

## **British Museum Library : interview with a municipal librarian.**

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Tracts 1870 (1)  
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## BRITISH MUSEUM LIBRARY

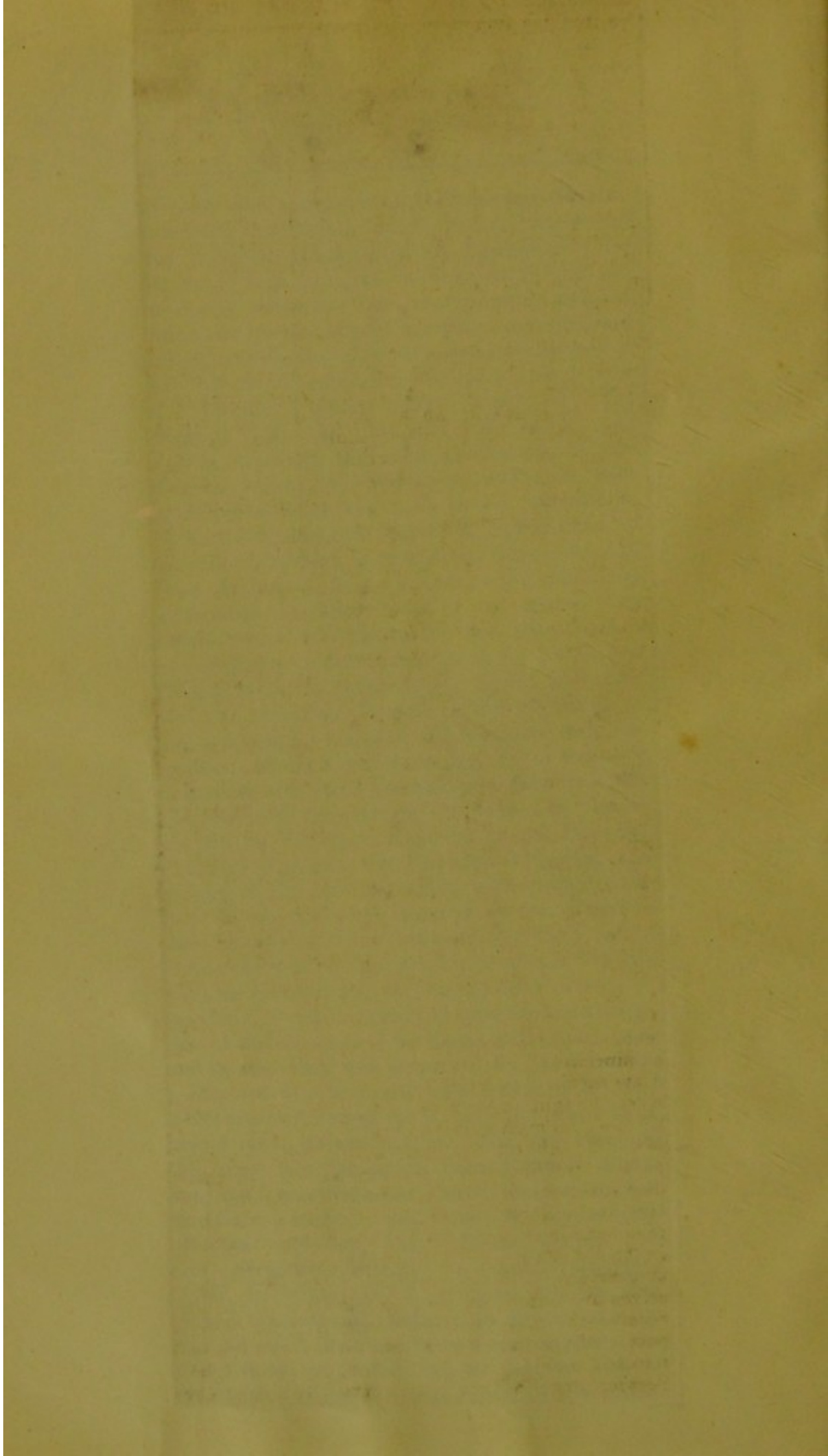
### INTERVIEW WITH A MUNICIPAL LIBRARIAN.

