



London

johnlauner@aol.com Follow John on

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TALKING POINT

John Launer: The library, my treasure island

John Launer *GP educator and writer*

For one day last month I was stranded in a small Welsh town. My car and computer both needed essential repairs, and the weather was unsuitable for the long country walk I'd planned. I had to find a way of filling the day, equipped with only my wits and a mobile phone. After breakfast in the high street I made my way to the public library in a converted 16th century county hall. To my surprise, I had one of my most relaxing and pleasant days for quite a while.

Apart from exceptionally friendly staff, there were armchairs close to warm radiators, free use of computer stations and wi-fi, and even free coffee and tea. And, of course, there were the books. I can't remember when I last spent most of the day in a library. I certainly did so while I was at school, especially during holidays, when the local public library was a refuge from teenage angst and boredom. I carried on doing so at university and medical school.

In the early years of my career before the internet arrived, I may have been one of the last doctors to use the BMA library in Tavistock Square simply to browse the stacks, picking books and journal volumes to read at random and see what I could learn serendipitously. Rediscovering this joy in Denbigh last month was like visiting an unexpected treasure island that I half remembered from childhood. It was as warm, peaceful, and full of magic as I could have hoped.

Added to this was the consciousness of what public libraries represent in terms of civic values and communal generosity. At one point I overheard a librarian explaining to another new visitor that they'd only recently introduced free hot drinks, so that local people struggling with the cost of living could be somewhere warm and comfortable. One library user, who made himself a cup of tea and offered to make me one too, looked as though he'd possibly made it his daily base for that reason.

Public libraries stand alongside the NHS as symbols of what is best in our society: a resource that is open and welcoming to all, regardless of wealth, education, or social class. Being there made me think of the greatest of all Welsh politicians, Aneurin Bevan, and his passion for social justice. As well as being on the committee of the Workmen's Medical Aid Society in Tredegar in south Wales—arguably the model for the NHS—it's no surprise to find that he was also on the committee of the miners' library.¹

It's reassuring to know that there are pockets in our society where local institutions and individuals are still fired by Bevan's belief that knowledge and learning should be available to all, alongside free healthcare from the cradle to the grave.

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1 Jones D. In defence of the public library. Institute of Welsh Affairs. 24 Sep 2011. <https://www.iwa.wales/agenda/2011/09/in-defence-of-the-public-library>