

American Library History Literature, 1947–1997: Theoretical Perspectives?

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An examination of fifty years of published research literature in American library history that was facilitated by the Library History Round Table reveals a significant and welcome increase in the diversity of coverage but a relative dearth of theoretical perspective. The author argues that after establishing a substantial base of quality literature, the time has now come for American library historians to harness ideas articulated by critical theorists in order to examine a social construction of reality and a process of cultural consumption. He also argues that American library historians need to join with social and cultural historians to help locate the library in a larger context of social and cultural forces.

Hard to believe it's been twenty-five years since I was introduced to a personalized world of American library history. The occasion was the 1974 ALA conference in New York; I was a month away from getting my M.L.S. and Ph.D. in American history and had been invited to an informal gathering of American library historians in a hotel suite. Mike Harris set up the meeting. His article, "The Purpose of a Public Library, a Revisionist Interpretation," had appeared in *Library Journal* the previous September and had set on edge the world of American library history, until then so used to celebrating itself.¹ His thesis was simple: American public libraries were agents of social control exercised by members of the upper classes, who sought to influence the behavior of the masses that frequented them. Mike was eager to engage a dialogue on revisionist ideas about American library history he had developed from theoretical perspectives imported from educational and social history, so he had gathered to the meeting some of American library history's giants.

In one chair was Jesse Shera, whose solidly researched *Foundations of the Public Library* (1949) had temporarily interrupted the celebration of American library history.² "Judged by every standard and measured by every criterion," Jesse had concluded in his book (I actually memorized the sentence before attending the meeting), "the public library is revealed as a social agency dependent upon the objectives of society. It

followed—it did not create—social change.” In another chair was Sidney Ditzion, whose *Arsenals of a Democratic Culture* (1947) represented a valiant attempt by a consensus historian to link library history to a new social history just then emerging.³

In a third chair was Laurel Grotzinger, whose biography of Katharine Sharp had sent out a clarion call that women’s contributions to American library history would no longer be ignored.⁴ Also there was Dee Garrison, who had just finished a history dissertation that eventually turned into *Apostles of Culture*, which would marry the solid scholarship of Shera and Ditzion with the revisionism of Harris.⁵ Sitting on a divan was Phyllis Dain, whose history of the New York Public Library had set a new standard for the history of public library institutions.⁶ And there was Don Davis, already plotting a series of bibliographical projects to bring organization to a wandering literature. Pretty heady company for someone just starting a career in the craft. The animated conversation that took place in that room convinced me that American library history had a promising future. I was anxious to become part of it.

The year before that meeting I had tried to introduce myself to American library history through its literature. I admit I wasn’t very impressed. Other than the bright spots mentioned above, most history (it seemed to me) sought to celebrate, not analyze, and most was based on analysis of secondary or published primary sources available in any good research library, not on unique unpublished primary sources in manuscript collections housed in archival depositories across the nation. Most also seemed narrowly focused, not historically contextualized to the culture in which its subject matter existed and of which it was only a part. And a lot of it was contained in dissertations, master’s theses, and seminar papers of marginal quality. Scarecrow had published many of the dissertations as monographs, but at the time the *Journal of Library History* carried the lion’s share of the literature, with *Library Quarterly* running a distant second. Both were fed copy via a series of forums. Every summer the American Library History Round Table sponsored programs at ALA conferences. In addition, Library History Seminars that moved around the country were held quinquennially.

Certainly this sizable secondary literature did a good job of unearthing most of the details of American library history, but it didn’t do much for perspective. My American history doctoral training had taught me to value extensive research into primary source materials (no matter where they were located) and then to relate the results of that research to a wider body of American history literature. The purpose of studying history, I believed, was to augment understanding of the present, and critical analysis was crucial to that enterprise. Because celebrating the past simply couldn’t do the whole job, I could understand why the library

profession did not take its own history very seriously, at least not until Mike's 1973 essay.

In this special commemorative issue on the fifty-year history of the Library History Round Table, *L&C* editors have asked me to review from theoretical perspectives the American library history literature published in the last half century in about twenty pages. In terms of volume, that's a difficult task that will allow me only to concentrate on the best or the most unique. In terms of theoretical perspectives, however, that's relatively easy. Like librarians in general, American library historians have assumed a basic social good in the institutions, the professional expertise, and the people they study and have tended to look at their arena of scholarship from the inside out. To stretch a metaphor, they generally study the history of individual trees with little attention to the ecological patterns and changes in the much larger forest in which these trees are rooted, grow, and survive, prosper, or die. And because librarianship itself has not generated influential or significant theoretical perspectives (it is focused mostly on process, seeking to answer "how" rather than "why" questions), American library history has lacked theoretical diversity. I conclude that, with few exceptions (like Mike Harris's essay and Dee Garrison's book), this in large part explains why it has been of marginal value to the profession and of limited value to historians working in other sectors of American history.