Attention was drawn in two articles in the *Morning Post* last week to the condition of the British Museum Library. It was argued that the constitution of the Museum and the method of appointment of librarians was such as to make the Library administration unprogressive. The view was put forward that the abandonment of the idea of a subject index by the British Museum authorities was a most unfortunate decision. Criticism was directed against the methods by which the Library is maintained, the two chief lines of attack being that the authorities appear to have no wish to aim at a complete collection of English books, and that they purchase foreign books by language instead of by subject, with the result that foreign thought is very indifferently represented. It was suggested that a great deal more might be done for the convenience and comfort of readers, both as regards the arrangement of the reading-room and the hours during which it is open to the public. The conclusions reached were that it was essential that reforms should be introduced with extreme caution, and that a Royal Commission should be held to investigate the whole question of the administration and government of the Museum.

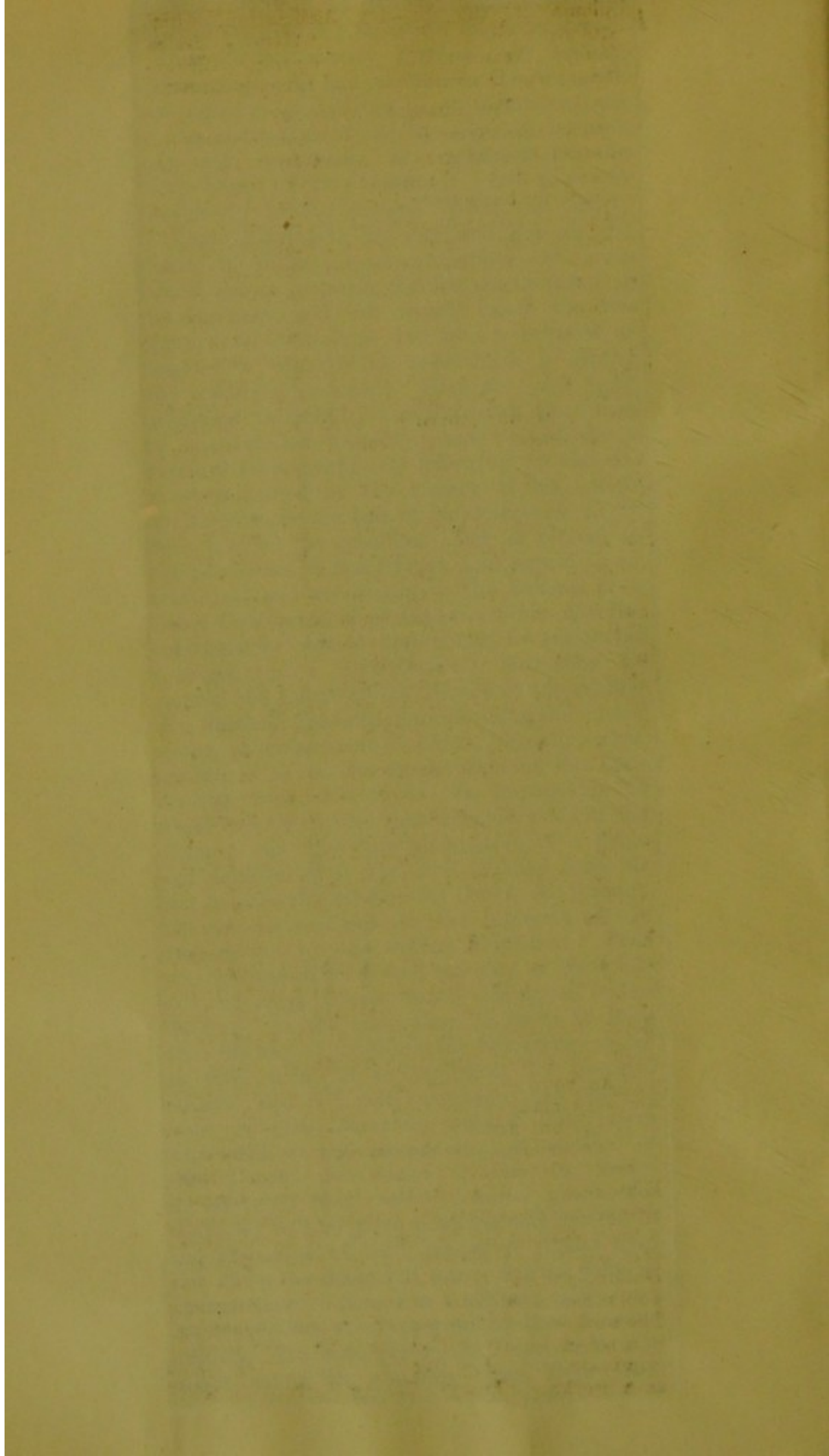
Mr. James Duff Brown, the Chief Librarian of the public libraries at Islington, saw a representative of the *Morning Post* on Saturday, and discussed some of the criticisms that had been made. "I have for some time past," he said, "been expecting that the administration of the British Museum Library would form the subject of public criticism, and I hope that the two articles which have been published will make the public realise that, as has long been known by librarians and expert readers, the collection is very considerably less valuable than would be the case if it were efficiently administered.

