

## Book Reviews

*America's Membership Libraries*. Ed. Richard Wendorf. New Castle, Del.: Oak Knoll, 2007. 354p. alk. paper, \$39.95 (ISBN 1584561998). LC 2007-45691.

*America's Membership Libraries* is an impressive book that details the history, organization, collections, memberships, and current status of those independent libraries that service a distinct, private clientele and are most commonly called athenæums, library societies, and mercantile and mechanics libraries. Edited by Richard Wendorf, Stanford Calderwood Director of the Boston Athenæum, with a Preface by Nicolas Barker, Chairman of the Committee of the London Library, the primary contributors are directors of membership libraries but also include trustees, members, and library assistants. The Library Company of Philadelphia, founded by Benjamin Franklin and friends in 1731, is acknowledged as the first American membership library and the principal model for those that followed. The Library Company, however, is excluded from detailed discussion because it has developed into a major research library whose mission lies outside the general purview of the sixteen libraries covered.

The chapters are arranged chronologically from the date of organization of each library. There is, then, the sweep of history and national settlement as these cultural institutions cross the continent from the Redwood Library and Athenæum (1747) in colonial Newport, Rhode Island, to the gateway to the west, the St. Louis Mercantile Library Association (1846), to the post-Gold Rush Pacific coast, the Mechanics' Institute of San Francisco (1854). Also, as America evolved from being primarily an agricultural to a commercial and industrial nation, the express mission of these libraries changed. The New York Society Library (1754) was founded

by young professionals to promote intellectual inquiry in the early commercial center, whereas the Mercantile Library of New York (1820), now the Mercantile Library Center for Fiction, was expressly formed for young clerks as a place where ambitious young men could become learned. The Library of the General Society of Mechanics & Tradesmen (1820), also in New York, was expressly created to "improve educational and cultural opportunities for working people in New York City."

An alternating rhythm of good fortune and misfortune is shared among virtually all the membership libraries: initial enthusiasm and early success, later decline, and subsequent revitalization. Membership in the Charleston Library Society (1748) was a measure of social importance in its early years, but the American Revolution—and, later, the Civil War and Reconstruction—nearly led to the Society's demise. A merger with the Apprentices' Library Society saved both these early institutions. A yellow fever epidemic in 1822 nearly finished the New York Mercantile Library as its membership fell from 308 to 189. Frequently, membership libraries had to deaccession important holdings to ensure their survival. Both the Salem Athenæum (1810) and the Providence Athenæum (1836) sold their copies of Audubon's *The Birds of America*, the former in 1923 for \$2,000 and the latter in 2005 for \$5 million, but in each case the funds ensured financial solvency. In the 1950s, the Lanier Library Association (1889) of Tryon, North Carolina, sold a copy of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Fanshawe*, applying the funds to the Association's endowment.

Happily, all the libraries included in this volume seem to be thriving, and many are adjusting their mission to con-



temporary conditions. Although private institutions, the membership libraries' collections are generally available for researchers, and, over hundreds of years, collections of special interest and great strength have been developed such as George Washington's personal library at the Boston Athenæum (1807) or the extensive Western Americana holdings at the St. Louis Mercantile Library Association. Other membership libraries have expanded their programming to include broader cultural offerings for their communities. The Mercantile Library of Cincinnati (1835) inaugurated its Niehoff lecture series in the 1980s and has brought such writers as Saul Bellow, William Styron, Joyce Carol Oates, and John Updike to its home city. The Athenæum Music & Arts Library (1899) of La Jolla, California, sponsors classical and jazz music programs.

Many of the membership libraries have become as much museums as libraries. The furnishings, paintings, and statuary are important to each institution, but of greater importance are the library buildings themselves, which are the visible emblems of each membership library. The buildings that house these libraries are a lesson in the history of American architecture from the mid-eighteenth century through the end of the nineteenth century. The Athenæum of Philadelphia (1814), designed by John Norman, is one of the first American buildings in the Italic Palazzo Revival style; the Portsmouth Athenæum (1817) in New Hampshire was designed by Bradbury Johnson in the Neoclassical style; and the St. Johnsbury Athenæum (1871) in Vermont was designed by John Davis Hatch III in the Second Empire Baroque style.

In spite of the luxuriously designed buildings and finely furnished interiors, these institutions have retained an essential American democratic impulse, an important attribute in the era prior to the public library movement. The New York Society Library "was always intended to be open to anyone—free of

charge—for research, with circulation and other services supported by fees, as is the case today." The Library of the General Society of Mechanics & Tradesmen had a separate room for women, and "males of African descent" were admitted beginning in 1861. Today, membership libraries continue outreach programs, such as the Charleston Library Society's Junior Literary Club, founded in 1990, and the Salem Athenæum's monthly book group and film society, both formed in the 1990s.

*America's Membership Libraries* is a handsome book with lavish photographs illustrating the buildings, furnishings, paintings, and, of course, books and documents of these institutions. For scholars of American library history and reading culture, this extensively indexed and well-referenced volume will be of great research value.—*Geoffrey D. Smith, The Ohio State University.*

**Budd, John M.** *Self-Examination: The Present and Future of Librarianship*. Westport, Conn.: Libraries Unlimited (Beta Phi Mu Monograph Series), 2008. 281p. alk. paper, \$60 (ISBN 1591585910). LC 2007-19948.

Professor John M. Budd introduces his latest book, *Self-Examination: The Present and Future of Librarianship*, not simply with a summary of chapters, but with a rousing elbow into the ribs of a profession that seems to dismiss the work of its most important thinkers (such as Michael Gorman and Jesse Shera) "as mere ruminations or reminiscences." Budd suggests that their thought—and, by association, his thought as well—is critical to founding a professional philosophy for librarianship, a philosophy that is long overdue. From the earliest pages, Budd implicitly asks his readers to join him in his "quest for meaning in the profession" and to keep the phrase "consciousness of purpose" always at the front of our minds. To do so, we must be willing to question our own beliefs and our own actions (which may in fact contradict our stated beliefs), and even the professional associations