



THE COUNTRY HOUSE LIBRARY (by Mark Purcell; Yale, rrp £45) The ambiguity of the word library – both a collection of books and the room in which they are housed – cuts straight to the core of this new book, which happily connects the architectural and the bibliographical. It argues that the philistinism often associated with the country house has been overstated, that their libraries were not just showrooms lined with glittering, gold-tooled morocco bindings – though often that too – but, instead, that books were actually read in the great houses of the British Isles. In quietly polemical fashion the author offers a rebuttal to the prevailing orthodoxy (established by those ‘who would not know one end of an incunabular from the other’) that has privileged rooms over books; rather, he suggests, the two can only meaningfully be considered in tandem. In library design, especially, form follows function, and Purcell gives equal attention to shelving and library furniture as to Aldines and Caxtons.

Such rooms were built in any number of architectural idioms, from classical to Neo-Norman, but practical considerations were universal, with the library at Stourhead demonstrating how to ‘house as many books as possible with the greatest possible elegance’. The symbiotic relationship between books in a country-house library and architectural form could extend to the exterior. The classical façade of Castle Ward, County Down, creation of the local squire, derives from a design in Abraham Smith’s *Designs in Architecture*, a copy of which still sits in the library today. On an even broader scale, global – even cosmic – forces encouraged the forma-

tion of country-house collections, specifically ‘a sense of the workings of divine providence in the connection between print, Protestantism and emerging national greatness’. From bookshelves to divine providence is quite a leap but Purcell does it effortlessly.

Having reaffirmed the primacy of books, and reading, to the historiography of these libraries, the author is also alive to the rooms’ alternate use as comfortable social spaces, particularly post-Regency, and he does not deny the decorative impulse: ‘Books are so much nicer than wallpaper,’ he quotes one châtelaine as saying. Sometimes the library was combined with a billiard room, suggesting a less than donnish approach to the volumes therein.

Nor was green baize the worst distraction. While the learned

Lord Charlemont could refer to his library as a ‘favourite mistress’, others took a less metaphorical route from pleasures cerebral to carnal. The German visitor, and philanderer, Prince von Pückler-Muskau noted that the English country-house library was the site of ‘many a marriage, or seduction of the already married’, while at Knole newlyweds Lionel and Victoria Sackville were so taken with each other that she recorded in her diary the sites of their many energetic embraces, including, inevitably, the library. This is a wise, witty book combining impeccable scholarship with a clear love of books and country houses. Purcell notes at the beginning that such a ‘full survey... has not been published before’; by the end, the reader is convinced that it need not be again ■ WILLIAM LAFFAN is author of *Room for Books: Paintings of Irish Libraries* (Irish Georgian Society) ▷

