

Mexican Library History: A Survey of the Literature of the Last Fifteen Years

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There is a need for historical studies of libraries in Mexico, which has a rich library background. This article deals specifically with the historical research carried out during the last fifteen years by two Mexican institutions which has resulted in a number of works both comprehensive and profound. The contributions made by libraries to Mexican culture are highlighted, and the need for further research is discussed.

Introduction

Before libraries as we conceive of them today came into existence in Mexico with the arrival of the Spaniards, Mesoamerican civilizations used engravings and paintings in codices to transmit their culture. In prehispanic Mexico there were many *tlacuilos*, amanuenses in charge of the elaboration of manuscripts. The need to preserve these manuscripts obliged them to assign a place for keeping them, known as *amoxcalli*. The most famous of these prehispanic libraries were located in Texcoco and Tlaltelolco. Unfortunately, these libraries were destroyed during the conquest.

The culture of Mexico is one of the richest and most ancient in the western hemisphere. The library of the Cathedral in 1534 was perhaps the first official library of the Americas. Mexico was the first country with a printing press, established by Juan Cromberger and Juan Pablos in 1539, and thus was the site where the first book was printed in the "New World." The first university, La Real y Pontificia Universidad [Royal and Pontifical University], was established in Mexico (1551–1553). The first national bibliography, *Bibliotheca Mexicana* (Eguiara y Eguren, 1755), was compiled and published there. The largest libraries in Latin America during colonial times were those of the Spaniards and Creoles in Mexico. These outstanding libraries, such as the Biblioteca Palafoxiana and the Biblioteca Turriana, transmitted the European culture to the new world and served the Spaniards and Creoles in their subjugation of the native Indian and mestizo cultures.

After the struggle for independence (1810–1821), power disputes between conservatives and liberals culminated in the restoration of the Republic in 1867 and the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz (1876–1910). The liberals conceived of the library as an instrument of culture and progress, establishing the National Library and public libraries “to meet an emotive and romantic need to have libraries as a symbol of modernity and progress, regardless its pragmatic usefulness.”¹ During the nineteenth century, the “impressive and venerable” museums of the erudite prevailed. Most of these were restricted to very elite patrons. At that time, 80 percent of the Mexican population (those ten years of age and older) was illiterate.

After the triumph of the revolution in 1910, an effort was made to make books available to all citizens. This effort reached its apogee during the 1920s when the *Secretaría de Educación Pública* [Ministry of Public Education] (SEP) was created, headed by José Vasconcelos. More than 2,500 public libraries were opened throughout the country, and thousands of works, from classics to technical books, were published and distributed to the most remote locations. However, this project lacked the organization needed to sustain its work, and it began to decline during the 1940s.

In the 1950s government support of university libraries began and has continued for forty years, resulting in the development of libraries such as the *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México* [National Autonomous University of Mexico] (UNAM). The growth of important specialized libraries followed, particularly those of official institutions in the scientific-technical fields. The number of technical libraries increased with the establishment of the *Consejo Nacional de Ciencia y Tecnología* [National Science and Technology Council] in 1970. Public libraries experienced a revival in 1983 as a result of the National Plan for Public Libraries. Since then more than four thousand libraries have opened throughout the country.

Since the first book arrived in Mexico, the breviary which Jerónimo de Aguilar, the interpreter of Cortés, brought from Spain in 1511, there has been very little study of the long history of books and libraries in Mexico. Only the public libraries conduct their own projects of historical research. Neither the university libraries nor the specialized libraries have been the subject of historical documentation. The statements of Nettie Lee Benson in 1971 are still valid: in Latin America there are few works of library history and no memoirs of librarians. The scant documentation that does exist consists largely of lists of names of directors, volume numbers, and types of materials from particular libraries—that is, historical data rather than true histories relating the role and impact of the libraries within the communities they serve.² Mexican library

historiography is very scarce indeed, comprising only fifty titles of short works such as articles and pamphlets and very few books written before the 1980s, and a similarly small number of more comprehensive and profound works published during the last fifteen years.