In a way, it's a bit awkward for me even to recount the history of American library history literature published in the last half century, since for the past twenty-five years I've spent my professional life attempting to contribute actively to its quantity and (I hope) its quality. In fact, a good share of this brief journey through American library history literature published between 1947 and 1997 feels like autobiography. And because I know and am friends with most of the people I cite here, I am probably more inclined to dull the critical edge that distance (in time and place) makes more likely. In addition, as a coeditor I stand with Ken Carpenter at the front end of what we hope will be a multivolume history of librarianship in the United States that will build on the literature of the past but at the same time locate the roles libraries, librarians, and librarianship have played in the nation's social, cultural, intellectual, and institutional multicultural history.⁷

In general, in this essay I ignore master's theses and doctoral dissertations (I hope the best of the latter will eventually be published as books) and also concentrate more on books than articles. To organize my discussion of the literature I adopt some categories familiar to readers of American library history (e.g., bibliographies and reference literature, biography, education, associations), but because I perceive the structure of the profession somewhat differently than many of my colleagues, I also

create a few new categories (e.g., “institution,” which will cover libraries of all types; “expertise,” which will cover literature addressing public and technical services in libraries; general historical studies of the profession and its activities; and “print culture history,” which represents a new interdisciplinary area of scholarship that I think has tremendous potential to help contextualize the more accurate and comprehensive role that American libraries have played in a larger world of social, intellectual, and cultural history). And within “biography” I also address “collective biographies” of women’s and African-American library history literature, the vast majority of which found its way into print only after 1974. Mike Harris’s essay certainly did signal a shift in American library history literature. It not only gave historical understanding to the rebels fighting the ALA establishment at the time, but it also encouraged voices heretofore residing outside a WASP heterosexual male-dominated literature to make their own history known to the profession.

Bibliographies and Reference Literature

The starting point for anyone interested in secondary sources in American library history should be the biennial literature review essays included since 1967 in the *Journal of Library History* and its successor, *Libraries & Culture*. Mike Harris wrote the first essay, Ed Goedeken the last one published.⁸ In between Mike paired with Don Davis for one essay, then I took over for six essays from the late 1970s to early 1990s and was succeeded by Joanne Passet for one essay, who was then succeeded by Ed. Largely from these essays and earlier bibliographical work, Harris and Davis compiled *American Library History: A Bibliography* (1978), later superseded by Don Davis and Mark Tucker’s *American Library History: A Comprehensive Guide to the Literature* (1989).⁹ Anyone interested in the published literature should start with Davis and Tucker, then supplement it with subsequently published biennial essays. Because so much American library history literature exists in unpublished form (much of which Davis and Tucker cite), scholars can amass additional factual material from the seminar papers, master’s theses, and dissertations listed first in two editions of Mike Harris’s *Guide to Research in American Library History*, later revised and greatly expanded in Art Young’s *American Library History: A Bibliography of Dissertations and Theses*.¹⁰

Other useful bibliographies more focused chronologically or by type of library include *Libraries in American Periodicals before 1876*, Robert Winans’s *Descriptive Checklist of Book Catalogues Separately Printed in America, 1693–1800* (which includes listings of private and social library collections), and Bob Singerman’s *American Library Book Catalogues, 1801–1875*.¹¹ And since 1933 the H. W. Wilson Company’s *Library Literature* has

indexed the American library history literature published in selected library periodicals.

A few general encyclopedias exist. The third edition of the *World Encyclopedia of Library and Information Services* contains much historical information, but more historically focused is the one-volume *Encyclopedia of Library History* that Don Davis and I completed in 1994.¹² Also useful is the *International Encyclopedia of Information and Library Science* and the multivolume *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science*.¹³ American library history has also been served by a number of textbooks.¹⁴ Betty Stone's *American Library Development, 1600–1899* is a useful compendium of basic data.¹⁵

Biography

For the most part, American library history biographers have placed a highly positive spin on their protagonists. The best attempt more balance and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of their subjects. This section subdivides into four categories: general biographical reference works, separately published biographies, separately published autobiographies, and works of collective biography on women and African Americans in American library history. I conclude with a brief subsection subtitled “Blind Spots.”

Biographical Reference Works

The starting point for biographical sketches of notable librarians remains the *Dictionary of American Library Biography* (library historians refer to it as “DALB”), edited in 1978 by Bohdan Wynar, and its *Supplement*, which I edited in 1990.¹⁶ The former contains 302 biographical sketches, the latter adds 51 more. Both include all deceased Librarians of Congress and presidents of the American Library Association; both generally celebrate more than contextualize their subjects. To each sketch is attached a brief bibliography that lists relevant primary source material. Additional biographical sketches of living and deceased librarians can be found in the *ALA World Encyclopedia of Library and Information Services*. Coverage of American librarians has been increased in the recently published *American National Biography*, worthy successor to the *Dictionary of American Biography*.¹⁷ Future American library history biographical reference tools should model their scholarship on *ANB* sketches.