#### METHOD OF APPOINTMENT.

"Your correspondent," he continued, "was, to my mind, very well advised in opening his case by considering the method of appointment



to the Library staff, and in raising this point he laid his finger on the great disability under which many libraries in this country suffer. The University man who has taken his Honours B.A. has not even given presumptive evidence that he has any talent or taste for library administration. The possession of a degree need not, and in many cases does not, indicate any more than that a man has moderate intelligence and a reasonably good memory. The holder of the qualification would be the first to admit that he is ignorant of the elements of library work. He has not as yet been brought into touch with the requirements of the public. In such a library as the British Museum he is never brought directly into touch with them. Nor has he the theoretical knowledge of librarianship that is given by the diploma of the Library Association. I do not want it to be imagined that I am making an attack on the University graduate. A University training has its undoubted value to a librarian, but it ought to come second to a knowledge of librarianship. The system of the British Museum, however, makes it inevitable that scholarship should come first and librarianship second. The result of the present system, as everyone who has at all an intimate knowledge of the British Museum Library knows, is that of the men who are drafted into it some few become expert librarians with a right conception of their duty to the State and to the public, but the bulk of them regard the public use of the Library as a necessary evil. They have and develop a scholar's interest in some special topic connected with books, and devote to that topic the energy and the interest that should be devoted to the fundamental task of the librarian, to make as accessible as possible to the public the books of which he has the care. It is the old story of under-paying. The Museum underpays its men, and it attracts to itself students who are willing to put up with the inadequate salaries they receive because the amount of work demanded of them is small and they have time and opportunity to devote their energies to pursuing the private studies in which they are interested. This condition of affairs dates back to the time when Government appointments were regarded as sinecures to be awarded to those who, for some service rendered quite apart from the post, were thought to have deserved well of the State. To put the matter more bluntly, the staff of the Museum Library are open to the criticism that as a body they administer their trust in their own interests and not in those of the public. In the State libraries the fact that librarianship is not made the criterion of appointment results in the drafting of quite unsuitable men into the service, with the result that the men themselves are miserable, and that the public do not receive the attention they have a right to expect. My argument is that the candidates selected should, after passing the necessary Civil Service examination, be obliged to take the



