

A Love Letter to Innerpeffray Library from author Alexander McCall Smith

Have you noticed how big everything is these days? Big roads, big buildings, big libraries ... The world gets smaller in one sense while it gets bigger in another. And all the while, we humans remain very much the same size, with much the same needs as we have always had. One of these needs is for small rooms with bookshelves that go up to the ceiling, with chairs tucked away in corners, and with just enough space to sit and read.

Dear Innerpeffray Library, I very rarely come to see you even if I belong to something called The Friends of Innerpeffray Library. But at least you know that you have these friends, and that they love you, in particular, and all libraries in general. It is possible, I think, to love one thing while you also love another: affections can be shared, and indeed the heart grows bigger, I think, if one shares in that way.

You are a very old library indeed. You have been there since 1680, tucked away in that lovely bit of Perthshire countryside, at the end of a Roman road lined with hedges and fields that put one in just the right mood for old square rooms and tiny staircases and books on all sorts of obscure subjects. There you are, in your beautiful little building, with its ancient kirk to keep it company. There you are – a building on a truly human scale, designed for one or two people at a time, reminding us how things were before the world became so big and impersonal.

People who come to read in your building think they have been there before, even if they have not. This, I think, is because they have seen you in one of those dreams in which they imagine a holy place, an ideal place, and they see something very much like you.

You have no computers – or none that I have seen. So many libraries today have become sheds for computers, with books being edged out, put away. You have none of that. Let books who are exiled by computers seek refuge here in your little reading room. You are there to receive them, to comfort them in a world that is turning against the book.

You are so generous. You were a free library back in the seventeenth century, and you still are. In keeping alive this tradition you are reminding us of what libraries are all about. You are about knowledge and the open and generous sharing of knowledge. You are about the good that comes from the written word in an age when there are so many lies around.

You are the senior library in Scotland. You are loved by those who know you, but you are happy to take on new friends. You are a little beacon. You really are.

Alexander McCall Smith