Between 1924 and 1953 the American Library Association published an American Library Pioneer series that also tended to celebrate the lives of the profession's heroes rather than analyze their roles. Only the

biography of Charles Coffin Jewett and Emily Danton's *Pioneering Leaders in Librarianship* have been published since 1947.¹⁸ In 1975 Libraries Unlimited started a Heritage of Librarianship Series and in the next five years published rather positive biobibliographical volumes on Jewett, Ainsworth Rand Spofford, Charles Ammi Cutter, Melvil Dewey, and Justin Winsor.¹⁹

Biographies

Two works published in 1963 established new standards for American library history biography: Ed Holley's award-winning *Charles Evans: American Bibliographer* and Bill Williamson's *William Frederick Poole and the Modern Library Movement*.²⁰ Both are grounded in research into primary source materials, both attempt to contextualize their protagonists in a larger professional world, both identify and address their subject's strengths and weaknesses. A worthy predecessor to Holley and Williamson is E. M. Fleming's work on R. R. Bowker.²¹ Worthy successors include Laurel Grotzinger's favorable biography of Katharine Sharp, Peggy Sullivan's admirable work on Carl Milam, Marion Casey's excellent *Charles McCarthy*, John Richardson's careful piece on Pierce Butler, and Lee Shiflett's recently published work on Louis Shores.²²

Perhaps no figure in American library history has drawn so much attention as Melvil Dewey, our profession's most enigmatic pioneer. Grosvenor Dawe's authorized and highly reverential biography was published shortly after Dewey's death in 1931. It was followed in 1944 by Fremont Rider's brief work for the American Library Pioneer series. In 1978 Sarah Vann did a very favorable sketch of Dewey in the Heritage of Librarianship Series; in 1981 Forest Press hosted a seminar on Dewey and his classification, then later published the proceedings. The latest addition to Dewey biographical coverage is my own *Irrepressible Reformer*, which carefully examines Dewey in the context of his time, looks at the whole man (halos and warts, including his anti-Semitism and sexual harassment), and at the same time grounds a narrative of his fascinating past and the influential role he played in structuring the American library profession in an analysis of scores of relevant archival collections across the country.²³

Autobiographies

American library history now has a creditable body of autobiographies. Charles Compton's *Memories of a Librarian* is still worth a read.²⁴ Larry Powell's *Fortune and Friendship* (and the sequel *Life Goes On*), Keyes Metcalf's *Random Recollections*, Ralph Ellsworth's *Ellsworth on Ellsworth*,

Robert Downs's *Perspectives on the Past*, and Bill Eschelman's *No Silence! A Library Life* are also useful, if not particularly forthcoming and critical.²⁵ Autobiographies of Edith Guerrier, Annie McPheeters, and Mary V. Gaver document work lives in a feminized profession, yet in general all three sidestep the issues of gender that affected their work and careers.²⁶ McPheeters's book is particularly interesting; in it she reflects on her life as a black woman dedicated to serving the black community in an institution administratively controlled by whites. Jane Pejsa's *Gratia Countryman* quotes so extensively from her protagonist's letters that her book nearly constitutes autobiography.²⁷ Careful but brief autobiographical statements of nine late-twentieth-century American library women can also be found in *Women View Librarianship*.²⁸

Collective Biography: Women

In 1974 Margaret Corwin published her analysis of female leadership in state and local library associations in *Library Quarterly*.²⁹ Within a decade it was followed by two anthologies on the history of the role and status of women in librarianship, one edited by Kathleen Weibel and Kathleen Heim, the other edited by Heim alone.³⁰ In 1979 Dee Garrison published *Apostles of Culture: The Public Librarian and American Society, 1876–1920*. Unlike much previous biographical coverage of women in librarianship, Garrison's research attempted to locate library women in a larger professional world at the turn of the century. She divided her much-cited book into four sections. The first covers a "Missionary Phase," characterized by a predominance of New England gentry men who wanted to resist the changes brought about by immigration, industrialization, and urbanization and instead preserve the moral climate with which they were more familiar. These men assumed that exposing the masses to what they defined as good literature would help maintain the social order and minimize the chance for social revolution (echoes of Harris here).

A second section discusses the "fiction problem." Here Garrison hypothesizes that librarians were ultimately forced to admit that the masses did not want the sophisticated literature advocated by the genteel set but instead preferred "recreational reading" more in tune with their tastes and levels of comprehension. A third section provides an extended biographical sketch of Dewey, the first to take a critical look at Dewey's sexism and anti-Semitism. A final section, however, entitled "The Tender Technicians," has driven much of the scholarship on women in the profession in the last twenty years. Here Garrison argues that the feminization of the public library profession forced limitations on the progress of the institution because women who filled positions merely

extended their traditional motherly role to a different arena and were passively willing to work for low wages.

Scholars like Mary Niles Maack, Barbara E. Brand, Phyllis Dain, and especially Suzanne Hildenbrand have been reacting to Garrison's thesis ever since. A 1982 American Library History Round Table program entitled "Women in Library History: Liberating Our Past" drew the lines of debate and generated a number of essays that have now been read by hundreds (if not thousands) of LIS students in the past fifteen years.³¹ By the end of the century, however, the initial debate had tempered, and in its place solid scholarship that documents role more than contribution and analyzes more than celebrates women in librarianship began to provide a richer literature. Here I include Joanne Passet's *Cultural Crusaders* and Alison Parker's *Purifying America*, which compares WCTU and ALA women's turn-of-the-century procensorship reform efforts.³² Essays in *Reclaiming the American Library Past: Writing the Women In*, an anthology edited by Suzanne Hildenbrand in 1996, document accomplishments of female librarians long forgotten, but most also tend to admire more than analyze.³³

In this section I also include an emerging scholarship on the history of children's and youth services librarianship, a sector of our profession that has always been dominated by women. For example, Frances Sayers's reverential biography of Anne Carroll Moore and Miriam Braverman's *Youth, Society, and the Public Library* are now being superseded by solid interdisciplinary scholarship coming from the word processors of Anne MacLeod, Christine Jenkins, and Anne Lundin.³⁴ The spring issue of *Library Trends* that Karen Smith edited—subtitled "Contributions of Women to American Youth Services and Literature"—is reverential but revealing.³⁵ With scholarship like this, coverage of women in American library history has now begun to emerge from simply celebrating their contributions to move toward deeper and more critical evaluations of the roles they played in a larger historical context. All of it adds significantly to our understanding of the present.

