

# Review Articles

## English Libraries

*English Libraries, 1800-1850.* [By] C. B. Oldman, W. A. Munford, and S. Nowell-Smith. London: H. K. Lewis & Co., Ltd., [c 1958]. 78p.

The history of English libraries is part of the Western library tradition, despite the fact that it preserved a native individuality. This fact is apparent in a reading of the three lectures delivered for the School of Librarianship and Archives at University College, London, in February and March 1957, and now published in pamphlet form. Each of the lectures dwells on an outstanding personality of the period from 1800 to 1850.

In the first lecture, Dr. C. D. Oldman, who was associated with the British Museum since 1920, writes on Sir Anthony Panizzi and his work for that institution. Panizzi, as Keeper of Printed Books, reformed the British Museum library's program and modernized its administration. Dr. Oldman concludes that "If the English nation now possesses a National Library of which it can be justly proud, it is Antonio Panizzi, more than any other man, to whom our thanks must go for this."

W. A. Munford, in the second lecture, discusses Dr. George Birkbeck and his interest in the Mechanics' Institutes which were the forerunners of the English municipal library system. Birkbeck's pioneer effort on behalf of the Institutes and their related libraries stimulated adult education, and scientific and technical education in Great Britain as well as in other countries.

Simon Nowell-Smith, who has published widely in the field of literary criticism and bibliography and who has served as librarian of the London Library, presented the third lecture. He outlined Thomas Carlyle's role in the opening of the London Library in 1841 as a lending library, as well as his part in its subsequent development. To illustrate the nature of Carlyle's motivation favoring libraries, a journal entry of 1832 is cited: "What a sad want I am

in of libraries, of books to gather facts from! Why is there not a Majesty's library in every country town? There is a Majesty's gaol and gallows in every one."

All three lectures are presented in a popular style and include bibliographical references for those interested in further study.—*Sidney Forman, United States Military Academy, West Point.*

## Book Reviews

*Reviews in Library Book Selection.* By LeRoy C. Merritt, Martha Boaz, and Kenneth S. Tisdell. Foreword by Maurice F. Tauber. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1958. xv, 188p. \$2.50.

Reviewing is a much too powerful determinant of book sales and the fame of authors not to have been damned by some and puffed up by others. This doubtful reputation of the review has obliged librarians, who in the name of the review buy books unseen, to study the matter for themselves. The latest publication of the results of such inquiry, the book in hand, comprises three studies, each independently conceived and produced. "The Pattern of Modern Book Reviewing" was written by LeRoy C. Merritt, professor of librarianship at the University of California. "The Reviews and Reviewers of Best Sellers" is a version of the Ph.D. dissertation written by Martha Boaz, dean of the library school of the University of Southern California. "Staff Reviewing in Library Book Selection" is a recasting of an M.A. thesis by Kenneth S. Tisdell, associate librarian of the University of Missouri.

Merritt intended to study the dependability of reviews in a more comprehensive way than others have done. But virtually every important finding he makes is impaired by a serious weakness. First, he summarizes the literature of the subject and finds that earlier studies, although isolated and scattered, make a "devastating" picture of the inadequacies of book reviewing. But his rendition and use of previous research

are questionable. For example, he seriously misunderstands the scope, definitions, and conclusions of Victoria Hargrave's study of reviews of social science books in general and scholarly journals. Then, it is useful for Merritt to remind his colleagues that the *Book Review Digest* does not list all the reviews found in the journals it indexes, with the result that more books are excluded than are included. But he has overlooked the fact that this limitation reflects a belief that the library book selector requires several reviews in order to judge the quality of a book. A single review of a non-fiction book and two reviews of fiction were felt by the founders of *BRD* and their contemporaries to be inadequate guides to selection. The validity of *BRD*'s practice is acknowledged, unknowingly, by Merritt, who in other connections later in the study, as we shall see, recommends that the book selector ought to read several reviews.

