

Book Review

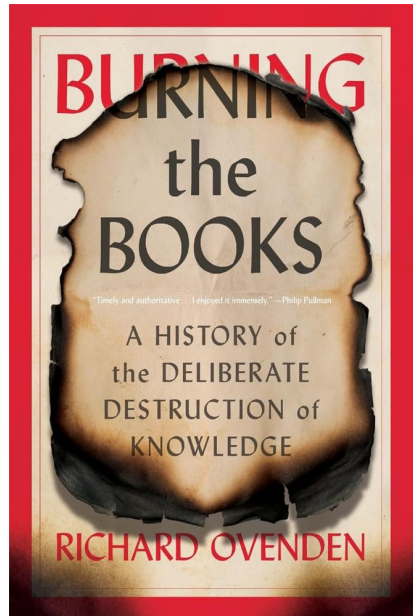
A History of the Deliberate Destruction of Knowledge by Richard Ovenden

Reviewed by Alyssa Gluf

Throughout history, humans have demonstrated a consistent pattern of destroying knowledge. Libraries and books have been razed by enemy armies, clay tablets reused to repair buildings, facts quietly edited out of Wikipedia articles.

This recurring theme in civilization raises a critical question: why is the destruction of knowledge so persistent across time?

Burning the Books: A History of the Deliberate Destruction of Knowledge takes readers through history's most significant instances of archive destruction to find what society loses when there are insufficient records of the past. In examining the myriad motives for destroying knowledge, Richard Ovenden, director of the Bodleian Library at Oxford University, makes a compelling case for the need to preserve libraries and archives in the digital age.



Combining his study of history with his firsthand experience as a librarian, Ovenden explores the various motivations behind the destruction of archives throughout history, ranging from moral panic to mundane carelessness. The thread connecting these events leads back to Ovenden's central thesis: without subjective records of the past to learn from, our future is in peril.

As a librarian, Ovenden approaches writing in a way that is thorough and scholarly. The beginning of the book rattles off quite a few names in such a short amount of space that it can be overwhelming, and some of the events studied in the first few chapters are similar enough that they blur together a little. Still, the knowledge imparted is valuable and helps build momentum for the rest of the book in contrasting instances of malice with those of neglect.

Burning the Books really begins to shine when it gets into more unique incidents of the modern era, where Ovenden examines the ethics around the ownership of knowledge. What was lost to the world when Lord Byron's friends decided to "protect his legacy" by burning his memoirs after his death? What is in Sylvia Plath's journals that Ted Hughes did not want the world to know? Who controls the narrative?

This brings us to the greatest threat to knowledge in our time: the preservation of data. In a world where politicians are on social media and data is owned by a small handful of large companies, it is becoming increasingly difficult to track online history and hold those in charge accountable. Ovenden effectively conveys the urgency of this threat but also offers ways that the average person can amplify the voices of those fighting for more funding toward digital preservation.

Burning the Books is ultimately a highly persuasive case for robust archiving, and it opens up ethical questions we will have to consider when weighing the importance of preserving knowledge against the right to destroy our own creations. The book itself serves as a collection of knowledge we have gained from the past, so that we may learn from it and guard ourselves against a potentially bleak future.