

CHAPTER THREE

PRIVATE LIBRARIES AND READING TASTES

Having dealt with general and historiographical works, most bibliographers of American library history divide their material into types of libraries and topics that correspond generally to the chronological way in which they have come to occupy places of scholarly significance. Although these divisions vary somewhat, they usually begin with works that deal with personal libraries and with the reading tastes that influenced their creation. Historians and literary scholars have tended to link these two topics and have focused much of their study on the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Perhaps this is because, before the widespread establishment of social and academic libraries that were accessible to the general public, private libraries served as the principal source of reading matter for large segments of literate society. After the founding of a greater number of institutional libraries, the number of significant private collections tended to decline by comparison, and some collections were absorbed in one way or another into larger institutions. When private collections became themselves institutionalized, they frequently formed the basis of research libraries. These receive coverage in Chapter 9, "Special Libraries-Private Research Libraries."

The two sections of this chapter reflect the themes suggested above. The section on reading tastes is very selective and includes primarily those items directly related to reading and book collecting. Citations to the book trade and publishing have been omitted from this chapter. Readers should consult such standard works as G. Thomas Tanselle's still definitive *Guide to the Study of United States Imprints* (2 vols.; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), John Tebbel's comprehensive *A History of Book Publishing in the United States* (4 vols.; New York: R. R. Bowker, 1971-1980), and Paul A. Winckler's *History of Books and Printing: A Guide to Information Sources* (Detroit: Gale, 1979). In any case, the distinction between studies of private libraries and reading tastes is not clear. Thus, the sections that follow should be used together.

Private Libraries

Michael H. Harris and Donald G. Davis, Jr., writing in the first edition of this bibliography, stated that "there is a strange tendency among historians to consider the nature of private book ownership a significant aspect of American intellectual history prior to the Civil War, while ignoring this subject when it comes to exploring the social or intellectual history of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries." With few exceptions, this situation still prevails. An important example of this pattern is Daniel Boorstin's award winning trilogy *The Americans*, the first volume of which (1958, **3.96**) devotes one of four sections, "Language and the Printed Word," to the study of reading tastes, private libraries, and the book trade. The second volume contains only scattered

references to the subject, and the final volume omits this aspect of intellectual history altogether.

The colonial and early national periods are now well covered. Louis B. Wright's *Cultural Life of the American Colonies* (1957, **3.95**) surveys private libraries and reading tastes broadly. New England has attracted the attention of several scholars, among them Thomas G. Wright (*Literary Culture in Early New England, 1620-1730*, 1920, **3.18**) and Samuel Eliot Morison (*Intellectual Life of Colonial New England*, 1965, **3.118**). The South has received its full treatment in Richard Beale Davis's three-volume work, *Intellectual Life in the Colonial South*, (1978, **3.389**) of which volume two is devoted to libraries. A type of research that has declined in popularity but that still holds promise is the study of private libraries in various cities and states. Many of these efforts have concentrated on the South and include the early work of E. V. Lamberton on colonial Pennsylvania (1918, **3.15**), William Houlette's study of plantation libraries in the Old South (1933, **3.24**), John McDermott's *Private Libraries in Creole St. Louis* (1938, **3.44**), George Smart's analysis of libraries in colonial Virginia (1938, **3.45**), Joseph T. Wheeler's work on private libraries in colonial Maryland (1940, **3.50**), and John Goudeau's research on Louisiana (1965, **3.117**). Walter Edgar has done continuing study of libraries in colonial South Carolina (1969, **3.131** ; 1971, **3.139** ; 1977, **3.387**). Some of this material overlaps that found in the following section, devoted to reading tastes.

A final major category of studies dealing with private libraries consists of those devoted to the collecting interests of individuals. These works range from books dealing with the development of major collections to catalogs of individual libraries and brief descriptive articles on such collections. Although Benjamin Franklin has received much attention by scholars such as Edwin Wolf (1962, **3.110**) and Margaret Korty (1967, **3.125**), others have also undergone study, as exemplified by Walter Harding's *Emerson's Library* (1967, **3.122**), Daniel Meador's *Mr. Justice Black and His Books* (1974, **3.155**), Marie Korey's *The Books of Isaac Norris, 1701-1706, at Dickinson College* (1976, **3.162**), and Mildred Abraham's study of the library of Lady Jean Skipwith of Mecklenburg County, Virginia (1983, **3.178**). A more recent thesis in this category is Clyde Stanley's work on William Byrd II of Westover (1984, **3.181**).

