

## Book Reviews

*Teaching with Books, a Study of College Libraries.* Harvie Branscomb. Association of American Colleges, American Library Association, 1940. 258p. \$2.50.

"THE THESIS running through this volume has been that the primary task of the college library is to provide certain facilities for and to aid in carrying out the instructional program of the faculty. Other functions such as the provision of reading materials along noncurricular lines and even of books for faculty research, though desirable and important, are secondary to this main task. Yet for reasons which have been discussed, the program of the library and that of the faculty have not been a unit. There has been lacking a sense of common purpose and, consequently, attention to the problem of the most effective coordination of effort."

The real thesis is stated in the last rather than in the first part of the above quotation. For librarians, the provocative section of the book is in the "reasons which have been discussed." And the constructive contributions to the subject are the suggestions in Chapter XI, "Bridging the Gap."

In the provocative part, librarians must reconcile themselves to the book's limitation of scope to the college library's "primary task" and also to having some of the other "secondary" functions made the scapegoats for the library's failures in this task. When the author says "the question must be raised whether we need these large libraries," he ought, in fairness, to add "for the libraries' primary task." Even so, the question would be provocative enough. Many sins are laid to the "rare book tradition" and the "influence of the great research libraries." Largely

because of these, "in the developments of the last 25 years more emphasis has been placed on the acquisition and preservation of library materials than upon their use," collections of fourteen university libraries having increased 281.9 per cent during this period. Yet for five of these libraries, where consistent circulation figures for 23 years were available, the combined recorded circulation in 1936-37 was more than 5 times what it was in 1914-15!

This is wasting too many words, however, on questions of scope and perspective, which are, after all, irrelevant, since the choice in these matters is the author's prerogative. It is true that too few undergraduates read outside their textbooks and that many of these few read too little. Reasons for this are well worth discussing and the author gives due attention to librarians' efforts to improve the situation, though he does not always seem to interpret correctly the philosophy that lies behind them.

The chapter entitled "Making Books Accessible" seems at first to set up a straw man in debating "the open shelf versus the closed shelf form of book administration" or does the author know of a college library with all closed shelves, a college library in which there is not at least some compromise between open and closed? If there is such a college library, his only injustice to it is in ignoring the subject catalog (which is discussed later as one of the things that cost us too much), for this, equally with the author catalog, deserves some notice as a guide to the students' "vague and tentative gropings" (whether the stack be closed or open)

and, not infrequently, is of more use to the student than looking on the shelves for books that are not there but in circulation. It may be that college presidents need to be convinced of the advantages of direct access to books in general; librarians do not. But that all students should have direct and unrestricted access to all books, if that is what Dr. Branscomb believes, will need more arguing to convince librarians in colleges of, say, more than 1000 students.

It is not clear how far Dr. Branscomb thinks the open access stack should go in including all the library books. He seems to favor "for introductory study, small open shelf libraries" (are the German "seminar libraries" really such?); he discusses with some sympathy the university's college library of about 15,000 volumes and "house libraries" of about 10,000 volumes. He does not object to browsing rooms as such, but questions "whether they do not apply the best resources of the library to what is a useful but nevertheless a definitely secondary function . . . recreation and noncurricular reading" and, secondly, "whether the browsing room works." (The browsing room is, according to the reviewer's observation, so variable in quality, quantity, and administration as to call for more than the somewhat casual mass treatment given it here.)

The author looks with some degree of commendation on open-shelf reserves with, only if necessary, closed reserves of a minimum list of "indispensable readings." And at this point the reviewer would like to record his individual gratitude to Dr. Branscomb for the help his book has given to one college's efforts toward moving closed reserves to open-shelf reserves, changing or reducing open-shelf reserves to "suggestion shelves," supplemented by

more, bigger, and better reading lists. Also (cf. pp.163ff) more of the "in dispensable readings" should be available in the student's private library and in rental collections.

The familiar case of "centralization versus departmentalization" is fairly stated and note made of the trend toward divisional instead of departmental layouts, where complete centralization and complete open access are impossible. The advantages of the divisional plan per se are not discussed. Also, in the way of special library service, the author looks with some tolerance on such matters as the temporary classroom library or the office collection.

In "Books in Halls of Residence," Dr. Branscomb sees not only the desirability of having books available to the student wherever he is but for a moment sees "the exciting possibility . . . that perhaps this may be the answer to the great problem of the noise, confusion and congestion," and he would place books of assigned reading here. However, he pretty well disillusioned himself later on, except in the case of large universities where dormitories, "houses," or colleges each house nearly as many students as a small college. But the disillusionment goes too far when he says (p.160), "If there are inherent difficulties in placing the most used books in residential libraries, it would seem that the plan of a single college library . . . to handle undergraduate reading may appear in the long run to be the wiser solution."

After all, the librarian's (and Dr. Branscomb's) assumption is that the student's reading should be increased in quantity and extended in range. Free access to all the books in the library is one way (though only one way) of doing

this. It probably is the best way in the case of such students as come to college with the curiosity, initiative, and energy to read, study, and hunt out material on their own, as also for students who achieve these intellectual traits in the course of their college work—e.g., in honors courses. And who would be rash enough to say that any of our college or university libraries is too big for such students? Dr. Branscomb does not; he quotes various opinions but concludes against any arbitrary limit.

