to exploring the injunction "do this in memory of me." The combination of doing and memory is striking. Memory is not a static deposit. Neuroscientists tell us that memory is formulated over and over again. Our memories are not in some storehouse waiting for us to retrieve them. We make them every time we need them, and they are assembled from physical components of the brain. They have no abstract existence. The area of neuroplasticity is fascinating, and I lack the authority to explain it fully. But I find this a helpful image for thinking about theological libraries: the memories housed in them are reactivated over

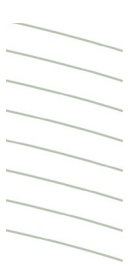


and over. In his book *Orthodoxy* (1908), Chesterton said famously that tradition was the “democracy of the dead,” meaning it gave voice to the thought of those who have died, thus undermining “the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about.” For that corporate memory to survive, the Christian community has to keep its neural pathways in use and its synapses active. Every generation needs at least a few people who study the most recalcitrant, opaque and obtuse of our forebears. They have few places to do so other than a library.

Sadly, we are living through a major cultural shift. For centuries, we have been part of a culture built on memory. It is fast becoming one built on retention. What does this mean? We have robots to do most of the hard grind of holding onto facts, saving us effort but also diminishing something human. If you go to an ATM, assuming you can find one these days, and withdraw \$50, that little fact will be retained in cyberspace forever. In twenty years, the bank could produce evidence of it as an alibi, if you needed one, that you were not in a certain house on the night the owner was murdered. This is retention. It is unforgiving, precise and doesn’t understand the notion of a grey area. If, on the other hand, you took that \$50 and bought a bunch of flowers for your beloved, that gesture of love can only be remembered. It may be a gesture of reconciliation or gratitude or sheer grace, none of which the ATM can understand. Above all, a memory must be chosen. Your beloved might think of those flowers in twenty years, long after he or she has forgotten the drycleaning you also picked up on the way home.

It concerns me that students commit less to memory than once they did, especially poetry. Commit to memory is a beautiful phrase. Memory is a commitment. A retentive culture is outsourcing a core human function to machines.

Theological libraries are a significant cultural counterweight. They tend to belong to traditions and help keep alive the memory of those traditions. I will refer to a couple of examples from my own tradition shortly. But let’s not forget that the Gospels themselves, indeed the whole of scripture, originated in cultures where memory was sacred. It is only in the letters of St Paul that we start to

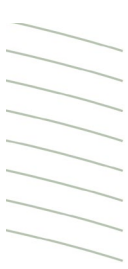


find memory co-extensive with the act of writing that memory down, but even then, there are occasions on which St Paul quotes hymns and credal formulae from unwritten memory.

I believe that there is a sense in which every library is theological or at least pre-theological. I remember when we were at school there was a series on TV called *The World at War*. I will not forget the episode about the siege of Leningrad which made it clear that one of the reasons a starving population managed to survive was that the city authorities kept the libraries open. Cold, hungry and frightened people could spend the day reading. This is a scene that invites theological reflection on the way words can feed and sustain us. We need bread, but we don't live on it alone.

Likewise, I recall our school librarian, Mrs Yvonne Macdonald. She ran a tight ship. In Year 12, we studied *Under Milkwood* by Dylan Thomas. It just so happened that Mrs Macdonald had lived in the same apartment building as Dylan Thomas in London, and she thought he was a disgusting human being. I won't go into the details in this august forum, but I think he once chundered on her gardenia. This was the least of his offences. Anyway, this was the first time anyone had connected me with the human being behind something I was reading, and I enjoyed the conundrum. *Under Milkwood* is lyrical, delicate, musical. Its creator was not. How is this pre-theological? I have an image that a theological library might connect readers of history, philosophy and scripture with the mysterious creator lurking in and behind all those experiences. At the same time, libraries help people appreciate that God is never caught in words. Creation is an expression of the creator but does not exhaust or capture the creator. There is always more to God. It is good and proper that theological collections should feel overwhelming. There is a lot to be said about God and, when it has all been said, not much has been said.

