Recent Publications

BOOK REVIEWS

McArthur, Tom. Worlds of Reference: Lexicography, Learning and Language from the Clay Tablet to the Computer. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge Univ. Pr., 1986. 230p. $24.95 (ISBN 0-521-30637-X). LC 85-7860.

At first, Tom McArthur's *Worlds of Reference* looks like just another history of books and printing. It is distinguished, if at all, by a philo-technological conclusion, a somewhat unexpected concentration on reference books, and an overall emphasis on the impact of books generally and printing specifically that is deeply indebted to Elizabeth L. Eisenstein's *Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (Cambridge, 1979). In 230 copiously illustrated pages, it moves swiftly and glibly from Cro-Magnon cave paintings at Lascaux and Altamira across 30,000 years of human history. McArthur stops at Sumer and Egypt to admire the invention of writing on clay and papyrus, meanders through the codex on parchment of late antiquity and Christian Europe, notes Chinese developments in papermaking and printing, and spends a bit more time on the implications of printing from movable type in the post-Gutenberg era. He eventually lands atop the computer revolution scarcely out of breath, indeed, with energy enough for a little bit of crystal-ball gazing into the shape of things to come.

Within this broad context, the Glaswegian linguist and lexicographer looks most specifically at the history of the study of language and at what he regards as the related creation of reference books, mainly lexicographic but also encyclopedic. (This is a distinction McArthur himself wants to blur; see, e.g., chapter 13, especially p.109.) It seems unfortunate that this focus should be burdened by his charmingly confessed ignorance of firsthand scholarship in many of the topics on which he speaks; a bibliography that is a pastiche of scholarly, semischolarly, and popular secondary sources; and a text filled with sweeping generalizations on a variety of subjects, not all of them equally agreeable, others merely obvious. (These flaws may also reflect his debts to Eisenstein, whose book also exhibits them.) It is, for instance, hard to imagine the librarian who will be either astonished by or in disagreement with McArthur's remarks that "the essence of information handling is that by imposing shape it banishes randomness" and that "the greater the certainty of finding what you want when you want it, the better the system" (p.11).

Like Eisenstein, McArthur has produced a book that is awfully easy to distrust. It resembles nothing so much as Al Capp's Shmoo. It waddles over to a reviewer and urges him to dine out on it.

I want to resist this temptation. Flaws and all, McArthur's is an oddly important book that will repay the time a reader spends with it. Though its dust wrapper tells us that *Worlds of Reference* is intended for "lexicographers, historians, educators and information scientists as well as the general reader," librarians ("information scientists"?) and library educators will want to pay attention to it.

McArthur is not interested in the history of books and printing per se. If he were, then his book would be almost entirely without merit. His topic is rather humankind's efforts to bring the universe of information under command. In this his-

tory, the development of writing systems, and then of printing, plays a crucial role; efforts to control information not only antedate writing but also will postdate printing, as McArthur understands. His book is, in fact, a prolonged "meditation" on reference, by which I think he means—Frederick C. Crews' joke in *The Pooh Perplex* about Murphy A. Sweat's "large freshman anthology, *All Previous Thought*" (p.64) notwithstanding—quite literally "all previous thought" and the ways in which it is stored, accessed, and classified.

Significant to his argument, and a point that he rightly stresses, is the close relationship between *classification* and *stratification:* "we don't just classify, we stratify," he remarks (p.176), and discussion of "canon-formation" as part of the taxonomic process is a recurrent theme in his book (e.g., p.35ff.). The impact of stratification on the shape of reference tools, as their compilers have recognized and accepted various hierarchies, failed to think about them at all, or sought to neutralize

them through adoption of, for instance, alphabetical organizing principles (*A* is *not* superior to *L*; it simply precedes it in an invariant series) is something that we don't often think about. Yet it affects the ways in which information and decisions about what constitutes information reach us. The tension between topical and alphabetical organizing systems is an issue that, in libraries, is familiar to catalogers. I am by no means certain how many reference librarians also consider it with respect to their own tools. That a concealed thematic organizing principle may underlie even an ABC approach to an encyclopedia (p.157) is worth pondering.

Nor am I certain how frequently the *authority* (as opposed to the authoritativeness or accuracy) of reference tools is considered within the field. This too, however, is a topic that McArthur usefully considers. His discussion of the controversy surrounding the publication of *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* in the 1960s is illuminating in this regard (chapter 16). Whether or not its compilers

wanted it to have *prescriptive* as well as *de*-scriptive authority, the society into which that dictionary emerged assumed that it did and objected loudly to the way in which it handled that authority. The more widespread social and political implications of reference books also attract McArthur's attention. His discussion of the significance of *vulgarisation* is not unrelated to a reader's increasing sympathy with McArthur's own reliance on secondary scholarship; more importantly, he shows how reference books, unmediated by teachers and the academy in the fashion of textbooks, directly affect their users. They may thus serve to undermine accepted canons of truth and significance (Diderot's *Encyclopédie* is, of course, the locus classicus for such a reference book).