The absence of historical information is due in part to the demise of librarians like those of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as Cruzado, Payno, Inguíniz, Teixidor, and Carrasco Puente, who were interested in the historical study of libraries, especially the National Library. Later, outstanding historians such as de la Torre and Villar made minor contributions. These librarians and historians also contributed to the history of the book and the printing press in Mexico.

The professionalization of librarians after the establishment of library schools in 1945 resulted in a primary interest in the organization of modern libraries, thus leaving behind historical research. It was not until the 1980s that historical librarianship projects arose at two institutions. The first was at the Centro Universitario de Investigaciones Bibliotecológicas [University Center for Library Science Research] (CUIB) of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, founded in 1981. The second project was that of the Dirección General de Bibliotecas [General Direction of Libraries] of the Secretaría de Educación Pública, one of the projects of the National Program of Public Libraries in Mexico under the Dirección de Investigación y Desarrollo de Recursos Humanos [Direction of Research and Development of Human Resources].

Historical Research in the Centro Universitario de Investigaciones Bibliotecológicas

The CUIB has published a number of manuals, books, and courses to support library activities in Mexico, as well as the journal *Investigación Bibliotecológica* [Librarianship Research]. It has also devoted its resources to historical research aimed at rescuing and systematizing historical data, a project which has influenced the structure of librarianship in Mexico. The following are the most important historical works produced by the project so far:

Un mundo poco visible, imprenta y bibliotecas en México durante el Siglo XIX [An Almost Invisible World: Printing Press and Libraries in the Nineteenth Century]. Ramiro Lafuente López, 1992. In this work the intention of the author is to offer a "history of the relationship system constituted by the social agents linked directly to the public circulation of printings. This system includes writers, artists, publishers, critics, teachers, librarians and readers in general. . . ."3 It deals mainly with public libraries, the National Library, and book marketing.

Educación bibliotecológica en México, 1915–1954 [Library Education in Mexico, 1915–1954]. Estela Morales, 1989. This work records the history of professional education in Mexico through 1954. In addition to bibliographic research, the author incorporates interviews with the professionals involved.

Mesa Redonda: Las bibliotecas presentes en la vida de México; de Carranza a nuestros días [Round Table: The Libraries in the Life of Mexico from Carranza until Now]. Compiled by Estela Morales, 1986. The participants of the round table present a general description of library events during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Las bibliotecas en los Informes Presidenciales: 1879–1988 [The Libraries in the Presidential Address: 1879–1988]. Adolfo Rodríguez, 1990. This is a collection of statements about libraries made by the presidents of Mexico in their presidential addresses, which they are required by law to present to the Congress.

Historical Research in the Dirección General de Bibliotecas

In the last decade the Dirección General de Bibliotecas at the SEP, currently part of the Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes [National Council for Culture and Arts] (CNCA),⁴ has supported research on the history of public libraries in Mexico. The project was begun at the end of 1983 by Rosa María Fernández de Zamora, then Directora de Investigación y Desarrollo de Recursos Humanos (1983–1986), with the support of Ana María Magaloni, Directora General de Bibliotecas. The purpose of the project is to enrich the culture of Mexican librarianship with the results of this historical research.

The research results are being published in two series. The first series, a general history entitled *La Historia de las Bibliotecas en México [History of Libraries in Mexico]*, is a five-volume work in progress presenting the general history of libraries in Mexico from colonial times to the creation of the Departamento de Bibliotecas of the SEP in 1921 and focusing on the development of public libraries. So far, three volumes—one about colonial times, one covering the nineteenth century, and one dealing with the period from 1910 to 1940—have been published. The other series is the *Historia de las Bibliotecas en los Estados de la República Mexicana [History of Libraries in the States of the Mexican Republic]*, the purpose of which is to trace the progress of libraries in each of the thirty-one states of Mexico, beginning with general library development during colonial times and then examining public libraries in particular. The histories of twenty-one states have been published thus far.

In order to get the project off the ground, it was necessary first to establish guidelines the researchers were to follow in their historical search, and second, to seek the appropriate researchers for the projected works. The guidelines distributed to potential authors of the history of the states included the following:

(1) The purpose of this research project is to document the history of public libraries in Mexico. The researchers must have a clear conceptualization of the public library in Mexico.