American presidents seem to have attracted special attention from library historians. Among the more significant works of the genre are William Peden's dissertation, "Thomas Jefferson: Book Collector" (1942, **3.56**); Gordon W. Jones's *The Library of James Monroe, (1758-1830)* (1967, **3.124**); and *Catalogue of the Library of Thomas Jefferson* by Millicent Sowerby (1952-1959, 1983, **3.80**).

Since private libraries frequently have become the foundation or nucleus of large public or research libraries, the histories of these institutions often contain useful historical information. Examples of these include the John Carter Brown Library at Brown University, the Jefferson books at the University of Virginia and the Library of Congress,

and the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley. Donald C. Dickinson's *Dictionary of American Book Collectors* (1986, **2.359**; listed in Chapter 2, "General Studies") treats many of these collections that were at one time private libraries of individual collectors and underscores the significance of further examining Chapter 15, "Biographies of Individual Librarians and Library Benefactors."

Reading Tastes

Materials relating to the development of reading tastes and those aspects of the book trade that reflect reading tastes are the focus of this section. Although historical studies of reading tastes have tended to deal with the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as seen in the examples cited above, several excellent surveys of reading and book distribution patterns in the country give a general overview of the subject. These include Frank Luther Mott, *Golden Multitudes: The Story of Best Sellers in the United States* (1947, **3.274**); James D. Hart, *The Popular Book: A History of America's Literary Taste* (1950, **3.285**); and Frank Schick, *The Paperbound Book in America* (1958, **3.314**).

Another kind of study has been based on the analysis of private libraries, book trade statistics, advertisements, and primary manuscript materials and has tried to assess the nature of reading tastes in various parts of the country or in different periods of American history. Examples of these are Joseph T. Wheeler on reading interests in colonial Maryland (1941, **3.254**), Theodore C. Blegen on Minnesota (1947, **3.272**), M. P. Fletcher on Arkansas (1949, **3.278**), Hugh Baker on California (1951, **3.288**), Carl C. Wright on Texas (1951, **3.293**), Harold H. Dugger on Missouri (1951, **3.290**), Howard Peckham on books and reading in the Ohio Valley (1958, **3.313**), Clyde H. Cantrell on the antebellum South (1960, **3.319**), Donald D. Walker on the reading habits of the cowboy (1960, **3.321**), Richard M. Gummere on the influence of the classics in colonial America (1963, **3.328**), Doyce Nunis on reading in early California (1964, **3.331**), Richard B. Davis's *Intellectual Life in Jefferson's Virginia* (1964, **3.329**) and his more recent *A Colonial Southern Bookshelf: Reading in the Eighteenth Century* (1979, **3.391**), H. Trevor Colbourn on the reading interests of colonial leaders (1965, **3.335**), Donald A. Sears on reading in Maine (1973, **3.369**), and the fine study by David Lundberg and Henry F. May, "The Enlightened Reader in America" (1976, **3.382**).

More recent research has dealt with literacy and the social uses of printed materials. These studies are exemplified by the work of David Hall ("The Uses of Literacy in New England, 1600-1850" 1983, **3.397**) and Rhys Isaac ("Books and the Social Authority of Learning: The Case of Mid-Eighteenth Century Virginia," 1983, **3.398**)-both included in *Printing and Society in Early America*, edited by William L. Joyce.

Another approach has been to study the popularity of individual authors in America. Classic studies of this kind, which seem to be declining in number, are G. H. Orians on Scott (1929, **3.203**), Charles F. Mullett on Coke (1932, **3.213**), Chester N. Greenough on

Defoe (1935, 3.219), Leon Howard on Milton (1935, 3.220), Esther C. Dunn on Shakespeare (1939, 3.243), Paul M. Spurlin on Montesquieu (1940, 3.250), Mary Barr on Voltaire (1941, 3.252), Spurlin, again, on Rousseau (1948, 3.277), Agnes M. Sibley on Pope (1949, 3.282), George F. Sensabough on Milton (1964, 3.333), Frederic M. Litto on Addison (1966, 3.339), Martin Roth on Sterne (1970, 3.353), and John M. Werner on Hume (1972, 3.363).

A final word is in order before closing this essay. For about a decade a group of scholars concerned with the influence and the role of the book in American culture has been coalescing as part of a growing worldwide phenomenon. The work of this research community is closely related to the history of libraries and reading, and its expanding literature requires serious examination by those who study the institutional frameworks that collect, preserve, and mediate books and other materials. One of the principal bodies in this movement is the American Antiquarian Society's Program in the History of the Book in American Culture, located in Worcester, Massachusetts.

Private Libraries

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1876-1919

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