Collective Biography: African Americans

Another area of collective biography that has emerged in the last quarter century is African-American library history literature. E. J. Josey, a pioneering civil rights activist who in the 1960s and 1970s often forced American librarianship to confront its own racism, published a number of works that identified black library pioneers.³⁶ More recently, Ismail Abdullahi has edited an anthology of essays about Josey and his contributions.³⁷ Sketches of Jean Blackwell Hutson and Dorothy Porter Wesley also appear in *Reclaiming the Past*.³⁸ Jessie Carney Smith covers "Black

Women Librarians, 1882–1992,” and in *What a Woman Ought to Be and Do*, Stephanie Shaw includes discussions of librarians among her coverage of black professional women workers during the Jim Crow era.³⁹ Elinor Des Verney Sinnette’s biography of Arthur Schomburg is also worth a read.⁴⁰

Collective Biography: Blind Spots

Collective biographical work on women and African Americans published in the past quarter century has amply enriched American library history and demonstrated how research that reveals a set of blind spots can partially correct a jaundiced perspective of the past. But much more needs to be done, especially with the history of librarianship that has affected Hispanic, Asian, and Native Americans. A hint of the possibilities here is evident in *Daring to Find Their Names*, a series of essays Jim Carmichael recently gathered to document the lesbigay presence (another vastly understudied population) in American librarianship in the last quarter century.⁴¹ There is an irony here. For a profession dedicated to multiculturalism, our historical literature demonstrates too much tunnel vision. At this point in its own history, librarianship knows relatively little of its role in retarding or facilitating multiculturalism’s nineteenth- and twentieth-century progress.

Institutions

Although Shera’s and Ditzion’s germinal works on the library as an institution are much in need of revision after half a century, they nonetheless remain standard treatments. In this section I divide my discussion of the historical literature of American library institutions into categories already familiar to readers of *L&C* literature review essays: (1) private libraries; (2) predecessors to the public library; (3) public libraries; (4) academic and research libraries (including archives); (5) special libraries (including state library agencies); and (6) school libraries.

Private Libraries

A number of works in social, intellectual, and cultural history published in the past half century have included private libraries in their coverage. Among them are Louis B. Wright’s *Cultural Life of the American Colonies*, Samuel Eliot Morison’s *Intellectual Life of Colonial New England*, and Richard Beale Davis’s *Intellectual Life in the Colonial South*, from which he drew his data for *A Colonial Southern Bookshelf*.⁴² More recently, Kevin Hayes published *A Colonial Woman’s Bookshelf* to show that women as well as men had active reading interests before the American Revolution.⁴³

Print culture history has also generated increased interest in the personal library collections of several famous American authors, including Mark Twain, Flannery O'Connor, Henry James, and Henry David Thoreau.⁴⁴ Students of American library history should also consult Kevin Hayes's *The Library of William Byrd of Westover*.⁴⁵

Predecessors to the Public Library

Solid works treating predecessors to the public library include David Kaser's *A Book for a Sixpence*, which covers the history of the circulating library in the United States, Haynes McMullen's research on social libraries before 1876, and Edward Stevens's analysis of the relationships between wealth and social library membership in early-nineteenth-century Ohio.⁴⁶ Other works worthy of mention include Charles Laughler's *Thomas Bray's Grand Design*, Joe Kraus's analysis of nineteenth-century YMCA libraries, and C. S. Thompson's *Evolution of the American Public Library, 1653–1876*.⁴⁷ Solid analyses of nineteenth-century school district and Sunday school libraries remain to be written.

Public Libraries

Public library history enjoys a generous literature. Shera outlined the origins of the public library before it evolved into an institution; Ditzion took it from there with his *Arsenals of Democracy*, which set the tone for viewing the public library as an agency that facilitated democratic culture and an informed citizenry. His perspective dominated the literature of public library history for the next quarter century and was evident in the public library histories for Boston, Detroit, Baltimore, New York, Cleveland, Minneapolis, and Buffalo that followed.⁴⁸ Works on continuing education services to adults in public library history literature echo the tone of these favorable treatises.⁴⁹

But Harris's 1973 essay signaled a shift in public library historiography. No subject within public library history demonstrates this shift better than the literature surrounding the library philanthropy of Andrew Carnegie. For example, George Bobinski's *Carnegie Libraries* outlines the philanthropy but sidesteps issues of motive and intent.⁵⁰ David I. Macleod does a bit better in his study of Carnegie libraries in Wisconsin.⁵¹ A new, more critical history, however, appears in *Carnegie Denied*, which consists of a series of essays edited by Bob Martin that examine the reasons scores of communities rejected Carnegie grants.⁵² Essay authors find gender, race, and class issues (among others) laced throughout community reactions. More recently, Abigail Van Slyck looked at the architecture of typical Carnegie library buildings from a

social history perspective and found gender and class distinctions built into the structures and designed into the furniture and appliances.⁵³ Her conclusions provide an excellent example of how to marry library history with social, cultural, and institutional history. I think the historiographical distance between her and Bobinski mirrors the potential of our craft for growth.