(2) It is necessary to follow the chronology corresponding to the most significant historical-political periods in Mexico.

(3) The socio-cultural context must be taken into account, especially the following aspects: population, education level, economic development, political environment, cultural environment, and federal or state education policy.

(4) The work must include the following considerations: administrative organization and legislation supporting the libraries, main libraries founded, their location and buildings occupied, budget, collections, organization, personnel, users, and services.

(5) The bibliographic sources consulted and the files and documents reviewed must be recorded.

(6) Illustrations, maps, tables, statistics, etc., must be included. Researchers for the general series devoted to a specific epoch were asked to follow points 3 through 6.

The Dirección de Investigación y Desarrollo de Recursos Humanos organized the project as follows. In the Federal District an interdisciplinary team of librarians and historians was formed to work on different aspects of the general history of Mexican libraries. They held meetings once a week, working in seminars in which all the members took part and contributed their ideas. Close contact was maintained with all those researching the history of the states, and they were all to be invited to the seminars in the Federal District.

Perhaps the most difficult task for those heading the project was to answer the question, Who was going to elaborate the history? The librarian? The historian? A combination of the two specialties—that is, a librarian and a historian working together on some issues—was considered. However, this was not possible, since the librarians who were available could not devote full time to this research. The history of the states was to be carried out by the most outstanding local historians. They were invited: some accepted, others did not. The general history was to be produced by specialists in specific epochs.

The result is that most of the histories were not written by librarians but by historians. Given this, one might ask, Is the librarian unable to

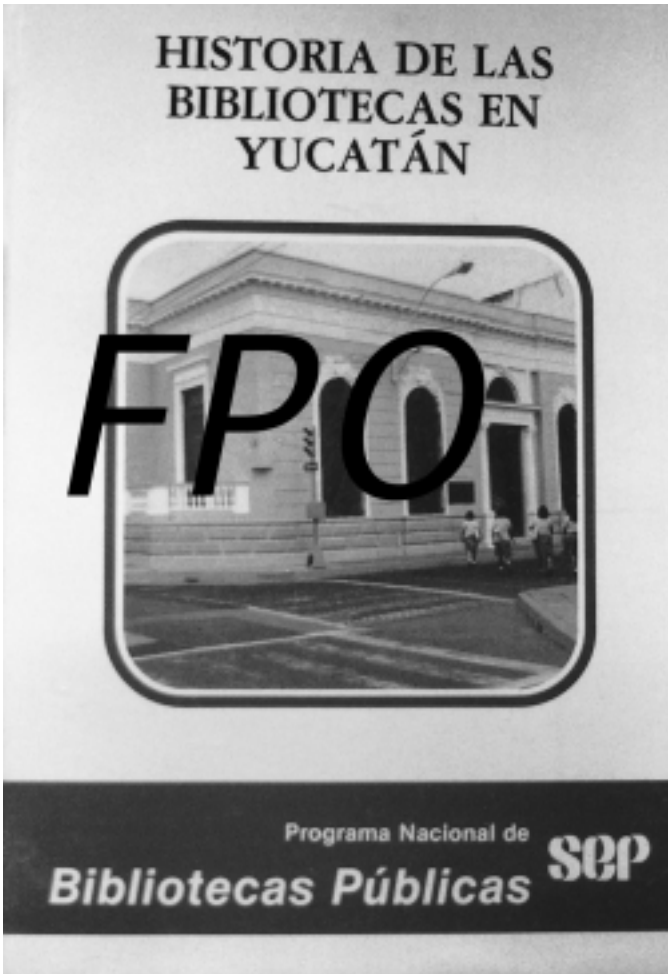
conduct historical research about his or her own profession? I think that, in most cases, the problem is not one of inability but rather of a lack of time and a grounding in cultural history. In the case of the historians, it was necessary to familiarize them with the problems of librarianship.