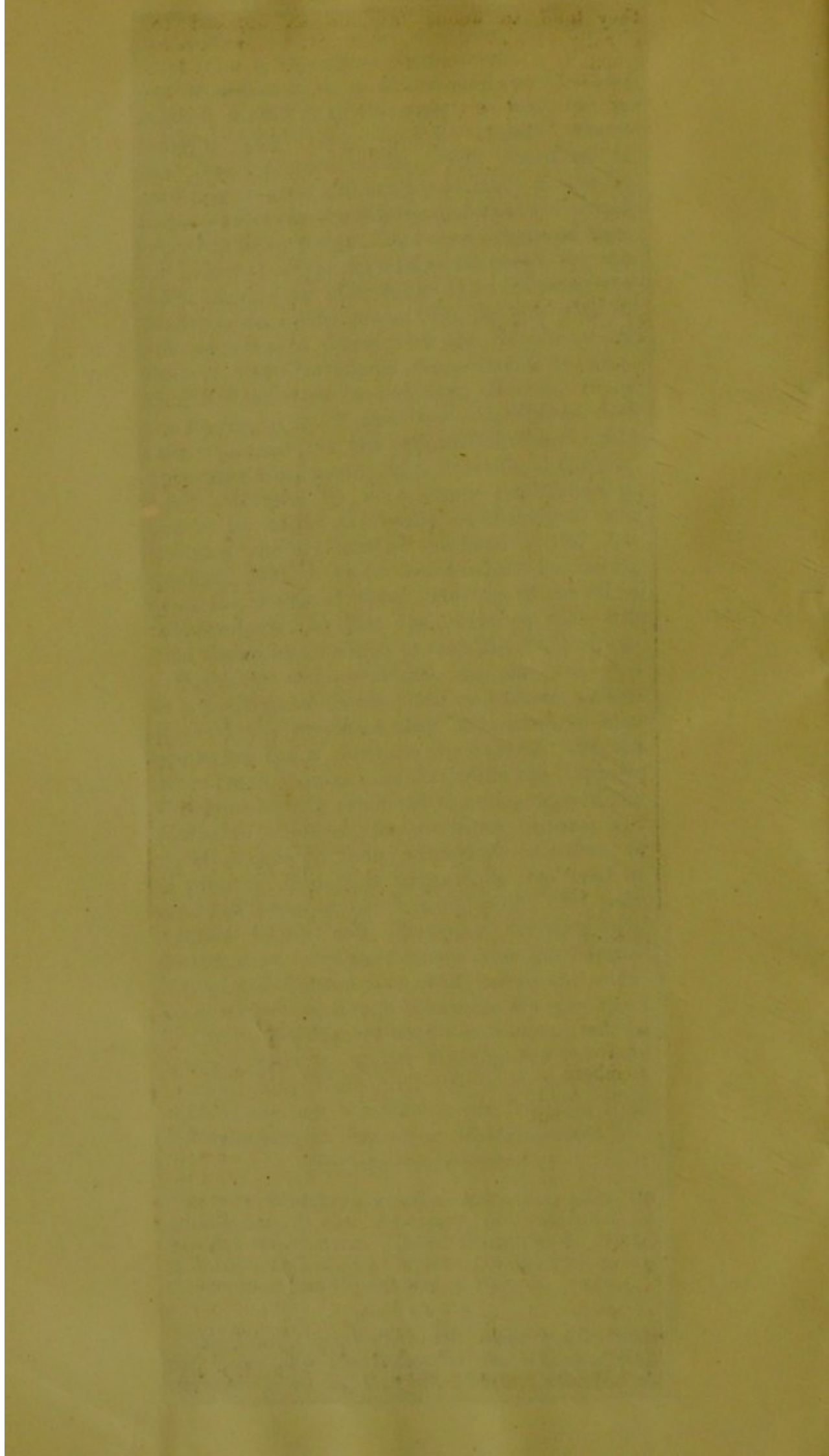
diploma of the Library Association, which requires proficiency in Literary History, Bibliography, Classification, Cataloguing, Library History and Organisation, and Library Routine.

