

will read and take them to heart. If this were to come about, studies and reports such as this one would never be needed.—*Maryan E. Reynolds, Washington State Library, Olympia.*

Information, Mechanism and Meaning.

Donald M. MacKay. Cambridge, Mass.: The M.I.T. Press, 1969. 196p. \$2.95.

Most librarians today would agree that a major, if not the major, function of libraries is the transfer of "information" from authors to readers. To facilitate the execution of this function, librarians classify their collections, provide subject, author, and title indexes, purchase bibliographies of every description, provide professional reference service, etc. Yet what precisely is this "information" that librarians work so hard to help transfer? How can we recognize what information a potential reader is lacking? How can we be sure that we are doing the best job of representing in our catalogs the information which authors have represented in their books? Without an adequate theory of information we really have no way of answering these questions in a rigorous way. Dr. MacKay is concerned in this book with the beginnings of such a theory of information.

MacKay is head of the Research Department of Communication at the University of Keele. He puts his background in physics to use at several points in this development of a formal model of how human beings store their information and how they add to, modify, and validate this store. His approach is nonlinguistic; that is, he views the messages that human beings send each other as unanalyzed wholes, which, as entities, have meaning to the sender and to the receiver of the message. He hypothesizes that the human mind at any given time is in a state of conditional readiness to react to stimuli in a certain way. When a message containing information is received, it results in a change in the individual's state of conditional readiness. The meaning of a message he defines as a function which selects a particular state of conditional readiness from all the possible states of conditional readiness. He does not suggest that his hypothesis describes how the brain really handles information, only that his model is a mechanism capable of

representing what the brain seems to do.

None of the ideas contained in this book are new. The book is a collection of three radio broadcasts and nine papers (plus two more papers reproduced as appendices) presented by the author from 1950 to 1964. Hence, the date of publication is misleading. MacKay has added an introductory chapter and has inserted a foreword and postscript to many of the papers, each a chapter in the book, in an attempt to provide continuity. He has used the technique of putting passages which can be skipped by readers of earlier chapters in small type. This technique only partly alleviates the major fault of the work—redundancy. In the later chapters, there is much said that has been said before, sometimes in almost identical terms. It is unfortunate that MacKay could not have taken the time to pull together all of the ideas from the various papers and present his thesis in a more organized fashion. It is also unfortunate that he has added no new references to those originally included in his papers. The work does not provide a very good entry into the literature of information theory, since even the original references were not intended to be exhaustive.

This book is certainly not a definitive work on the theory of information. However, in many respects, it is a stimulating and highly theoretical work. Those seeking practical advice on the design of library automation projects or the construction of information retrieval systems should look elsewhere. Those seeking insight into the basic nature of the information transfer process may find something here to stimulate their thinking.—*Edward A. Eaton III, The University of Texas at Austin.*

Library Lit.—The Best of 1970. Bill Katz and Joel J. Schwartz, eds. Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1971. 429p.

An apparently self-appointed jury of five (its origin is unclear in the introduction) took on the stultifying task of reading (scanning?) the full runs of some 200 library and general periodicals of the period November 1, 1969–October 31, 1970. The jury (the editors, professor and student, respectively, at Albany; John N. Berry, editor of *Library Journal*; William R. Eshelman, editor of *Wilson Library Bulletin*; and Eric

Moon, president of Scarecrow) are certainly to be commended for their effort in attempting to winnow out some grain from the tremendous amount of chaff. Furthermore, they propose to do this every year.

In case we need to be reminded of the sorry state of library literature, we are reminded by Eric Moon's superb "The Library Press," reprinted from *LJ* as "Prologue." In all, there are thirty articles from twenty-one journals (four from *LJ* and *WLB*, three from *American Libraries*, and one each from the others, ranging from *Horn Book* and *LRTS* to such less frequently seen things as *South Today* and *Soundings*.

After the introduction and prologue, the articles are grouped into four major headings: Libraries and Librarians, Technical Services/Technical Processes, Communication and Education, and The Social Prerogative. Generally speaking, the articles are excellent, although, as the editors note, no one will be happy with all the selections, on grounds of inclusion or exclusion. At any rate, certainly pieces like Joseph L. Wheeler's "What Good Are Library Standards?" in the first group; and "Shared Cataloging" by Herman Liebaers, "MEDLARS: A Summary, Review and Evaluation of Three Reports" by Norman D. Stevens, "CATCALL" by Ralph R. Shaw, and "Automation Stops Here" by Roscoe Rouse in the second group, deserve as wide circulation as they can get. Equally deserving are Curtis G. Benjamin's "Book Publishing's Hidden Bonanza" in the third group, and Robert P. Haro's "How Mexican-Americans View Libraries," Jesse Shera's "Plus ça Change," Anita R. Schiller's "The Disadvantaged Majority," and O. James Warner's "Law Library Service to Prisoners" in the fourth.

The immediate question is, "Why reprint all of this?" Certainly most of us see *LJ*, *WLB*, *CRL*, *AL*, and a handful of other journals, but how many of us read (or even see) *all* of the journals? We read in our own fields of interests, with little time for more. Perhaps an anthology of this type will broaden horizons in a relatively easy way.

My one quibble is in reprinting without any editorial notes articles from British journals which employ terminology unfamiliar to most American readers. No doubt

it is pure ignorance on my part (widely shared, I suspect) when I fail to understand terms like "G.C.E. pass" and "Part II papers" in Peter D. Pocklington's excellent "Letter to a Library School Lecturer." Couldn't there be a brief editorial note?

In short, this volume is recommended for library schools and professional collections, institutional and personal.—Walter C. Allen, *University of Illinois, Urbana*.

Books That Changed America. Robert B. Downs. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1970. 280p. \$6.95.

The compilation of lists of influential books is a fairly common phenomenon in the literary world. A frequently used gambit in the preparation of such lists is a poll of authorities in a given field which yields a list of books most frequently mentioned by the authorities polled. That few people would agree on any such list is a foregone conclusion. In a 1935 *Publishers' Weekly* article Edward Weeks, John Dewey, and Charles A. Beard each chose what they considered to be the twenty-five most influential books of the previous fifty years; Bellamy's *Looking Backward* was the only unanimous choice. The wide variation of choices for lists of influential books is due to the large number of works which have exerted some measure of influence on the public as well as to the differences in taste and background of the compilers.

Armed with this warning that no one list of books will satisfy everyone (or perhaps anyone except the compiler) let us examine Robert Downs' new work, *Books That Changed America*. Downs has given us a list of twenty-five works in the general area of the social sciences which have exerted a telling influence on America; the list was limited to the social sciences because the author felt that the influence of works in this area is more easily demonstrated than that of works in other fields. Over eighty books were considered for inclusion at the onset of this project; as Downs notes in the introduction, "the task of reducing the list to twenty-five was by no means easy." One could compile a very creditable list of influential books from those works which he considered and then omitted; among such works noted in the introduction are Horatio Alger's *Ragged Dick*, Dana's *Two Years*