The rough outlines of some of that growth were already evident in the late 1970s with the publication of Rosemary Du Mont's *Reform and Reaction: The Big City Public Library in American Life* and Garrison's *Apostles of Culture*.⁵⁴ Evelyn Geller's *Forbidden Books in American Public Libraries, 1876–1939* followed shortly thereafter, thus creating a literature that not only accommodated but also welcomed newer works like Joanne Passet's *Cultural Crusaders*, Deanna Marcum's *Good Books in a Country Home* (which covers Mary Titcomb's librarianship in Hagerstown, Maryland), and Doug Raber's *Librarianship and Legitimacy: The Ideology of the Public Library Inquiry*.⁵⁵ Marcum's work constitutes a case study of one small public library in rural America, a ubiquitous institution whose history remains vastly understudied. Raber's work contextualizes the Public Library Inquiry, a midcentury study funded by the Carnegie Corporation that yielded works still read and reverentially referred to in public library research studies.⁵⁶

Academic and Research Libraries

Academic and research libraries also have a rich (though less substantial) literature. Standard treatments for the former published in the last half century include Kenneth Brough's *Scholar's Workshop: Evolving Conceptions of Library Service*, Arthur T. Hamlin's *The University Library in the United States*, and Lee Shiflett's *Origins of American Academic Librarianship*.⁵⁷ All provide standard data, but all also need updating. The last two especially need to incorporate findings of more recent scholarship on higher education in the United States that examines the influence of twentieth-century corporate/government partnerships with universities. Robin Winks's *Cloak & Gown: Scholars in the Secret War, 1939–1961* and Ellen W. Schrecker's *No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism & the Universities* hint at the rich possibilities here.⁵⁸ Roger Geiger's analysis of American research universities since World War II would help set the context.⁵⁹

Thomas Harding's *College Literary Societies: Their Contribution to Higher Education in the United States, 1815–1876* is still useful for its analysis of the role the library played in the history of the college literary society, but existing library circulation records left by many of these societies remain to be exploited.⁶⁰ Other titles that cover particular dimensions of acade-

mic librarianship include Neil A. Radford's *Carnegie Corporation and the Development of American College Libraries, 1928–1941*, Roland Person's *A New Path: Undergraduate Libraries at United States and Canadian Universities, 1949–1987*, Charles Osburn's work on patterns of collection development, Dave Kaser's recent study of academic library architecture, and an anthology of essays edited by Richard Johnson for the library profession's centennial in 1976.⁶¹ Jessie Carney Smith's *Black Academic Libraries and Research Collections* is helpful.⁶² So is a series of biographical sketches of influential academic library leaders (1925–75) that I edited in 1983.⁶³ Individual academic libraries receive useful treatment in works by Ken Peterson (California-Berkeley), Charles R. Schultz (Texas A&M), William S. Dix (Princeton), Ellsworth Mason (Colorado), Douglas Ernest (Colorado State), Roscoe Rouse (Oklahoma State), Betty Young (the Women's College at Duke), and William Betinck-Smith (Harvard).⁶⁴ Mark Olsen and Louis-Georges Harvey have done some fascinating work in Harvard's circulation records for the years 1773–82.⁶⁵ Their research demonstrates the potential that analyses of library circulation records have for understanding how particular groups of library users appropriate the information resources made available to them.

Research libraries also have a sizable literature. A good place to start is *Libraries and Scholarly Communication in the United States: The Historical Dimension*, a series of essays Phyllis Dain and John Cole edited from a symposium on the subject in Washington in 1987.⁶⁶ A number of authors have covered the history of the Library of Congress in the last half century. David C. Mearns told *The Story Up to Now* in 1947, and a quarter century later Charles Goodrum updated the Library's history to the 1970s.⁶⁷ The most impressive addition to the literature covering the LC's history published since midcentury is Jane Aikin Rosenberg's *The Nation's Great Library*, which covers the years Herbert Putnam served as Librarian of Congress (1899–1939).⁶⁸ Rosenberg does a masterful job of locating Putnam's influence on the Library and then contextualizing that influence in the professionalization of librarianship as it evolved across the nation in the first half of the twentieth century. In his biography of Archibald MacLeish, Scott Donaldson devotes several reverential chapters to MacLeish's tenure as Librarian of Congress (1939–45).⁶⁹ Although the historical literature of the Library of Congress is large, I cannot leave a paragraph discussing it without noting the yeoman's work done since 1975 by John Y. Cole, current director of the Center for the Book in the Library of Congress, who has published scores of articles and edited numerous books with the Library's history as their focus.