#### THE SUBJECT CATALOGUE.

“The absence of the subject catalogue is unquestionably the gravest defect from which the Museum suffers. In municipal libraries we have made it our business to find out by what methods the public takes volumes out of the library. Our experience has shown that the public identifies the books it wants by the subject and by the title far more often than by the name of the author. Whether this would or would not be so in the British Museum Library is a very different matter, but it points very clearly to the importance of a good subject index. Unfortunately, since the days of the logician Stanley Jevons, there has been in the Museum a prepossession in favour of an authors' catalogue and against a subject index. Until Mr. Fortescue started the compilation of his subject index for books published since 1880 there was no guide whatever of this sort to the Museum. I rather disagree with your correspondent in his estimate of the work. It is, to my mind, very far from perfect, for it is a hybrid production, not being either a pure classified catalogue with a full subject index nor an alphabetically arranged subject index with cross references and without collected entries. Under the present system it is not possible to get a general view of any subject. I have found the difficulty myself and have heard many complaints from other readers. The ideal system would be to have three catalogues—one of authors, one a classified index with full subject references, and a limited title index. In Mr. Fortescue's index the reader often has to look under several headings to find the books of which he is in search. Thus, to discover what has been published on comparative law, he will have to look up England—Law, France—Law, and so forth throughout the different countries of the world, whereas in a pure subject index he would find a small sub-class under Law devoted to the special object of his research.

#### DEFECTS IN THE COLLECTION.

“As your correspondent pointed out, there are very many books which ought to be in the Library, but are not to be found. Within my own experience the deficiencies are chiefly in French, German, and the older local English books. The British Museum Library should, as far as possible, contain copies of every work published in the country. The obligation does not lie on the Bodleian, the Advocates', the Dublin, and the Aberystwyth libraries, but the public has a right to expect it of the Museum. The authorities, however, aim rather at making it a select library. They have no right to discriminate, for they are a Museum as well as a working library. The misfortune is that