Of the twenty-one state histories and the three general histories already published, fourteen were carried out by historians, two by a specialist in classical arts, three by librarians with backgrounds in history (the history of the libraries of the states of Aguascalientes and Zacatecas were written by Ramiro Lafuente, and that of Jalisco by Helen Ladrón de Guevara). The five remaining histories (of the states of Guerrero, Morelos, Chihuahua, Sonora, and Yucatan) were elaborated by librarians. The states whose histories have been published so far are Aguascalientes, Baja California Sur, Campeche, Chiapas, Chihuahua, Guerrero, Hidalgo, Jalisco, Michoacan, Nayarit, Oaxaca, Puebla, Queretaro, San Luis Potosi, Sonora, Tlaxcala, Veracruz, Yucatan, and Zacatecas.

The following is a summary of the three books of the general series which have been published at the present time:

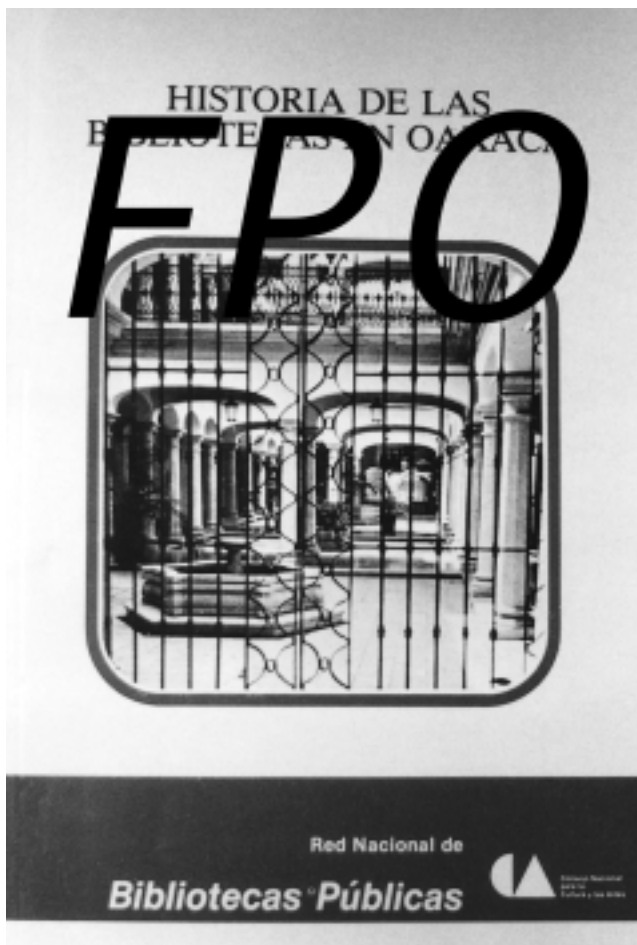
Historia de las bibliotecas novohispanas [History of Novo-Hispano Libraries]. Ignacio Osorio Romero. 1986. 282 pp. The author examines the libraries of religious orders and private libraries established in colonial Mexico in the sixteenth century. This study also traces the history of the libraries of Real y Pontificia Universidad [Royal and Pontifical University], La Real Academia de San Carlos [Royal Academy of San Carlos] (devoted to the plastic arts), El Real Colegio de Minería [The Royal College of Mining], and the Biblioteca Turriana, the first public library in Mexico City which flourished during the eighteenth century. Romero writes,

Against the opinions which used to characterize the Novo-Hispano culture of the Sixteenth Century as eminently medieval, the fact that the libraries created in that time were the result of the conception of the modern renaissance library is highlighted. . . . The Novo-Hispano libraries served an oligarchic white social class formed by Europeans and Creoles. With the exception of a brief period of time, during the year following the conquest when a select group of noble Indians had access to the European culture, the book and the libraries were another of the privileges of the white population during the colonial period. . . . These large libraries were the bibliographic legacy which the New Spain inherited to the independent Mexico; their collections at the moment of the independence were lacking of importance and they reflected the ideological interests of past times; but as a whole they were the witnesses and,