His criticism that too many fiction, history, and biography books are reviewed in general periodicals is based on his admitted "unwarranted" assumption that books in all subject fields should receive proportional attention in these journals. His analysis of the *ALA Booklist*, the *Library Journal*, and *Virginia Kirkus' Bookshop Service*, turns up the valuable finding that the library book selector needs all three because they vary in promptness of pre-publication reviews, subject coverage, and judgment of books. A similar examination of the *New York Times Book Review*, the *New York Herald Tribune Weekly Book Review*, and the *Saturday Review*, shows that these disagree often enough in choice of book to review and judgment to require the book-buying librarian to read all three. Then, without warning, Merritt adds these words, "better still, he should probably read the book." This is the most important statement in the study. Merritt implies that the three review media cannot, even together, serve library book selectors. But where is the argument and the evidence? The last part of his work occupies one page. A paragraph lists the separate findings, and then, the reader is introduced to the results of a random sample of 104 books and their reviews indexed in *BRD* of 1956. This sample was to provide

an indication of change, if any, in the pattern of book reviewing since 1948. But the scope of the later survey is much too narrow and cannot be considered a proper test of the earlier findings.

Boaz reveals that the unfavorable preconceptions with which she began her evaluation of the reviews of best sellers of the years 1944 to 1957 were, by and large, proven wrong by her analysis. Her new belief is that the "reviewing of best sellers from 1944 to 1957 indicated, on the whole, a judiciousness that considered both the merits and the demerits of the best sellers, and provided satisfactory criticism for the average reader."

The term "average reader" is a vague description of a key aspect of the theme. It appeared neither in the statement of intentions nor in the analyses of reviews. Only in the concluding section is it revealed that the analysis was done with the "average reader" in mind. As it stands, Boaz has merely given her impression of the "average reader." But then, the study in general is pervaded by personal opinion. It lacks that which Lester Asheim identified as missing from the impressionistic survey, "the objective, systematic, and quantitative discipline" of content analysis.

Tisdell, using checklists of fiction and non-fiction books, found that staff reviewing made little difference in book selection in large public libraries. Libraries that depended on published reviews generally bought the same titles that staff-reviewing libraries did. His other findings, such as the significant disagreement among library reviewers over the merits of the same books, tend also to undermine staff reviewing. Tisdell is in the Waples tradition of library research. He uses simple but tried tools of statistics and mass communications research, among them, content analysis. The adherents of staff reviewing may answer that if it is true that there is no difference between the results of staff reviewing and published reviews, then the former ought to be improved rather than abandoned. Or they might speculate that the fruits of staff reviewing are not expected to be large, and are represented in the libraries' unduplicated titles. In any case, Tisdell has challenged supporters of the staff review with

an objective study which should be examined by all librarians.

The last section of the book is a four-page statement by Boaz entitled "Some Historical Sidelights on Reviewing." It is fragmentary and personal, and omits important sources. Boaz makes a debatable defense of contemporary book reviewing and reviewers which is based on acquiescence in what she describes as the avoidance by most readers of intellectually stimulating book criticism.

In regard to the book as a whole, the

lack of bibliographies and index should be noted. Since the original works were concerned with the years 1948, 1944-1955, and 1945-46, they already are historical. Despite these limitations and the more serious ones noted above, it should be emphasized that book reviewing is so much a part of the librarian's work that encouragement should be given to studies of it in its various phases. Undoubtedly, refinements in methodology will be forthcoming.—*Abraham N. Barnett, Purdue University Libraries.*

## Nominations Sought

Nominations are being sought for the 1960 Margaret Mann Citation award. Librarians who have made a distinguished contribution to the profession through cataloging and classification are eligible. The contribution may have been through publication of significant literature, participation in professional cataloging associations, or valuable contributions to practice in individual libraries. Nominees must be members of the Cataloging and Classification Section of the ALA Resources and Technical Services Division but may be nominated by any librarian or ALA member.

All nominations, together with information upon which recommendation is based, should be made not later than January 1, 1960, to the chairman of the Section's Award of the Margaret Mann Citation Committee, Dale M. Bentz, associate director, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City.

The Margaret Mann Citation, established by the ALA Division of Cataloging and Classification in 1950, has been presented at each of the ALA annual conferences since that time for outstanding professional achievement. Recipients of the award have been Andrew D. Osborn (1959), Esther J. Piercy (1958), David J. Haykin (1957), Susan Grey Akers (1956), Seymour Lubetzky (1955), Pauline A. Seely (1954), Maurice F. Tauber (1953), Marie Louise Prevost (1952), and Lucile M. Morsch (1951).

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