Accordingly, when a library grows beyond the reading-room-and-wall-shelves or the alcove type of building, it does not make sense to say that it becomes a worse library just by reason of its size. And when the stack comes to outbulk the reading room collections, it does not make sense to move the whole student body from reading room to stack. The difficulties of administration, which Dr. Branscomb notes, are not the only objections to a wide-open-access stack, nor the best objections. The ineffective library is the little used one, regardless of size or ease of access to books (the least used library in the reviewer's experience, as it happens, was a combination of alcove-plan and open-access stack). The failure of the library to be used is essentially due, not to any oversize, but to lack of the kinds of books wanted, whatever the gross library holdings may be, the lack of desire or the compulsion (too often requisite) of the student to read. The philosophy that lies behind the browsing room, suggestion shelves, or reading collections in residence halls is not a guilty conscience due to closed stack, but the desire to give the public what it wants, that is, to supply books that the student wants to read and to make them attractive, comfortable, and convenient. The philosophy back of the

reserved book collection and, to a certain extent, the "single college library" is compulsion, leading the horse to water *and* making him drink at the fount of "most-used books." Surely the browsing collection and the suggestion shelves are more likely than the stack to lead the "tentative and groping" student to a wider range of reading interest. As he attains this, he will be stimulated and not confused by the number of books in any given class in the stack and will make intelligent use of the key to the city or anything else we can give him, and surely he will make better progress if the, at best, limited space in the stack is not cluttered up with five thousand or even five hundred of the tentative and groping.

The reviewer has the uncomfortable feeling that by commenting on some of the more provocative statements in the book he may have given the prospective reader a wrong perspective. Perhaps the chief value of the book is that it attempts to present, not a recommended standard practice applicable to all college libraries, but a variety of suggested, observed, and experienced solutions for problems common to all. That it does not champion more vigorously the reviewer's favorite theory of solution and says kind words about solutions less acceptable to the reviewer may also be a merit.

The chapter on "What Books Should the Library Buy?" is a little disappointing in that its serially numbered recommendations are chiefly on what not to buy. But this is quite proper ("no list can be prepared which should be blindly followed by all institutions") and the recommendations on procedure in the use of standard lists, and in allotment of funds, are in general sound and useful. The mistake is the chapter heading.

There is more excuse for disappointment in Chapter XII, "The Costs of Library Service," not in the information it assembles on the relative sizes of college library budgets and on possible economies in cataloging processes, but in its omission of any discussion of the costs of service to readers, of the expenses of open-access stacks, of the cost of a library staff "knowing more about the work carried on in the several departments"—i.e., the cost of carrying out Dr. Branscomb's most important suggestions.

Finally, "Bridging the Gap" (Chapter XI) might well have been made the concluding chapter. The library staff at present cannot even "lead the horse to water," but this book suggests certain changes by which they may work with the instructors in this and may better justify the instructors' efforts. Suggestions include, for example, modifications in emphasis in the program of many libraries, greater faculty concern for student reading and other library matters, changing the status of the librarian, and reworking the library program with greater knowledge about the work carried on in the several departments of instruction both in general and in individual courses. The application of such general changes might, the author suggests, result in specific changes such as: more intelligent judgment on the number of duplicates required for various titles, modification of circulation rules which would adjust these more exactly to the reading demands of the course, preparing supplementary bibliographies, small exhibits on special topics, more adequate assistance in connection with themes and special assignments, exploiting the reference librarian for reference work instead of for information about the mere locations of things, certain

developments in which the instructor is moved into the library, location in the library of more classes other than seminars, simplification of instruction by the librarian in bibliography, and the use of the library and more such instruction in connection with departmental courses. In all this, Dr. Branscomb has given us good leads.—*Henry B. Van Hoesen, Brown University, Providence.*

*The Medieval Library.* James Westfall Thompson. University of Chicago Press, 1939. 682p. \$5. (University of Chicago Studies in Library Science.)

THIS monumental contribution to the history of intellectual development has been produced by Professor Thompson, now at the University of California, formerly professor of medieval history at the University of Chicago and lecturer on the history of libraries in its graduate library school.

In the production of this noteworthy work the author has been assisted by several of his present and former students at the universities of Chicago and California, Ramona Bressie writing the chapter on "Libraries of the British Isles in the Anglo-Saxon Period;" S. K. Padover, the chapters on "Byzantine Libraries," "Jewish Libraries," "Muslim Libraries," and "German Libraries in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries;" the late Isabella Stone, "Libraries of the Greek Monasteries in Southern Italy;" Geneva Drinkwater, "French Libraries in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries;" Claude H. Christensen, "Scandinavian Libraries in the Late Middle Ages;" Dorothy Robathan, "Libraries of the Italian Renaissance;" and Florence Edler de Roover, "The Scriptorium."

The subject matter is treated by periods: