

# Book Reviews

**A History of Libraries in the Western World**, by Elmer D. Johnson. New York and London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1965. 410p. \$8.50. (65-13554).

When a heathen came to Rabbi Hillel and asked him to explain the whole Torah on one leg, he answered: "Do not unto others as you should not want them to do unto you—the rest is commentary. Go and study." Anyone who is asked to write a compendium of library history is faced with the same problem. It is impossible.

Mr. Johnson has bravely struggled through hundreds of monographs on one or another phase and period in the history of libraries. At the end of each chapter he has listed "further reading." That his book seems abrupt and somewhat statistical is hardly his fault. How does one describe the British Museum in two pages? One could hardly get the flavor of the King's Library in that space. One could not possibly understand the scope and depth of the special collections of authors, subjects, and periods which that institution has published from several score lines of typing. (The volume is a photoreproduction of typed pages, an inexpensive form of printing apparently favored by books on libraries and librarianship.)

Bravely, Mr. Johnson starts out with papyrus and clay tablets, and works his way methodically through to sixty-seven hundred volumes on French culture collected by François Bouvier at Michigan State University. It is a long and tortuous road along which he progresses, and at every signpost he has had to make a difficult decision. How much can he say before he has to rush on? As many lines had to be devoted to that pioneer public library founded in 1656 by Captain Robert Keayne in Boston, which had no lasting influence and was destroyed by fire in 1747, as to the considerably larger, richer and far more influential Newberry Library in Chicago, which still flourishes.

It is difficult to suggest how the work might have been better. As a rare-book man I might have savored in greater detail and with more flowery description some of the

monumental collections of the past. A public library specialist might have dwelt with more loving care on the development of modern branch systems. One interested primarily in the emergence and importance of the hundreds of specialized technical collections would have underlined more heavily their impact on contemporary life.

No scholar will be happy with Mr. Johnson's book. Most of its inadequacies are the result of the immensity of the scope. Most of its inaccuracies are the result of the inadequacy of the secondary sources upon which the author was forced to rely. One is somewhat overwhelmed by statistics. No matter how one reads numbers they fail to appraise quality or usefulness. That St. Louis County had four hundred and thirty-five thousand volumes in 1962 does not tell us much more than that Gabrielle de la Tour, Countess of Montpensier, owned over two hundred volumes in 1474. Yet, how does one describe the *Bibliothèque Nationale*?

As a textbook for library school courses in library history, Mr. Johnson's work will be most useful. Names, dates, some facts, a bibliography obviously incomplete but at least challenging, and a skeletal outline for fleshing are there. This is not the gospel, but it is an introduction to verses in the gospel. But woe to him who relies upon the index. It can only be described as primitive. To the reader one can only repeat the words of Rabbi Hillel: "Go and study."—*Edwin Wolf 2d, The Library Company of Philadelphia.*

**The Modern Manuscript Library.** By Ruth B. Bordin and Robert M. Warner. New York: The Scarecrow Press, 1966. 151p. \$4. (66-13734).

This volume is intended to guide libraries and librarians in the management of manuscript collections. It serves this purpose admirably, reflecting the best of current practices. Each facet of a well-rounded manuscripts program is instructively discussed: collecting, processing, preparation of finding aids, administration, public relations. The model for discussion (and a fine one)