I could give other examples. I am the proprietor of a very nice street library. I was amazed how it brought people together during the long Melbourne lock down and how it continues to do so. We live in a street where people don't socialise much and where a lot of kids get driven to school. The

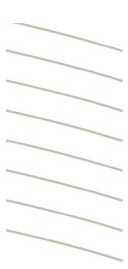


street library has helped to fill this void and bring people together. I have had many appreciative notes and one which asked if I may have had a certain book which, as a matter of fact, I did. One day, I was taken aback to find that somebody had donated one of my books to the library. How could I possibly live in a street where neighbours thought they could do without such a priceless gem? I have often told people not to be a writer if you don't like the taste of humble pie. On the whole, the street library has been a joyful experience. What makes this pre-theological? The answer is the unexpected nature of connection, the thread that holds together pearls of every price. Jesus said, "where two or three are gathered in my name." What was his name? *Logos*.

The same applies to the Ashburton Public Library where I am often to be found on a Sunday afternoon. Old people are escaping the weather and reading the paper, kids are enjoying picture books with their parents, students meet their tutors. Connection is inherently pre-theological. So too is finding words for experiences that rise above the mundane.

What is the difference between a pre-theological library and a theological library. Of course, it is the nature of the collection and the service to which the collection is put. Broadly speaking it is the special nature of memory that underwrites both the gathering and the use of the collection. It is also the fact that everything in the library is chosen and held as an expression of the experience of a searching and believing community. It is not a stockpile. It is a selection, and this is what distinguishes it from places of retention. A theological librarian has a role in making those choices. Visitors are not looking for a needle in a haystack. They are looking for a needle in a sewing box.

I would like to mention a couple of theological libraries which have been important to me. The first is one I have not yet visited, to my shame, but about which I have heard and read a great deal, not least in *The Riddle of Fr Hackett* (2009). This is Brenda Niall's biography of the Jesuit priest, Fr Bill Hackett (1878-1954), the founder of Melbourne's Central Catholic Library, later known as the Caroline Chisholm Library.

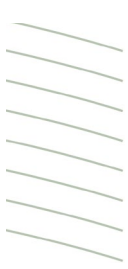


For some years I worked at Jesuit Publications and our office was named after Hackett, so I became interested in him. He was forced to leave his native Ireland because of his involvement in nationalist politics, which was controversial, to say the least. He may well have been an assassination target. In Melbourne, he became the friend and confidant of another Irish nationalist, Archbishop Mannix, a colourful and complex man but one who did not make many friends. Mannix loomed large in the public life of Australia, but his private life was austere. Hackett was obliged to go on holidays with him to Portsea every year. For such an affable man as Hackett, it must have been a penance. Hackett died after being hit by a taxi in Cotham Road as he crossed the road in his black coat at night, on his way to give Benediction at Genazzano. As he ebbed from this life, he joked that he was the first person to be taken to heaven by a taxi.

Hackett was a poor administrator and struggled as the rector of prestigious Xavier College. His passion was the library, founded in 1923, a place where ideas could flow freely in the context of faith. The young Brenda Niall was a regular: ‘The Catholic Library was a vibrant cultural space, unique in Melbourne, unusual anywhere.’

Niall explains that in the granite culture of post-war Catholicism, this kind of library was unique and even suspect: *In my own 1940s convent schooling, the nuns paid anxious deference to the clergy on all matters of belief. We did not ask, we listened. When a thoughtful 17-year-old found something to question in our text, Sheehan’s Apologetics and Catholic Doctrine, she met the sharp response: “Jocelyn Gorman, how dare you pit your puny mind against the great wisdom of the church.” At about the same time, I heard it said of some presumptuous intellectual, “he read his way out of the church.” As William Hackett went on his fundraising way, he met a good deal of scepticism: a Catholic library sounded nice but was it really necessary? He worried about the Catholic school system. “I am afraid we are educating devout barbarians”.*

Hackett was succeeded by a Tasmanian, John Arnold Phillips (1904-1987), another Jesuit, who helped care for the library for some thirty years. During this time, it moved from Collins Street to premises in Elizabeth Street and then to Lonsdale St. It was part of the vision that a ‘central’ library

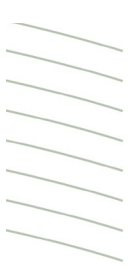


was in the CBD, not on the grounds of a convent or monastery. For much of his tenure, Phillips was a resident of Jesuit Theological College, a large community most of whose members seldom met him. He rose at a fixed hour, said Mass and then caught the tram to the library where he would work all day. He cooked his own meals there, at one time suffering malnutrition, and returned home on the last tram every day, arriving about midnight. He had friends at the library who cared for him, but he was a mystery to his fellow Jesuits, joining them once a year on Holy Thursday. The history of theological libraries has profited from the work of people who were prepared to colour outside the lines, and John Arnold Phillips was surely one of those. It could hardly be included on a formal job description, but the best librarians are community makers.