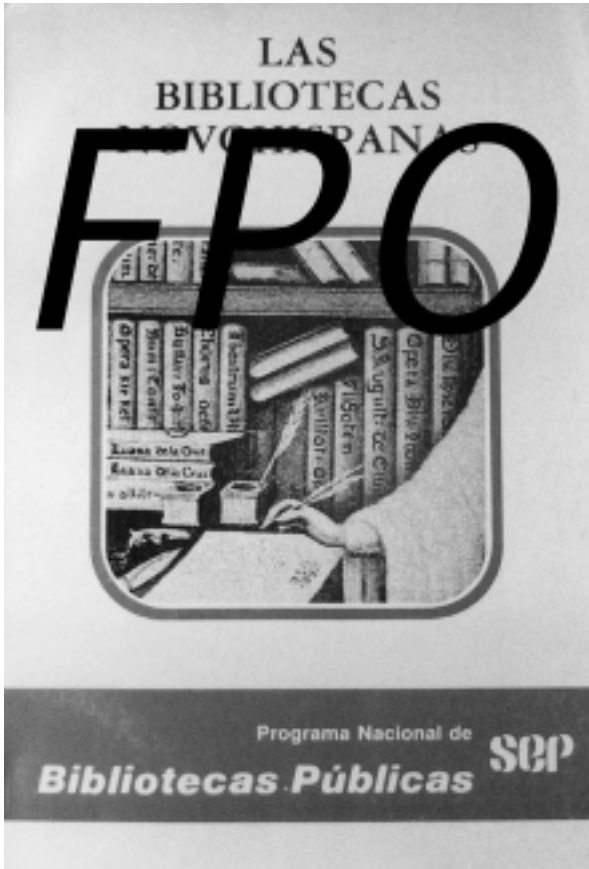
in many cases, the agents of costly scientific and ideological struggles through which the Novo-Spaniards took possession, first of the European point of view of the world and, secondly, through which they develop their own historical project.⁵

Las bibliotecas mexicanas en el siglo XIX [The Mexican Libraries during the Nineteenth Century]. Carmen Vázquez Mantecón, Alfonso Flamenco Ramírez, and Carlos Herrera Bervera, 1987. 254 pp. In this book the authors analyze the political and cultural circumstances under which the libraries developed during the nineteenth century after Mexico attained



its independence. They devote special attention to the establishment of the National Library and state public libraries. Carmen Mantecón writes,

Our intention is to explain all of this in our work. . . . Firstly, the origins of the project for the National Library were investigated from the decade of the 1920's, in such a changeable century. The history written about this period has undoubtedly forgotten the review of the documents included herein which certainly modify the point of view of such reformers. Then, the comprehensive view of the book, the library and the Mexican reader is presented facing the attempts of the State for the creation of a public culture. . . .



We consider we have contributed in some extent to the history of the National Library from another point of view but for all the educational and cultural view given in the pages of this book.⁶

Las bibliotecas públicas en México, 1910–1940. [The Public Libraries in Mexico: 1910–1940]. Guadalupe Quintana Pali, Cristina Gil Villegas, and Guadalupe Tolosa Sánchez, 1988. 485 pp. In this work the authors study a very important period in the history of Mexico, beginning in 1910 with the Mexican Revolution, which brought important changes to Mexican public libraries. With the establishment of the Secretaría de Educación Pública in 1921, a fascinating library movement was begun, promoted by the first Secretary of Education, José Vasconcelos. Guadalupe Quintana notes that

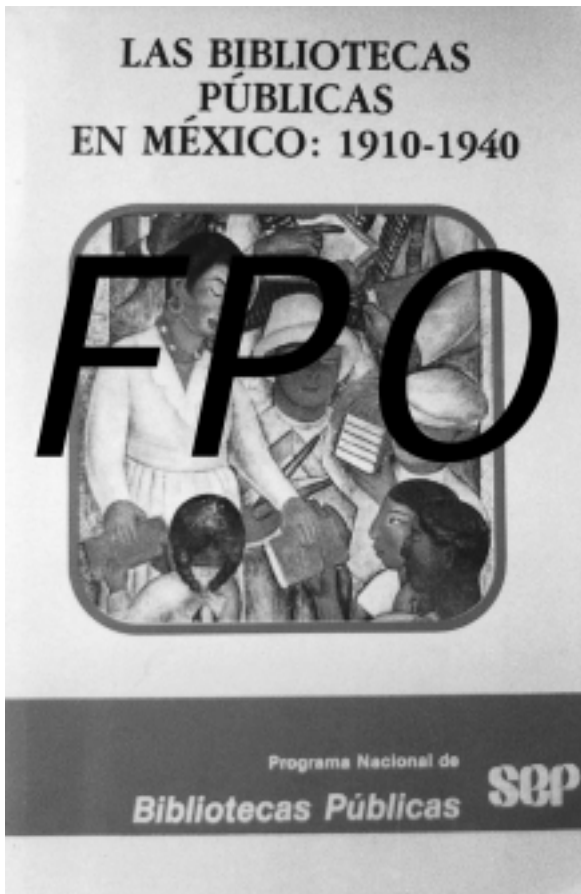


during which the public libraries were considered for the first time a basic element for the educational process of the population and they were living, dynamic and cultural institutions, open to everyone. . . . More than a simple account of the main events related to the life of the libraries during those years, in this work we have recreated the social and cultural environment and, in many cases the political aspects as well, under which the main protagonists thought and acted. We think that this is the only way to completely

understand the efforts made by these men; the deep meaning of the librarian work in those years, a work that even today we have not stopped admiring, and from which we can take countless experiences for our cultural present and future.⁷

Other Historical Research

Other historical research which has not been promoted by these two institutions is summarized below. As for key figures of library history, only José Vasconcelos has been the subject of biographies, a study carried out by Adolfo Rodríguez Gallardo and a book by Linda Sametz de Walerstein.



Vasconcelos, el hombre del libro; la época de oro de las bibliotecas [Vasconcelos, The Man of the Book: The Golden Era of the Libraries]. Linda Sametz de Walerstein. Mexico: UNAM, Instituto de Investigaciones Bibliográficas, 1991. 227 pp. In her work the author studies Vasconcelos, a twentieth-century politician who was one of the most intelligent, interesting, and controversial men of his time and a promoter of libraries in the 1920s. During his term, more than 2,500 public libraries were opened throughout the country.

La Biblioteca Palafoxiana de Puebla. [The Biblioteca Palafoxiana of Puebla]. Efraín Castro Morales Puebla: Editorial del Estado de Puebla, 1981. 250 pp.

Santa Cruz de Tlaltelolco: la primera biblioteca académica de las Américas [Santa Cruz de Tlaltelolco: The First Academic Library of the Americas]. Mexico: Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 1982, 101 pp. (Archivo Histórico Diplomático Mexicano.) In this study, in addition to providing the history of the Colegio and its library, the author reconstructs the catalogue of the library's collection, some of which is now located at the Sutro Library in San Francisco.

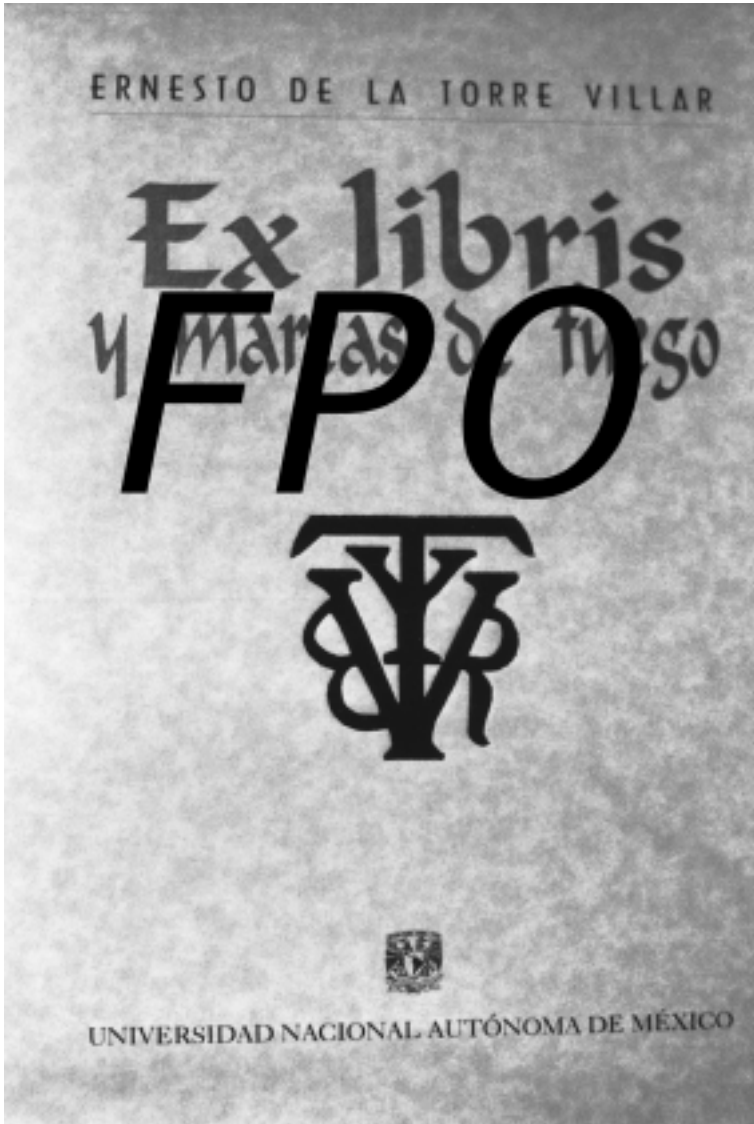
Guía de Archivos y Bibliotecas privados. [Guide of Private Archives and Libraries]. Asociación Mexicana de Archivos y Bibliotecas Privados, A.C., 1994. 112 pp. Besides the information given on the names, characteristics of collections, and locations of the nineteen institutions, a brief history of each of the libraries is also provided.