Other national libraries located in the District of Columbia area have also merited historical attention. Donald McCoy and Herman Viola have written solid works on the National Archives, while chronicles exist to

document the history of the National Agricultural Library and the National Library of Medicine.⁷⁰ Kenneth Hafertepe covers the first thirty-eight years of the Smithsonian.⁷¹ Burton K. Adkinson takes a broad look at the federal information many of these libraries dispersed, some for more than two centuries.⁷² Although not located in the District of Columbia, the growing number of presidential libraries and museums documenting the lives of men who occupied the White House receives some historical coverage in Fritz Veit's *Presidential Libraries and Collections*.⁷³

Other research libraries have also merited considerable attention. New York has several. The model for an institutional history of a research library's origins remains Phyllis Dain's work on the New York Public Library. Pam Richards does a good job documenting the history of the New-York Historical Society Library.⁷⁴ So does Doris Dale, who covers the history of the United Nations Library.⁷⁵ The City of Brotherly Love has several significant research libraries, and library historians will find a few histories of these institutions helpful.⁷⁶ In Boston, the Boston Atheneum and the Massachusetts Historical Society have adequate chronicles; so do the John Crerar and Newberry Libraries located in Chicago.⁷⁷ On the West Coast, Don Dickenson's history of the Huntington in San Marino, California, should stand for another generation; so should *The Library of the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace*, edited by Peter Duignan.⁷⁸

Special Libraries (Including State Library Agencies)

A. H. MacCormick and Rudolph Engelbarts have done adequate work on prison libraries.⁷⁹ Ellis E. Mount's work on the Engineering Societies Library in New York remains staple, but Anthony Kruzas's general treatment of the history of business and industrial libraries is badly in need of updating.⁸⁰ So is Ada Winfred Johns's work on special libraries in general.⁸¹ Larry McCrank's *Mt. Angel Abbey* covers a century of existence of an Oregon monastery and its library.⁸² The history of state library agencies is poorly covered, as I discovered when I was asked more than a decade ago to contribute the lead article to an anthology on state library agencies.⁸³ Nonetheless, readers will still find useful chronicles on state libraries in Michigan, Pennsylvania, Oregon, and especially New York.⁸⁴

School Libraries

As of this writing there are nearly 100,000 school libraries in the United States, yet no adequate general history exists to contextualize their origins to a larger world of elementary and secondary education.

Henry L. Cecil and Willard A. Heaps's *School Library Service* is a useful starting point.⁸⁵ Margaret I. Rufsvold's *History of School Libraries in the South* is also helpful but badly dated.⁸⁶ So is Frederic D. Aldrich's *School Library in Ohio*.⁸⁷ Harriet Long covers the history of public library service to schools; a smattering of scholarly articles helps fill in a few gaps.⁸⁸

Expertise

Under this heading I include literature that covers the history of cataloging and classification, public services (including reference), collection development, and library appliances and technology. Most of the literature lacks cultural context; little of it draws from relevant conclusions that emanate from the secondary literature of social and intellectual American history.

Cataloging and classification have the richest historical literature in the area of library expertise. Staple fare includes the works of W. C. Berwick Sayers and Leo Montagne, which in part laid the groundwork for John Comaromi's landmark study *The Eighteen Editions of the Dewey Decimal Classification*.⁸⁹ But Comaromi's work was not definitive; debate about the origins of Dewey's classification continues.⁹⁰ Historians of classification will also find useful two sourcebooks, one on cataloging, the other on subject analysis.⁹¹ Fran Miksa's monumental *Subject in the Dictionary Catalog from Cutter to the Present* updates Julia Pettee's *Subject Headings* and should be the definitive history on that subject for some time to come.⁹² Miksa also covers the development of the Library of Congress classification scheme in a briefer piece.⁹³ Donald Lehnus and John Comaromi analyze book numbers in separate works, while Jim Ranz chronicles the history of the printed book catalog in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century American libraries.⁹⁴ No area in the practice of librarianship has been more affected by automation than cataloging and classification, and no organization has had a greater impact on this area of library expertise in the past quarter century than OCLC. For a historical discussion documenting this impact, *OCLC, 1967–1997* is helpful.⁹⁵

Sam Rothstein's *Development of Reference Services through Academic Traditions* superseded Louis Kaplan's *Growth of Reference Service in the United States from 1876 to 1891*, but both are now badly in need of updating.⁹⁶ So is Scott Adams's *Medical Bibliography in an Age of Discontinuity*, which covers a literature whose format and organization have changed rapidly in the last decades of the twentieth century.⁹⁷ Klaus Musmann provides an anecdotal history of technological innovations in library services between 1860 and 1960; Barbra Higginbotham adequately covers the history of library preservation between 1876 and 1910.⁹⁸

Library Education

No area of American library history literature has been more consistently critical and analytical than coverage of professional library education. Readers should start with Sarah Vann's *The Williamson Report: A Study* and follow it with Carl White's *Historical Introduction to Library Education*.⁹⁹ Vann's *Training for Librarianship before 1923* is a helpful chronicle; so is Charles Churchwell's *Shaping of American Library Education* and C. Edward Carroll's *Professionalization of Education for Librarianship*.¹⁰⁰ More interpretive essays can be found in the 1986 issues of *Library Trends* and the *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, both of which commemorate the centennial of formal library education in the United States in 1986.¹⁰¹ More recently, Bob Martin and Lee Shiflett analyzed the ALA's role in the library education of African Americans between 1925 and 1941.¹⁰² Several individual library schools have received historical treatment, including Columbia, Case Western Reserve, Illinois, North Carolina Central, and Chicago.¹⁰³ The last, authored by John Richardson, is clearly the best of the lot. Ironically, all but Illinois and NCU have closed. Margaret Stieg's *Change and Challenge in Library Science Education* includes some historical perspective.¹⁰⁴

