



Recent Publications

BOOK REVIEWS

Downs, Robert Bingham. *Perspectives on the Past: An Autobiography.* Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow, 1984. 225p. \$17.50. LC 84-5589. ISBN 0-8108-1703-9.

The distinguished longtime librarian of the University of Illinois is a man whose career, accomplishments, and words have received much deserved respect and attention. Here he offers an accounting of his life, what he calls his *Apologia Pro Vita Mea*.

Downs' career speaks for itself; he need not justify it and indeed he does not apologize at all. Rather he expresses very considerable satisfaction with his choice of a profession and assures us that he has never experienced any doubts about that decision. Asked by a recent biographer whether he had suffered major disappointments or failures to accomplish anything of great importance that he had sought to do, he simply replied that he could think of none. Though many of us who experience self-doubts or, at the least, some regrets that we could not also have tried some other appealing roads may find such complacency odd, the record provides every reason to justify Downs' satisfaction.

With only brief experience in subordinate positions, he headed three important libraries in his early career, starting at Colby College and moving to the University of North Carolina and to New York University before beginning his twenty-eight years at Illinois. At each he was notably successful. Accompanying these principal work assignments were contributions as library educator, as library con-

sultant and resources surveyor in the United States and abroad, as active member and contributor to professional associations, and as prolific author of books and articles dealing both with librarianship and such related topics as folklore, great books, and intellectual freedom.

Surely the personal report of such stewardship promises much of value to those who come after him. The book itself is generously illustrated and printed in an attractive style considerably above the usual standard of this publisher. Everyone in these lines of work will find it interesting—but not fascinating. Downs is not alone among academic librarians in recent years in writing an autobiography that tells us less than we would wish. But Ellsworth, Lyle, Metcalf, Powell, Ready, Shores, and—judging by Martin's report of the source of much of Tauber's ostensible biography—Wilson gave us considerable amounts of personal and private testimony, Metcalf most of all. Downs, unfortunately, lives up to his reputation as a private and reserved man. Not only does he withhold his personal feelings and reactions but he also writes in ways well calculated to put a distance between himself and his reader.

He has chosen to organize the work, not in the chronological fashion in which a life is lived but in topical order: people he has known professionally, administrative positions he has held, research collections he has built, resources he has analyzed, libraries he has surveyed, association activities he has been engaged in, foreign assignments he has carried out, books he has found influential, ideas and events of

intellectual freedom he has involved himself in, folklore he has studied, and personal and family matters. More than a third of the text consists of quotations from articles he has written. Of the first chapter, "People," ten of the twenty-four pages are quoted passages, eight of them from a frequently reprinted speech on his views on supervisory style. The book, all too often, has the character of compilations on the successive topics rather than the firsthand, personal testimony that the reader of an autobiography hopes to find.

In style too, the work has fortunate characteristics. Surprisingly in one who has written so prolifically, Downs frequently commits the fault of the misplaced or dangling modifier, perhaps because of his predilection for the passive voice. Perhaps in response to a wish not to claim credit not due him, he tends not to spell out his own positions in many instances, with the odd and presumably unintended result that the reader, not being told anything of the ebb and flow of discussion, begins to get the impression that every favorable outcome is to be credited to Downs himself. Sitting in my office overlooking Lake Mendota, I can only rejoice that the undergraduate library of the University of Wisconsin was placed in this scenic location. Do I owe that fortunate outcome only to Downs and his recommendation or was it the result of many suggestions? Throughout the book similar ambiguities occur.

Even though this book surely adds to what was made known in Arthur P. Young's chapter in *Leaders in American Academic Librarianship: 1925-1975* (Beta Phi Mu, 1983), nothing in it impresses one as being new or different. The unique contribution Downs has to make to the story is only briefly made here. His disclaimer—that he intends to write only a professional biography—does not entirely satisfy the need for candid assessment of persons and events, if indeed we are to learn as much as we might from his experience. He lists, for example, a number of the departmental librarians at Illinois and he omits others. Does the difference have any particular significance? Does it represent a variation in his judgments of people or is it solely a function of space? He lists some