The other theological library that has been an important part of my journey is the Dalton McCaughey library in College Crescent, part of Pilgrim Theological College. It began life as the Joint Theological Library when the collections of the Jesuits and the communities that would eventually form the Uniting Church in Australia were brought together in the early seventies on the grounds of Ormond College. It is still a wonder to me that this ever happened. In sectarian Australia, Jesuits and Protestants kept their distance. There was a time when Davis McCaughey and Bill Dalton, a presbyterian minister and a Jesuit priest, may never have met except to argue. Now they share the naming rights of a wonderful facility.

I can only tell the story from the Jesuit side from where it looks like an outcome of the Second Vatican Council. Until 1969, Jesuit candidates for ordination studied at Canisius College in Sydney where theological education was basic and designed to equip priests to administer sacraments with both precision and accuracy. There was little imagination and many of the students were bored. The place was crowded so the library was shelved around the corridors. I was told that it was never catalogued but maybe this is an exaggeration. Certainly, some students hid books on out of the way shelves because they were in short supply.

The move to a professional library with proper staff, proper lending rules and proper accession procedures was a sign of what many people liked about Vatican II and some disliked. It was, in

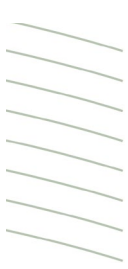


many respects, an intellectual revolution. There were those who mourned the loss of heartfelt simple piety. They couldn't understand why you'd exchange a holy water stoop near your front door for a copy of Karl Rahner on your bedside table. A picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus looks like kitsch to some, but it touched them more than a name such as Schillebeeckx.

I have a treasure which I found in a second-hand bookshop and which I keep partly because it reminds me of the Dalton-McCaughey library. Davis McCaughey was born in Belfast and arrived in Australia in 1953. He went on to become the first moderator of the Uniting Church in Australia, the main author of its basis for union, was subsequently the governor of Victoria and could claim long list of notable achievements until his death in 2005.

In the bookshop, for \$8, I stumbled across a modest volume called *Five Dialogues of Plato Bearing on Poetic Inspiration* which had once belonged to him. He has neatly signed the book and noted the date of purchase in December 1935, when he was 21. He made the decision to bring it to Australia. Those of us who have travelled know that books are heavy and you must be choosy when travelling the world with books, the exception being the philosopher Martin Buber who let it be known that he would rather face the Nazis than leave Europe without his books. He compromised and reached Israel with a mere 5,000 of them.

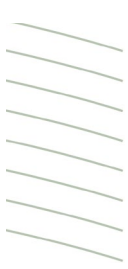
Those dialogues must have meant something to McCaughey and something of him lives on in them because they are annotated in his spidery hand. He has underlined many lines where Plato speaks about love as well as the distinction between the body and the soul, not a razor-sharp dichotomy. In the margin of Phaedrus, he has written in capitals 'INSPIRATION IS MADNESS' as though he has just discovered a place where he could build a life. The beauty of libraries is the presence not just of writers but also of earlier readers in books, waiting to meet you. Encounter is part of the work of memory.



A library has sometimes provided a useful image of memory, which is one of the core functions of theology. Let's return for a moment to that battleground phrase, "do this in memory of me," the understanding of which has created deep divisions in the Christian world. Can memory make the past truly present? The Jewish philosopher George Steiner (1920-2020) used a nuanced understanding of memory to explain the phrase 'real presence.'

It is striking to me that the Reformation developed in an era where memory was a cultural obsession, as it was in the work of Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) who was executed as a heretic. Memory is a central and recurrent motif in the spirituality of St Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), founder of the Jesuits. He used the so-called 'intellectual', model of the Trinity: God as memory, will and understanding. The Son is the will of the Father. Understanding, the Holy Spirit, is the gift of Father and Son. So why should God the father be thought of as memory? Because, in *The Spiritual Exercises*, memory and creation are closely linked, especially in the memory of the senses. An Ignatian sense of memory is physical: he developed a technique of historical meditation known as 'the application of the senses.'

