CHAPTER TWO

"A POWERFUL MEANS OF IMPROVING THE NEIGHBOURHOOD": SUBSCRIPTION LIBRARIES

On 1 May 1770, twenty local gentlemen met in a tavern in Kirkcudbright with ambitions to affect a cultural renaissance in their wider community. As the minutes record,

The meeting unanimously agree that a Public Library, established at this place upon a proper foundation and under proper regulations, will be attended with great improvement as well as entertainment; and many of them having previous to this day considered the matter privately, they composed a set of articles which they were of opinion might be properly submitted to the consideration of the subscribers.¹

The gathering constituted the great and the good of the local community, with Provost William Lenox, representatives of the 4th Earl of Selkirk (a dogged improver and a former student of Francis Hutcheson at Glasgow) and four prominent landholders leading the way. Six more merchant councillors were present, along with William Laurie and John Buchanan, collector and surveyor of the customs respectively, as well as the parish minister, Robert Muter, two lawyers and the surgeon John Walker.

On the most functional level, their new library was intended to facilitate “the immediate purchasing a collection of the most valuable books on antient and modern history, voyages travels Belles Lettres Agriculture etc.”, bringing within their collective compass a collection of prestigious and canonical books that many of them would not have been able to afford individually.² They thus reflected a growing fashion across Britain that sought to institutionalise the informal circulation of books that we introduced at the end of Chapter One.³ But such private

¹ Hornel Library MS4/26, Minute Book of the Kirkcudbright Subscription Library, 1 May 1770; for a general description of the Library, see F. J. L. Brown, “Kirkcudbright Public Library: an examination of an eighteenth century Scottish Subscription Library” (unpublished dissertation, held by Stewartry Museum).
² Kirkcudbright Minutes, 1 May 1770.
subscription libraries did not simply facilitate access to many of the books which interest us in this study. They also allowed provincial Scots to engage in some of the leading cultural priorities of the age, including the pursuit of politeness, sociability, and, above all, improvement. As the Kirkcudbright subscribers agreed, their “Public Library” (the name reflected their public-spirited associationalism rather than the library’s principles of access) was explicitly intended to contribute to the “great improvement” of intellectual culture in the town: “We the following subscribers considering the great utility of the above plan for establishing a public library at Kirkcudbright, do heartily approve of the same.”

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Despite Paul Kaufman's pessimism that evidence for historical library provision in Scotland is “widely scattered, obscure, uncharted, often painfully scant – and much that is so sorely needed is apparently lost”, enough material does survive to support a nationwide comparative

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