McArthur ends with a discussion of the future of reference in a computerized society. The perennial issues of reference—"how best to scan for, amass, file, retrieve, define, illustrate, display and distribute lexicographic and encyclopedic information" (p.170)—have been complicated by additional issues, most of them resulting directly from the introduction of the computer (whose development McArthur suggestively parallels to the impulses behind the development of encyclopedias).

A short review cannot indicate the range of this book. I have called it a "meditation" above, but it may mean more just to call it an essay in a slightly older sense of the word *essay*: a preliminary effort toward understanding something about the ways in which the human mind works at keeping the knowledge it acquires. "When I first started . . . this book," McArthur writes, "I thought I was engaged in outlining the history of lexicography and its related disciplines. It took some time . . . before I realized that I was in fact toying with a distinct way of looking at human history" (p.16). One can carp all day long about the flaws of a 230-page book that "toys" with such a topic. Yet *Worlds of Reference*, though far from magisterial, offering no answers, and sometimes obvious, is the product of an intelligent author dealing with issues utterly fundamental to the business of li-

braries. It is always suggestive, always worth thinking about.—*Daniel Traister, Van Pelt Library, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia.*

Slavens, Thomas P. *Theological Libraries at Oxford.* New York: K. G. Saur, 1984. 197p. $43.50 (ISBN 3-598-10563-0).
_____. *A Great Library through Gifts.* New York: K. G. Saur, 1986. 355p. $40 (ISBN 3-598-10621-1).

Both Slavens' study of Oxford's theological collections and his lengthier treatment of the library at Union Theological Seminary (New York) were undertaken in the belief they might "provide guidelines for the development of other libraries" (p.v, *Theological Libraries;* p.ix, *Great Library*). The work treating Oxford briefly examines the accumulation of theological and church history collections held in the Bodleian, the History and Theology Faculty libraries, and thirty-one other Oxford libraries. The reproduction of the double-spaced typescript is marred by a number of typographical errors, and poor punctuation hampers clear reading. Several factual errors also detract. For example, Archbishop Laud was executed in 1645 and could not have donated manuscripts to the Bodleian up until 1650 as suggested (p.51). The marvelous, early seventeenth-century frieze in the upper reading room of the Bodleian is turned into evidence of the first librarian's narrow religion and collecting (p.49). However, the frieze included not only church fathers and Protestant reformers but also featured Wyclif, Hus, Savonarola, and scientists such as Copernicus, Brahe, Mercator, and Ortelius.

More fundamental faults prevent the work from fulfilling its stated purpose. In the absence of any conclusion, we are left with "two themes" briefly noted in the preface: the importance of starting early—in the case of Oxford, eight centuries ago—and the important development role played by gifts as well as copyright deposits and endowment funding (p.v). For obvious reasons the first "theme" does not advance academic librarianship. The second "theme" is important and dis-

tinctly relevant, but its promise is unrealized.

In recounting the development of the various libraries' theological holdings, Slavens offers a compilation of notable acquisitions accumulated over centuries. Many are gifts of splendid rarities invaluable to theological scholarship, but he does not ascribe the origins of all the important holdings. Furthermore, the overall importance of gifts to the building of Oxford's fine collections is not well demonstrated. The single numerical indication of the importance of gifts is for 1978–79. In that year, only 22 percent (£ 520,000) of the Bodleian budget was available for materials purchases (p.92). A total of 79,000 books and pamphlets were accessioned, 43,000 of which were obtained through copyright deposit and 25,000 through purchase (p.74), leaving 11,000 unaccounted. How many were in theology? Were they gifts? If so, how could that year be considered representative of the relative importance in past centuries of donations and copyright deposits?

A serious omission is the failure to explain the motivations and mechanisms of donation. We can readily deduce the motivations of alumni and faculty donors, but why do apparently unaffiliated donors give? Is there now or has there ever been a plan for systematic development and donor cultivation such as a number of leading academic libraries have instituted in recent years? A Friends group is mentioned only once as playing an unspecified role in an acquisition during the 1940s (p.67).

The listing of many collections and single items of scholarly interest, coupled with the inclusion of the Bodleian's 1980 reading regulations, points to possible use of the work as a very selective guide to theological research at Oxford. However, the lack of indexing and inadequate discussion of present access tools prevent ready use even in this manner.

Slavens' effort to describe the importance of gifts to the development of the library at Union Theological Seminary is more successful. Listed again are notable acquisitions, including many significant