chief librarians of major universities and omits others contemporary to them. What is the meaning of those differences? His discussion of the Center for Research Libraries provides one illustration of the substance that is missing. For better or for worse, the center surely represents one of the most imaginative conceptions of the past half-century. Downs briefly expresses reservations about the institution. It would help the rest of us to know more of the professional and even the personal considerations that lie behind these brief remarks. He provides a reference to a paper published some thirty years ago, but a contemporary discussion and a retrospective evaluation would surely help us. In this connection appears one of the many ambiguous passages in which, though Downs does not claim credit for an outcome, a reader might reasonably conclude that it is due to him: "When I was chairman of the MILC Board of Directors . . . I proposed a name change: the Center for Research Libraries, and the recommendation was accepted. Afterward, a large number of U.S. libraries outside the Midwest and in Canada became members" (p.35). The sea change in the institution symbolized by this revision of the name is a topic that warrants detailed exposition, and, if Downs indeed developed the idea as well as the name to express it, he deserves great credit or perhaps blame. I suspect the matter is considerably more complex than this passage suggests and I feel some confidence that Downs did not intend to claim either credit or blame. But, since he does not tell us, we do not know.

It is not a happy situation to be critical of the work of one who has so clearly merited much or perhaps all of the praise he has received. Yet one could wish that the writer of an autobiography would tell us more that is direct, explicit, and candid. We have much to learn from the career of Robert Bingham Downs. The public record of that career is masterfully marshaled here. A great deal of it, however, was available before, and the unique contribution he had to make to the story is only briefly made. There is almost nothing that is truly personal or even, except in the literal meaning of the word, autobiographical.—

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meaning of the word, autobiographical.—W. L. Williamson, *Library School, University of Wisconsin—Madison.*

Cleveland, William S. *The Elements of Graphing Data.* Monterey, Calif.: Wadsworth Advanced Books and Software, 1985. 323p. \$18.95 LC 85-10603. ISBN 0-5340-3730-5.

The only negative thing that might be said in connection with this book is that it probably won't be read by even a fraction of the scholars who could benefit significantly from exposure to its content. Cleveland's insights and principles go far beyond the relativity simple problem of creating legible graphics; as he writes in the preface: "This book . . . contains graphical methods and principles that are powerful tools for *showing the structure of data*" (p.1, my italics).

Like maps (with which I am most familiar), graphs are made for two quite different reasons. The first is data analysis, for which the scholar uses the graph to tease out or make explicit relationships among observations for his own benefit. The second is data communication, for which the scholar-analyst has determined what the structure of the data is and wants to communicate it effectively to others. Thus a graph can be both an intermediate working tool and a final product, uniquely efficient for both, superior in many instances to words, numbers, or (even) maps. But in the formal educational curriculum at all levels (including college and graduate school) there is an almost overwhelming bias in favor of acquiring and conveying meaningful relationships among data in verbal or numerical form. Cleveland's book forces one to realize what a serious loss this is for scholarship, even for our culture as a whole.

The Elements of Graphing Data is to graphs what Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* is to text; high praise is implied and intended in this parallel. Cleveland's writing style—clear, concise, orderly, authoritative, and commonsensical—suggests that he has more than a passing acquaintance with Strunk and White's classic volume. The publisher has also done well by Cleveland, with attrac-

tive, legible type, and a generally well thought out book design.

As to content, the book contains four major sections. The first is a brief introductory discussion about graphs, with an emphasis not so much on their form per se (although he integrates knowledgeably the subject of visual perception with all aspects of graphs) as on the meaning that data can take on in graphed form. Cleveland, a scientist at AT&T Bell Laboratories, has been studying (and inventing) graphical methods for data analysis and presentation for more than ten years.

The second section is a how-to gem, "Principles of Graph Construction." It should be required reading for all educated human beings.

The third section deals with graphical methods and moves at times quite deeply into the domain of statistics. The nonspecialist can easily browse through this section, taking as much as seems useful.

Throughout the book Cleveland uses real data sets to illustrate copiously his discussion. This has the effect of making the book a fascinating read because he delves into actual scientific questions, e.g., do hamsters who hibernate more live longer? In one case study, Cleveland reviews the complete 1980 volume of *Science*; the majority of articles (67 percent) contained graphs, almost four hundred in number. Nearly one-half of these graphs were flawed, one-third seriously so (something on the graph was not explained, for example). Cleveland's own illustrations (computer generated) are numerous and clear.

The book closes with an admirable exposition of the principles of graphic perception and cognition that bear on the construction and comprehension of graphs. In some respects it might have been logical and useful for the book to begin with this material, but it probably does take on additional meaning after one has thought intently about graphs for more than two hundred pages.

This book is a gem. Buy it, read it, and urge everyone you know whose job it is to convert raw data to meaningful information to do the same.—Barbara Bartz Petchenik, *Cartographic Services, R. R. Donnelley & Sons, Chicago, Illinois.*