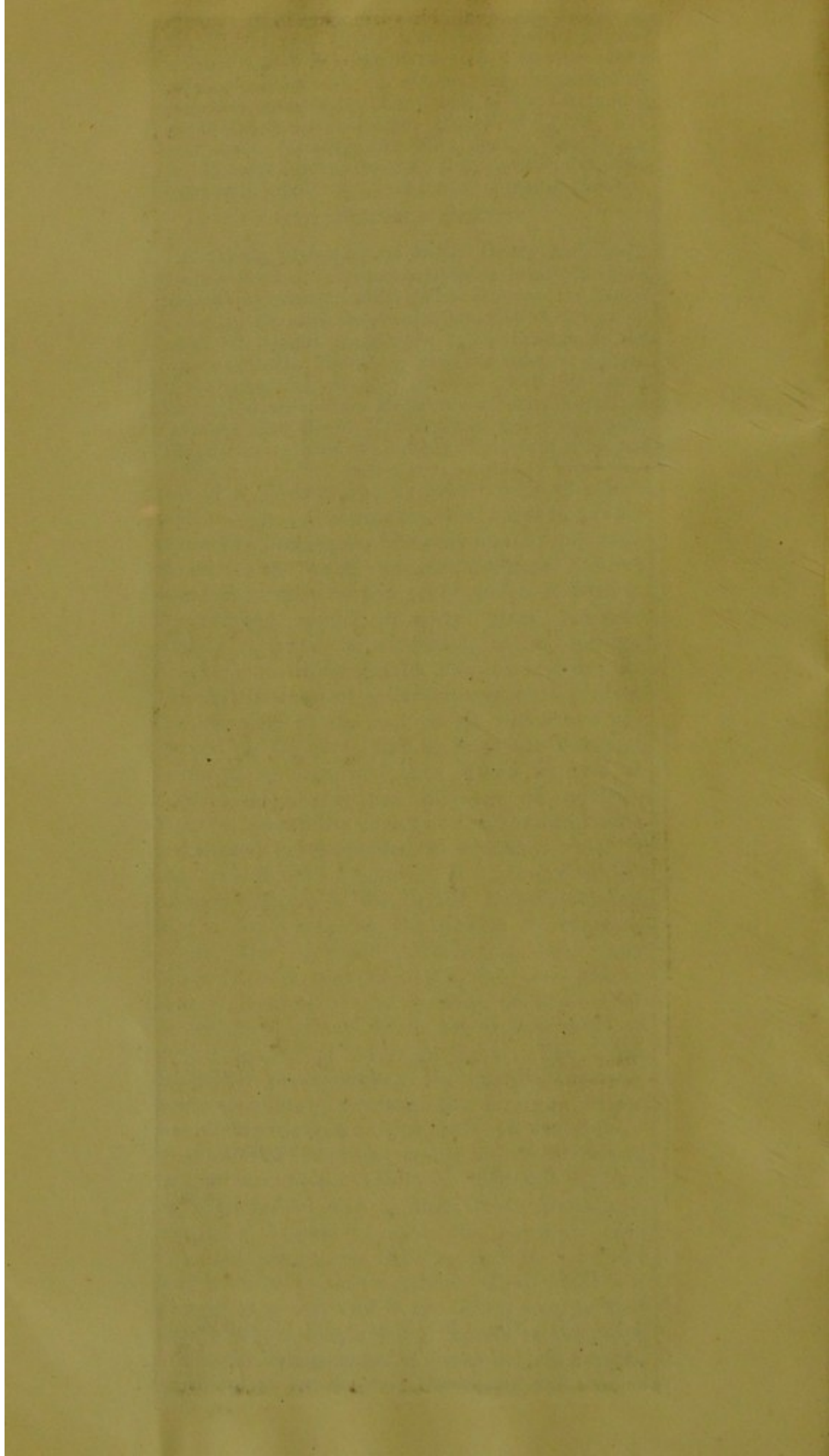
they tend to adopt museum as opposed to library methods for purposes of administration, which is wrong, and they would like to follow special library rather than museum methods in adding to the collection, which is equally wrong and even more serious, for the results of such action, so far as it obtains, is irremediable. The whole question of what books the Museum receives and how it preserves them requires looking into. I will give one specific example. I had occasion some time ago to refer to a paper written by Ballazzati on a new system for a classification, and published in an Italian Journal of Bibliography. I found the paper of which I was in search bound up with other 'tracts'; it has been cut out of the Journal in question, and I could find no trace in the Museum of what had become of the remainder of the Journal.

"Your correspondent, I think, erred on the side of clemency in his comments on the delay in getting books. It is, I must admit, impossible to hope for the rapid service one gets in Washington, for the structural conditions of the Museum render the mechanical efficiency of the Washington library unattainable. But the delays of half an hour, three-quarters of an hour, and more which occur could and ought to be prevented. The method of slips used is cumbersome. I need not go into details, but I would suggest that the requirements of the Museum could be met by making readers fill up a perforated slip on which their name and seat number appeared twice. One portion of the slip could be put on the shelf from which the book has been taken, and the remainder placed in the book and sent out at once to the reader. The present system involves the copying of each slip by an attendant—a further economy in time could be effected by increasing the number of attendants. The administration of the Library ought to be made efficient. The question of increased cost should not have to enter into it.

#### RESTRICTIONS ON ADMISSION.

"In addition to the points raised I should like to charge the administration with being bound by far too rigid rules. For instance, several members of my library staff, who are eighteen or nineteen years of age, wish to make use of the library, but are debarred by the age clause. While there is much to be said for the age limit of twenty years, it should not apply to working librarians. It is to the public interest that the librarians of all libraries should be encouraged to make as much use as possible of the British Museum Library, and special arrangements should be made for their accommodation. The refusal to do it is part of the general policy of restrictions on admission. This, no doubt, is partly based on the difficulty which the Museum authorities have in finding room for their readers, but the solution should lie rather in taking steps





to increase the available room than in discouraging readers.

