

Book Reviews

Harris, Michael A., and Stan A. Hannah. *Into the Future: The Foundations of Library and Information Services in the Post-Industrial Era.* Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, 1993. 182p. \$39.50 cloth, \$19.95 paper (ISBN 1-56750-01503).

Treatises on the social environment of information often demonstrate the parochialism of the library literature. This new book is a welcome exception. It is both synthesis and commentary, intended to provide a background against which students and practitioners can make intelligent decisions about "the future of library and information service in these changing times." To remedy the "impoverished and incestuous nature of the literature of library and information science," the authors deftly summarize relevant theory from sociology, political economy, economics, and critical theory. The result is an exhilarating series of new perspectives and insights into the meaning of the information age, national information policy, professional identity, and workplace issues.

The book is structured around Daniel Bell's seminal concept of the post-industrial society, originally conceived in the early 1960s. Bell saw information as the totalizing principle that would define the society of the future, transforming a goods-producing into a service economy. The codification of theoretical knowledge and its application to problem solving within large and complex systems would be carried out by a new breed of information technologists, the knowledge elite. As Harris and Hannah point out, Bell's elitist, technocratic vision was characteristic of its time. Later critics have found flaws in Bell's vision, including the privileging of technology over other aspects of the social environment, leading to extremes of technopho-

bia and technophilia. But, as Harris and Hannah also point out, "something very real is happening to contemporary society as a result of the emergence of information technology," yet "we remain uncertain as to what it is."

F. W. Lancaster, foremost advocate of the paperless library, is introduced as Bell's counterpart within the library profession. Lancaster foresaw the transformation of librarians into information entrepreneurs. His ideas launched continuing disputes over the fate of the book, the commodification of information, and the passive versus active role of librarians. Somewhat later, the golden age of state-sponsored library funding came to an end (an inevitable swing of the policy pendulum) and the Reagan administration began promoting privatization. Harris and Hannah illuminate issues surrounding state policy on information by tracing the historical dialectic between the accumulation (economic growth) and legitimation (social justice) functions of government.

Surveying the literature on the sociology of professions, the book casts doubt on any easy assumptions about the role of librarians in a post-industrial society. Nor is the impact of computerization on workers in general at all clear. Does automation lead to labor segmentation, a widening gap between knowledge workers and the unskilled? Or does it create more democratic, nonhierarchical organizations? Research on these matters has led to inconclusive results. As Harris and Hannah explore these questions, a picture begins to emerge of a library profession that is having difficulty coming to terms with political and economic change.

Marxist, feminist, and deconstructive points of view (seldom invoked in li-

brary literature) contribute some refreshing twists. For example, the belief that the traditional library was apolitical is exposed as an illusion. Similarly, concepts such as *democracy*, *freedom*, *equality*, and *neutrality* are shown to be contested concepts rather than timeless truths—a point made through an amusing comparison of the hacker's ethic of free access to all information and the only slightly less sweeping claims of the American Library Association. Apropos of a discussion of gender and librarianship (women do not fare well in the information age), the authors cite a study that "documents the way that men have always defined women's ideas as 'unoriginal,' thus legitimizing the exclusion of women from the upper ranks of the class system of the intellect."

The book concludes with a prolegomenon "to Library and Information Services in the Post-Industrial Era," in which the authors offer their own suggestions. This is the most disappointing part of an otherwise excellent book. Rather than actually taking positions, Harris and Hannah merely continue to set the stage for the formation of positions. They remind librarians that capitalism is dynamic by nature, and that change is inevitable. They advise us to acknowledge that the paradigm of library services "for the public good" is in eclipse—advice that may have already been superseded by the "politics of meaning" of the 1990s. Their call for a "commitment to arguing well" and a "struggle to establish a consensus" postpones commitment to actual choices. We will have to make those choices ourselves, of course, but at least we have been given a new way of thinking about them.—*Jean Alexander, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois.*

Towner, Lawrence W. *Past Imperfect: Essays on History, Libraries, and the Humanities.* Ed. by Robert W. Karrow, Jr., and Alfred F. Young. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993. 298p. alk. paper, \$25 (ISBN 0-226-81042-9).

Lawrence "Bill" Towner was for twenty-four years the director of the

Newberry Library, one of the nation's most prestigious independent research libraries. This collection of Towner's writings, some previously unpublished, includes articles, essays, and speeches given on a variety of occasions. Published to mark his seventieth birthday, they are meant to define "the man and his vision"—to give us something of the flavor of the individual and to document his achievements as a historian, librarian, and spokesman for the humanities.

This volume is likely to be of greatest interest to librarians for an uncommon view of a visionary leader's personality and the library he shaped. The public Towner emerges as a man of great erudition, charm, coherence of vision, definite purpose, and adaptability, and he appears as someone capable of doing a great many different things—exemplary historical research, planning, administering, testifying before committees, cultivating mentors and donors—and using the appropriate rhetorical strategies for each occasion.

Towner's career as a historian was perhaps too brief to be truly distinguished, but his experience as a researcher had a distinct influence on some of the projects he undertook and promoted as a librarian. His interest in primary documents was reflected later when, as a librarian, he sponsored definitive editions of major American political figures and the microfilming of large bodies of documents. His convictions as a liberal historian of the progressive school and his interest in social contexts were evident in his own research, which focused on the behavior of marginal groups in colonial America—slaves, indentured servants, apprentices, and criminals. This interest in "democratizing" research is also apparent in his vigorous attempts to broaden access to the Newberry's beyond-the-usual clientele of university-affiliated scholars.

Towner's role as an articulate and forceful spokesman for the humanities also sheds an interesting light on his career as a librarian. This role is documented chiefly by his support of the National Endowment for the Human-