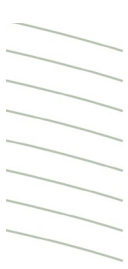
I am scarcely qualified to do more than skirmish with these ideas. A good place to start, however, is Frances Yates' book *The Art of Memory* (1966). She writes, for example, about the French logician, Peter Ramus (1515-1572), who was to die in the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre. Ramus developed what he considered a simple way of activating memory which did not use images but only the internal coherence of the text to be remembered. Yates describes him as an iconoclast because he withstood the scholastic notion of memory, most famously expressed in the iconic *Summa* of Thomas Aquinas. The scholastics believed that memory needed a single book in which all truth could be stored as in an airtight jar. Ramus exchanged a belief in a single book for something more like a library which shared many voices and approaches. He explained that, in doing so, he wanted to replace artificial memory with a natural one, a contrived system with one that developed more organically.



In the history of Roman Catholicism, and perhaps other denominations, those who have departed from the need for a single book have often been suspect, just as Brenda Niall discovered when she was a schoolgirl in the 1940s. One controversial figure was Matteo Ricci (1552-1611), a Jesuit who spent many years in China where he was a pioneer of inculturation, trying to understand rather than judge a culture which was at least as sophisticated as his own. He got into bother for a flexible approach to liturgy. But his ability to learn languages and philosophical systems was remarkable.

Ricci enlarged upon an ancient understanding of memory as a mansion, not unlike a library. In his imagination he knew in which room, cupboard and drawer certain words and ideas could be found. Jonathan Spence wrote a book called *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (1985) which explains this system rather more eloquently than I can. He understood that memory needed a system of cataloguing. It grows. There are rooms within rooms, boxes within boxes, hidden corridors and wardrobes to cater for every type of clothing. His sense of expanding memory was threatening to those for whom theological was a mechanism of control. It was similar to what we would these days call the expanding universe. A theological library is a finite space in some ways, and I am sure many librarians have worried about finding space for their collection. But in important ways it is not readily contained.

Indeed, some people have thought of the whole universe as a library. One such person was the Argentinian writer Jorge Louis Borges (1899-1986). I believe he taught the current pope which, if true, must have made an interesting classroom. Some years ago, there was a popular book called *The Name of the Rose* (1980) by Umberto Eco, a fan of Borges. It was set in a medieval monastery, became a movie starring Sean Connery and led to a shelf of spin offs in the form of medieval monastery whodunnits. In *The Name of the Rose*, the blind librarian is called Jorge and the library is shaped as a labyrinth. Borges was also blind and became the national librarian of Argentina. His best-known book is the collection *Labyrinths* (1966) and if you haven't experienced it, a tremendous pleasure awaits you.



Labyrinths includes the story ‘The Library of Babel’, written in 1941. It begins with a sentence that will whet the appetite of any theological librarian: *The universe (which others call the library) is composed of an indefinite and perhaps infinite number of hexagonal galleries.* The story develops this image in kaleidoscopic ways, the hexagonal galleries twisting this way and that to accommodate a seemingly infinite number of texts and combination of texts:

When it was proclaimed that the Library contained all books, the first impression was one of extravagant happiness. Everyone felt themselves to be the masters of an intact and secret treasure. There was no personal or world problem whose eloquent solution did not exist in some hexagon. The universe was justified, the universe suddenly usurped the unlimited dimensions of hope. At that time a great deal was said about the Vindications: books of apology and prophecy which vindicated for all time the acts of every person in the universe and retained the sweet arcana for his or her future ... the searchers did not remember that the possibility of a person finding his or her Vindication or some treacherous variation thereof can be computed as zero.

This may be as good a place as any to call a halt. I salute the unspoken role of theological libraries in shaping and liberating the Christian community. In my tradition, for example, we have stubbed our toe on the issue of women in ministry. Yet the most significant Catholic ministries are now largely run by women: I am speaking of Catholic schools and hospitals. The leaders of those ministries invariably studied in your libraries and found comradeship there with women writers and theologians.

On the other hand, I am sure that you have all encountered people who come to your library seeking Vindication, which Borges spells with a capital V. These are the people who want confirmation of what they already think and affirmation of their habits of behaviour. I thank you that our chance of finding Vindication in your libraries may be computed as zero.