

12-30-2009

## Review of The Library: An Illustrated History

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### Original Citation

Thornton, G. A. (2009). Review of The Library: An Illustrated History. *Collection Management*, 34, 1, 53-54.

### Repository Citation

Thornton, Glenda A., "Review of The Library: An Illustrated History" (2009). *Michael Schwartz Library Publications*. 74.

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THE LIBRARY: AN ILLUSTRATED HISTORY. Stuart A. P. Murray. Introduction by Donald G. Davis, Jr. Foreword by Nicholas A. Basbanes. *New York, New York; Skyhorse Publishing, 2009, 310 pp., ALA edition, ISBN: 978-0-8389-0991-1, hardcover, \$35.00.*

One of the treasures of being a librarian is the opportunity to come in contact with wonderful new books and occasionally, find the time to read one. *The Library: An Illustrated History* is one of those wonderful volumes that will truly delight the senses of any librarian and I heartily recommend it to all. It should be in every library collection and possibly in the reference section.

The work is encyclopedia-like—a series of short entries grouped into twelve chapters covering the history of libraries from ancient times to the mid-twentieth century. It is the story of writing, the development of books, and the passion of book lovers throughout the ages as they gather every book available via a variety of means from theft, gifts, and purchases to the spoils of war to create libraries, both personal and “public.” Of course, the meaning of the term “public” does not always refer to libraries that are freely open to all comers, but rather those libraries created for the specific classes of users from government, religious institutions, schools, universities, etc.

This work is heavily illustrated and easy to read. According to the author, it is not intended to be a detailed history of any one aspect of library history—rather it is truly an overview designed to put the long and rich history of libraries in every culture throughout the world in a historical context of the age. It does this quite well and whets the appetite for more. Any reader of this work is bound to find some piece of library history so fascinating that they will go off on a hunt for more detailed information about the people, places, books, cultures, or ages of mankind mentioned within.

What struck me as I read this volume is how similar the issues of libraries today are with those of hundreds of years ago. Organization, preservation, protection from theft, acquisitions outpacing the ability to catalog, the loaning of books to others along with the measures taken to get them back, changing formats for storing print, and unauthorized copying sound so familiar! It seems that librarians today would have much to discuss with librarians of past centuries.

So in heaping praise on this volume, I can only find a few things to complain about. I noticed what I believe is a missing negative in the following sentences from pages 65 to 66. “Stationers loaned books out in sections so they could be studied or copied, then returned in exchange for the next section. Some stationers were so successful that the university library was not much used by scholars whose studies went beyond the most commonly used course books, which were available at the stationers.” Obviously, this last sentence should read “...the university library was not much used by scholars whose studies did not go beyond the most commonly used course books....” Despite what I believe is an editorial error—I found the comment fascinating—it is a description of a situation that existed in the “High Middle Ages.”

And finally, my only other personal disappointment in the book was in the chapter Libraries of the World which presented a sampling of outstanding libraries around the world, including several within the United States. Being a Clevelander, I would have liked to see mention of the Cleveland Public Library with its almost ten million volumes and outstanding reputation as a research library. However, I suppose that with only 310 pages to outline the history of libraries since about 3000 BC, I can overlook this last omission. Highly recommended for all libraries!

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