Ex-libris y marcas de fuego. [Ex-libris and Ownership Marks]. Ernesto de la Torre Villar. Presentation by Mario Melgar Adalid. México: UNAM, Dirección General de Fomento Editorial, 1994, 143 pp. Illustrated. (Colección Biblioteca del Editor.) This is a work of related interest, in that each *ex-libris* or ownership mark represents a library. It examines the history of these marks in foreign countries and in Mexico and provides a valuable historiography with excellent illustrations.

The history of libraries and bibliographic studies of outstanding librarians have occasionally been the subject of theses. From 1980 to 1994, the following were produced:

Revisión histórica de las bibliotecas públicas establecidas en el D.F.: antecedentes para la proposición de un nuevo modelo [Historical Review of the Public Libraries Established in the Federal District: Background for the Proposal of a New Model]. Juana Zahar Vergara. Thesis presented at the Colegio de Bibliotecología of UNAM, México, 1985.

Los "libros pintados" del México antiguo y colonial: joyas pictográficas de la Biblioteca Nacional de Antropología e Historia [The "Painted Books" from Antique and Colonial Mexico: Pictorial Treasures from the National Library of Anthropology and History]. Saul Armendáriz Sánchez and Tomasa de Jesús Guevara. Thesis presented at the Escuela Nacional de Biblioteconomía y Archi-



onomía (ENBA), México, 1990. 288 pp. This study focuses on the history, classification, and preservation of codices owned by the Biblioteca Nacional de Antropología e Historia.

La función del tlacuilo, los amoxtlis y los amoxcallis [The Function of the Tlacuilo, the Amoxtlis, and the Amoxcallis]. José Angel Vázquez Martínez. Thesis

presented in the Colegio de Bibliotecología of the UNAM, México, 1993. 113 pp.

Análisis de la obra bibliotecaria de Juana Manrique de Lara. [Analysis of the Library Work from Juana Manrique de Lara]. María Teresa González Romero. Thesis presented at the Colegio de Bibliotecología of the UNAM, México, 1994, 198 pp. This thesis is concerned with the bibliographic work of this outstanding Mexican librarian who worked and promoted public libraries from the 1920s to the 1940s.

In addition to these works, there are two books in press at this time:

La Asociación Mexicana de Bibliotecarios, notas para su historia [The Mexican Library Association, Notes for its History]. Rosa María Fernández de Zamora. This work provides a view of the development of the most important professional group in Mexico, dating from 1924.

La Biblioteca del H. Congreso de la Unión 1821–1994. Su historia. Sus recursos. Sus servicios [The Library of Congress of the Union 1821–1994: Its History, Its Resources, Its Services]. Rosa María Fernández de Zamora and Margarita Martínez Leal. This history of library services is intended for Mexican federal legislators.