Library Associations

Understandably, the American Library Association—the world's oldest and largest—has received most historical treatment. In 1976 the ALA's centennial celebration occasioned too much celebratory literature, including Dennis Thomison's work on the association's history through 1972, which is uneven and underresearched.¹⁰⁵ Much better is Ed Holley's *Raking the Historic Coals*, which reprints primary documents generated by organizers of the 1876 meeting at which the ALA organized.¹⁰⁶ My own *Politics of an Emerging Profession* uses many primary source materials not previously consulted to construct the ALA's story from that date through World War I.¹⁰⁷ Art Young does an excellent job of covering the association's participation in the war effort.¹⁰⁸ Gary Kraske analyzes the association's role in U.S. cultural diplomacy between 1938 and 1949, but much more analytical and contextualized is Louise Robbins's *Censorship and the American Library*, which builds from Evelyn Geller's work to look at the ALA's response to intellectual freedom threats between 1939 and 1969 within a paradigm of cultural pluralism.¹⁰⁹

Several other library associations also have histories. Don Davis covers the Association of American Library Schools (now the Association for Library and Information Science Education) through the late 1960s.¹¹⁰ Alma C. Mitchell has edited a series of essays on the first fifty years of

the Special Libraries Association, but more analytical is Elin B. Christianson's *Daniel Nash Handy and the Special Library Movement*.¹¹¹ Irene Farkas-Conn's work on the history of the American Society for Information Science is also helpful.¹¹² Abbreviated histories of other professional associations can be found scattered throughout the scholarly periodical literature.¹¹³

General Historical Studies of the Profession and Its Activities

Scores of good American library history books published in the last half century exist that cross the categories of literature I list above. Here I mention either the best or the most useful, because at the time of this writing, American library history lacked anything better. In the area of censorship, I have already mentioned Geller and Robbins, but readers should also consult Marjorie Fiske's germinal *Book Selection and Censorship*, which analyzes censoring practices of California school and public librarians in the 1950s.¹¹⁴ L. B. Woods demonstrates that censorship imposed from outside the profession is every bit as effective as censorship effected from the inside.¹¹⁵ Pam Richards's analysis of the World War II Allied-German rivalry for scientific information is a model case study of comparative history.¹¹⁶ Dave Kaser covers a different war, a different time, as do I with *An Active Instrument for Propaganda*, which looks at public library activity on behalf of the state during World War I.¹¹⁷ Kathleen Molz addresses *National Planning for Library Service, 1935–1975*, while Fred Stielow and Mary Lee Bundy have edited a series of essays covering *Activism in American Librarianship, 1962–1973*.¹¹⁸ Ed Holley and Bob Schremser contribute a series of interviews with members of the nation's library community who were integral to the passage of the Library Services and Construction Act of 1964, which has had a significant impact on the practice of librarianship ever since.¹¹⁹

Several works cover the library as a profession and selectively draw upon its history for evidence to support conclusions. Works by Lloyd J. Houser and Alvin Schrader, George E. Bennett, and Michael F. Winter are worthwhile; so is Mike Harris and Stan Hannah's *Into the Future: The Foundations of Library and Information Services in the Post-Industrial Era*.¹²⁰ The best of the set, however, is Andrew Abbott's *System of Professions*, which uses the concept of professional jurisdiction to compare the history of librarianship with several other professions.¹²¹

Print Culture History

As I prepared this essay I had occasion to read an article entitled "The Business of Reading in Nineteenth-Century America: The New York

Mercantile Library” in the June 1998 issue of *American Quarterly*. It’s written by Thomas Augst, whom I had met in November 1997 shortly after he had finished his American studies dissertation at Harvard, from which the *AQ* article is taken.¹²² In it Tom demonstrates how the Mercantile Library’s users commodified their reading into categorizations like “useful knowledge” and “rational amusement,” how the largely middle-class males who constituted its patrons then used the act of reading as an agent to manifest their “character,” and finally how in the process of adapting to these interests the managers of the Mercantile Library articulated a new rationale for understanding these new dynamics for reading to justify it as a civic enterprise worthy of private and public support. In short, Tom’s work demonstrates how one nineteenth-century library crafted a socially acceptable philosophy to justify and perpetuate the services it provided to its users. The article is unique in American library history because it views the institution through the eyes of the people who used it, not through the eyes of the people who ran it.