"A further blemish on the administration is the favouritism that, as most readers will agree, unquestionably prevails. A remarkable instance of this occurred to me. I had half a dozen books on my desk and had requisitioned other volumes when, to my surprise, a note was brought saying that I could not have any more books out. My neighbour had on his desk a far larger number, and the friends to whom I have spoken about the incident are quite unable to account for it. I did not take the matter up to headquarters, and I only quote the case as an illustration of the indifference with which readers are treated. Care should be taken to prevent the very human attitude of the attendants, who give their more ready attention to those readers whom they know and like.

"Lastly, as regards fiction. For very obvious reasons works of fiction are not available until they have been published for two years, and as a consequence they do not appear in the general catalogue. I agree that the Museum Library is not the place for the novel reader, but he should be excluded, and those who for serious purposes wish to consult recent fiction should not be penalised.

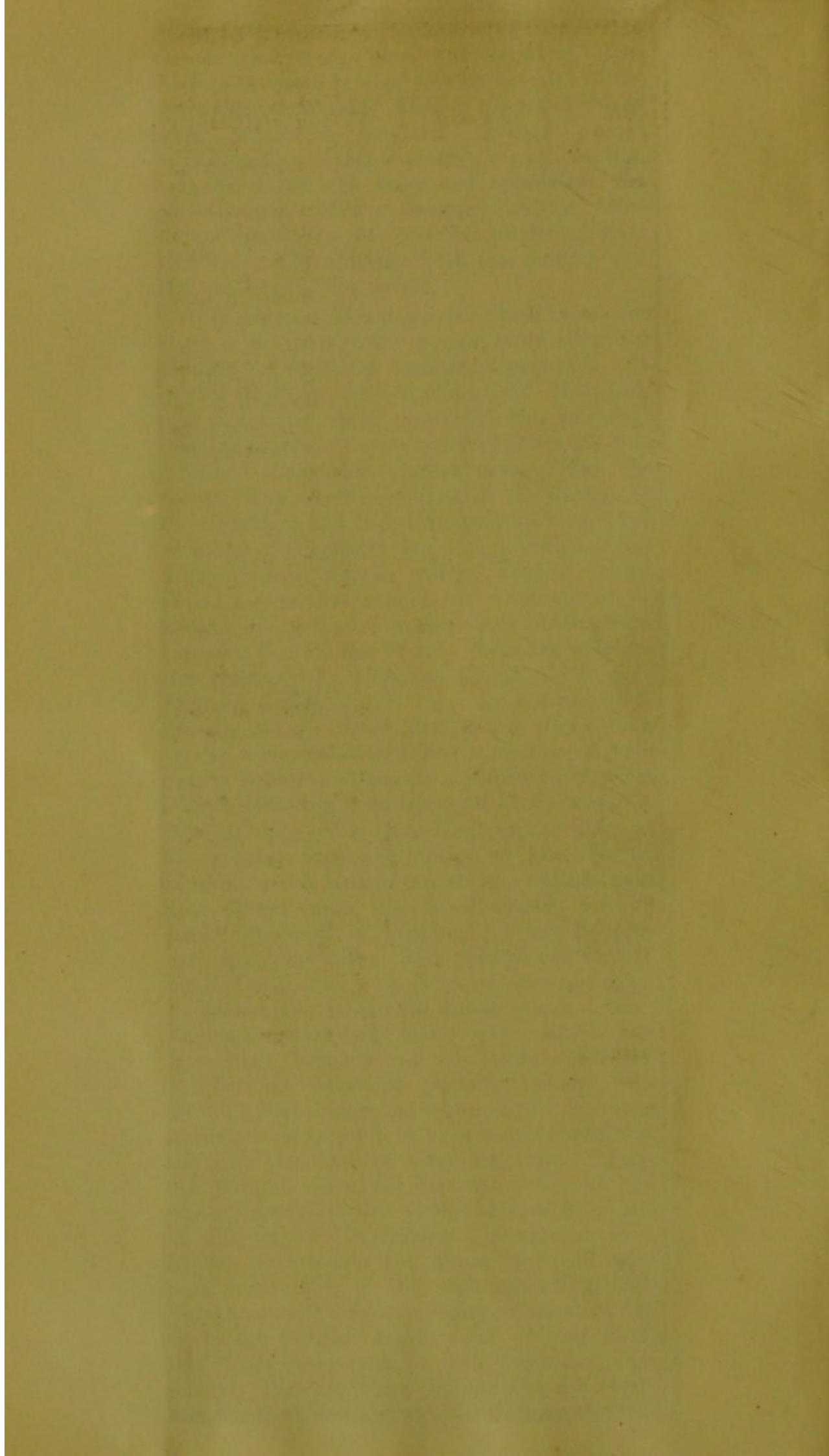
"In making these criticisms of the Museum administration I should like to add, in conclusion, that it is the system against which I am directing my attacks. Those of the staff who are the victims of it and who have come to their posts quite unqualified to occupy them have my sincere sympathy, while the few who have triumphantly achieved good work in spite of their system, have my sincere admiration. I contend, however, that by reorganising the Library it could be made far more efficient, to the advantage of the public, and, indeed, to the advantage of the staff. To bring about this result I think that a Royal Commission is essential."