Final Considerations

The researcher faces a difficult task in writing the history of libraries in Mexico, due largely to the lack of primary and secondary information. He or she must undertake a complex and thorough search through primary sources, such as the archives and libraries of public and private offices, and through the records of the libraries themselves, which are not always well organized. These documents must be read very carefully and analyzed meticulously, and the events must be interpreted and understood in context. In addition to these difficulties, there is also a lack of efficient secondary sources which would make the work of researchers easier, including general and special bibliographies, periodical indexes, and documents.

During the last fifteen years in Mexico there has been considerable progress in the research and documentation of the history of public libraries. Nevertheless, the histories of the university libraries and of the specialized and private libraries are still largely unexplored. Because Mexican university libraries have been providing their services for so many years, they necessarily constitute a very rich field of historical study. Such is the case of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), at which there are approximately 170 libraries. The Dirección General de Bibliotecas and its Biblioteca Central have played a very decisive role in the development of UNAM, and its history has not yet

been written. In 1976 I conducted a modest study of the university libraries, to which there has been no follow-up at this time. The Biblioteca Daniel Cosío Villegas from the Colegio de México and other specialized libraries face the same situation. Even the Biblioteca Nacional is waiting for a comprehensive history to be written that includes its last fifty years.

So far, there have been no studies of the influences on the organization of collections and services of Mexican libraries. However, it can be said that in general during the colonial period, the libraries were influenced by Spanish trends. In the nineteenth century, French trends prevailed. And during the twentieth century, trends from the United States dominated Mexican libraries. An examination of these influences would make for a very interesting study in comparative librarianship.

Then the question arises, Why must we be concerned about the history of libraries at a time when overwhelming technology, the influences of materialism, utilitarianism, and marketing, and concern for the future absorb all the time of librarians? It is said that people look to the past in times of crisis, that historical wisdom is essential to civilization. Besides, there is an intellectual legitimacy imparted by the study of the history of a profession. Librarianship, like any other profession, needs to know its origins, to understand why and how libraries of the past were organized; the role they played within their communities; their contribution to the cultural growth of the societies they served; and how they informed the identity of modern Mexican libraries.

Linda Sametz de Walerstein, in her book about Vasconcelos, writes,

On the other hand, there is the fact that despite having been in the classrooms of the Colegio de Bibliotecología from the UNAM during my bachelor studies, I do not remember having been taught the roots and the beginning of this profession in Mexico; however, I think that the future generations need this knowledge to be closer to their profession, to identify themselves with it.⁸

The histories of Mexican libraries that have proliferated in the last fifteen years have not yet been evaluated from a critical point of view, but they undoubtedly constitute a great contribution to the history of Mexico in particular and of Latin America in general.

Notes

1. Rosa María Fernández de Zamora, "Siglo XIX," *Mesa redonda. Las bibliotecas en la vida de México. De Carranza a nuestros días* (México: UNAM, CUIB, 1986), 46.

2. Nettie Lee Benson, "La historia de las bibliotecas en América Latina. Una evaluación crítica de su bibliografía," *Apuntes bibliotecológicos* 3 (1971): 4.
3. Ramiro Lafuente López, *Un mundo poco visible: imprenta y bibliotecas en México durante el siglo XIX* (México: UNAM, CUIB, 1992), 1.
4. The Subsecretaría de Cultura of the Secretaría de Educación Pública became Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes in December 1988.
5. Ignacio Osorio Romero, *Las bibliotecas novohispanas* (México: SEP, DGB, 1986), 257, 260.
6. Carmen Vázquez Mantecón, *Las bibliotecas mexicanas en el siglo XIX* (México: SEP, DGB, 1987), 11, 14.
7. Guadalupe Quintana Pali, *Las bibliotecas públicas en México: 1910-1940* (México: SEP, DGB, 1988), 16, 19.
8. Linda Sametde de Walerstein, *Vasconcelos el hombre del libro: la época de oro de las bibliotecas* (México: UNAM, IIB, 1991), 12.

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