The perspective Tom takes is characteristic of a rapidly growing literature that is often referred to as print culture studies or print culture history, a large part of which attempts to look at the act of reading from the reader’s viewpoint, then to determine how readers appropriated what they read for their own needs.¹²³ Tom’s endnotes are loaded with citations to this literature, including Steven Mailloux’s *Interpretative Conventions: The Reader in the Study of American Fiction*, Jane Tompkins’s *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860*, Cathy Davidson’s *Revolution and the Word: The Rise of the Novel in America*, Ron Zboray’s *A Fictive People: Antebellum Economic Development and the American Reading Public*, Michael Denning’s *Mechanic Accents: Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America*, and Jan Radway’s *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*.¹²⁴

Much of print culture studies itself is built on close readings of critical theorists like Michel Foucault, Jurgen Habermas, Antonio Gramsci, Barbara Herrnstein Smith, and Michel de Certeau, who argue that people construct their own reality and that within that reality they evolve particular value systems evident in unique “languages” in which words take on coded deep meanings generally understood best by group members heavily invested in using them.¹²⁵ The literature of print culture history is also built on the work of reception theorists like Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, Benedict Anderson, and Janice Radway, who argue that for most readers, meaning in a text—whether it be print, visual, audio, or electronic—is important not just as an object to be described but also as an effect to be experienced.¹²⁶ They argue that readers actively search for meaning in the texts they select and often “poach” to re-create meanings unique to their own lives.

I think most of what these print culture scholars say about their subject matter has direct relevance for the study of American library history. Unfortunately, however, Tom's perspective is largely absent in American library history literature.¹²⁷ In fact, in his article Tom could cite only Shera, Ditzion, Kruzas, and a 1978 doctoral dissertation by William Boyd as secondary works that contain data relevant to his subject.¹²⁸ His inability to find a larger literature within American library history that spoke to his perspective points, I think, to American library history's greatest shortcoming. On the one hand, it concentrates too much on the library from the inside out and focuses too much on the institution, the people who practice librarianship within that institution, and the expertise used by the people within the institution itself. On the other hand, it does not concentrate enough on the library from the outside in, nor does it focus sufficiently on people who used (or did not use) the institution, why they used (or did not use) it, and whether the expertise honed within that institution mirrored a particular "language" that was inclusive for some, exclusive for others. My Wisconsin colleague Doug Zweig has a useful way to characterize this dichotomy. For too long, he argues, our profession has "looked at the user in the life of the library, rather than the library in the life of the user."¹²⁹ And for the past half century, I would argue, the literature of American library history has largely been servant to the former.

Even those few times when library historians have approached the act of reading, they have been unwilling to explore its greater significance for American library history. For example, when the University of Chicago's Graduate Library School faculty began "scientific" investigations of reading in the 1930s, they generally overlooked fiction, thus ignoring the types of reading the vast majority of users obtained from their libraries.¹³⁰ In 1965 and 1985 Esther Jane Carrier published two volumes on *Fiction in Public Libraries*.¹³¹ Both adequately documented the profession's anxieties about popular fiction reading between 1850 and 1950. Neither, however, attempted to analyze cultural reasons for these anxieties; neither tried to do what Tom Augst has done with the New York Mercantile Library.

Perhaps it's time for a change. Perhaps what we need at the beginning of the twenty-first century is a shift like the one Mike Harris occasioned in 1973 when he used theoretical perspectives developed outside the profession to explain some of the problems enveloping it at that time. Perhaps what we need to do is import some new theoretical perspectives that we can then apply to questions contemporary to our own generation. I am convinced that the theoreticians cited above (most of whom cannot now be found in the notes of current American library history research) provide the valuable frameworks necessary to address these broader

kinds of questions, the answers to which would better help contemporary librarians understand what the role of the library currently is before they plan a future for the institution based solely on localized knowledge and expertise and the rosy predictions of a vocal group of information technology evangelists who have a vested interest in predicting a particular future as if it were a certainty.

After twenty-five years I am still convinced that the purpose of studying history is to augment understanding of the present, and one of the best ways American library historians can do this at the beginning of the twenty-first century is to concentrate much more attention on how people use (and have used) the texts libraries provide (and have provided) them. Partnering with print culture scholars would vastly accelerate the enterprise and increase the relevance of American library history to the profession at large. And just as contemporary libraries are excellent sites for the study of the use of texts, so American library history is an excellent site for the study of print culture history. The theorists cited by print culture scholars can easily provide excellent frameworks for augmenting our understanding of how the millions of people that thousands of American libraries have served for more than three centuries have used the information resources made available to them.

We've come a long way in the past half century and have built a substantial literature. Since 1973 this literature certainly has increased in diversity, although not significantly in theoretical perspective. And over the years American library history has benefited substantially from annual LHRT programs, quinquennial Library History Seminars, the pages of *Libraries & Culture* and *Library Quarterly*, and the willingness of Scarecrow, Greenwood, Libraries Unlimited, and the American Library Association to publish its monographs. But to make our craft more relevant to our profession at the beginning of the twenty-first century, we now have to take it to another level, one at which we use the ideas critical theorists have articulated to examine a social construction of reality and the process of cultural consumption; we also have to learn from the social and cultural historians around us who have applied these ideas to the environments in which the libraries, librarians, and librarianship that we study existed in given times and given places. Print culture studies has demonstrated the potential; American library historians need only to seize the opportunity.

I hope that when the Library History Round Table celebrates its centennial in 2047, my successor can report that the beginning of the twenty-first century ushered in significant theoretical diversity that substantially assisted the library profession to understand historically not just the user in the life of the library but also the library in the life of the user.

Notes

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14. Latest in a long line is Michael H. Harris, *History of Libraries in the Western World*, 4th ed. (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1995).

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