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TO THE EDITOR OF THE MORNING POST.

SIR,—Though I am sorry to say that I am not qualified to give any opinion as to the excellence or otherwise of the Library of the British Museum in its finer points, I have found it practically impossible to make use of the Library on account of its regulations. I have no doubt this has been my fault, and that the regulations may be easily followed if one can spare the necessary time and thought.

My experience has been as follows: I wanted to consult a book, went to the Museum, ascertained the formalities and very humbly suggested to the clerk who dealt with me, that it would be a great comfort to me if I might utilise the Library then and there, that I was myself a householder and a Doctor of Medicine and a Doctor of Laws, and a Fellow of the Royal Society. No, it was impossible for me to use the Library until I had fulfilled the necessary conditions, so I went away. Being



anxious to see the book, I subsequently fulfilled these formalities, whatever they may have been, and was thereafter allowed into the Library and supplied with the book I asked for, after further formalities. Having verified my reference I called the attention of the attendant to the fact that it was attributed to an incorrect date in the catalogue. I was very courteously requested to communicate with a superior official, which I did, stating that the date 1802 was erroneously catalogued in place of 1811. I received a brief answer from the high official informing me that mistakes were not made at the British Museum, and I returned to my ordinary occupations.

Some months later a friend was showing me over the Boston Free Library, and asked me to test the rate of delivery of any given book, so I named my British Museum book, and received it within five minutes. (N.B.—It was properly dated 1811 in the Boston catalogue.)

In the following year, happening to be again in Boston with a friend who wished to verify a quotation, I walked into the Library to the catalogue room, thence to a given shelf in a ready reference room, where I found the book and the quotation, and though I did not know the ropes I do not think the whole operation lasted more than a quarter of an hour. But the institution where I was able to do this is in touch with its citizens, and bears the following inscription over its door: "The Commonwealth requires the Education of its People as the Safeguard of Order and Liberty."

I am at this moment anxious to verify a reference. I cannot afford the time to do so through the machinery of the British Museum. I forget what the formalities are, but three months ago, having ascertained and fulfilled them, I received a permit allowing me to use the reading room for fifteen days, but my engagements unfortunately prevented me from using it during that period, and I am a busy man.—Yours, &c.,

AUGUSTUS D. WALLER,

Jan. 20.

MD., LL.D., F.R.S.

P.S.—The error of date mentioned above is now corrected by hand in the catalogue of the British Museum.

