

than that books find their proper “constellations”; they must have an identity, be part of a coherent collection that orients the reader. An individual book must be part of an assemblage (Zaid’s word) that “rescues books lost in chaos.” A good bookseller, a good librarian, will see to it that no book need be orphaned. Book dealers and librarians are the intermediaries who will “filter the chaos and create meaningful constellations, facilitating the writer’s exchange with the reader.”

This slight, but satisfying, book joins what seems to be a new genre of memoirs and essays on the pleasures of reading (e.g., Alberto Manguel’s *A History of Reading*, David Denby’s *Great Books*, Nicholas Basbanes’s *Patience and Fortitude*). Zaid the author managed to convey to this reader his own passion for books—from his description of learning to read and acquiring the ability to combine individual letters of the alphabet into the “miracle of the full word,” to the way mature readers can be liberated, transported from reading the page to reading life itself. Perhaps it takes a person outside the library profession to remind us of the foundations of our work, to challenge the notion that it is thought-filled reading, and not information, that changes the way we think and live in our culture. Not a required purchase for most libraries, but a book every librarian ought to read. —*Cecile M. Jagodzinski, Indiana University.*

***Isaac D’Israeli on Books: Pre-Victorian Essays on the History of Literature.*** Ed. Marvin Spevack. London: British Library (ISBN 0712348298); New Castle, Del.: Oak Knoll Pr. (ISBN 1584561319), 2004. 266p. \$49.95. LC 2004-299690.

Who was Isaac D’Israeli? A descendant of Italian Jews who emigrated to England in the eighteenth century. An independently wealthy man of letters who spent his days at the British Museum and his nights in

his home library of 25,000 books. The genial author of poetry and fiction, popular miscellanies (*Curiosities of Literature, Literary Character of Men of Genius, Calamities of Authors*, etc.), and a well-regarded history of the reign of Charles I. Father of the flamboyant prime minister Benjamin Disraeli, his polar opposite in temperament, Isaac D’Israeli is now a forgotten figure except for a handful of quotations in old collections that have migrated to the Internet. One quotation, “There is a society in the deepest solitude,” seems to apply to the author himself.

This handsome collection of highlights from D’Israeli’s writings on the history of books signals an attempted revival. The editor, Marvin Spevack (a prolific Shakespeare scholar), is currently at work on a companion critical study. In his preface, Spevack places D’Israeli in the context of his “revolutionary times” and points out his interest in historical and cultural processes. Selections are grouped under the following headings: Writing and Reading, Printing and Publishing, Books, Authors & Co., Preservation and Destruction, Property and Politics, and Libraries. Also included is a famous (some say famously inaccurate) biographical essay by Benjamin Disraeli entitled “On the Life and Writings of Mr. Disraeli,” written in 1848, the year of Isaac’s death. The volume concludes with a directory of personal names, helpful for understanding D’Israeli’s phenomenally broad range of references, ancient and modern.

Superficially, D’Israeli is an old-fashioned bibliophile writing in elaborate prose about authors who were already obscure in his own lifetime. However, the patient reader comes to appreciate D’Israeli’s knowledge, judiciousness, originality, and humor. D’Israeli believes that a historian must consult the original sources and cite them punctiliously. His wide reading allows him to draw general

conclusions based on evidence from different times and places. He also provides factual information, such as prices charged by proofreaders or the price for the dedication of a play (five to ten guineas from the Revolution to the time of George I). He uses anecdotes to reveal human character. He is really a social historian, one of the first to study books and reading as social phenomena developing over time. He writes: "the favorite book of every age is a certain picture of the people. The gradual depreciation of a great author marks a change in knowledge or in taste."

D'Israeli is an enlightenment thinker with robust confidence in taste, proportion, and progress, but his intellectual integrity saves him from false optimism. The idea that monastery libraries preserved civilization he calls a myth: "They were indefatigable in erasing the best works of the most eminent Greek and Latin authors, in order to transcribe their ridiculous lives of saints on the obliterated vellum." The new is not always best; although "our present paper surpasses all other materials for ease and convenience of writing," ancient ink was far better than modern. D'Israeli defends freedom of speech and the rights of authors, recommending that authorial copyright extend one hundred years. He has a healthy skepticism about the role of politics, money, vanity, and venality in all walks of life, including book publishing.

Factual errors have been found in D'Israeli's work, and the material is often fragmentary and whimsical. Spevack presumably selected the best material for this edition and organized it into thematic chapters, but the reader still has to slog through thick paragraphs and even pages of only minor interest. There is something ridiculous about the conjunction, in a section on destruction of manuscripts, of Aristotle and Lady Mary Worthley Montague. Catalogs of curiosities—minute writing, forgeries, voluminous authors,

bad book titles, handwriting teachers, and so on—grow tedious. The mock epic tone (Alexander Pope was one of his favorite authors) also wears thin, although D'Israeli's wit can sometimes be marvelous. On the theme of dedications, he writes: "Never was the gigantic baby of adulation so crammed with the soft pap of *Dedications* as Cardinal Richelieu. French flattery even exceeded itself." Or, on the metaphysical poets: "They cast about them their pointed antitheses, and often subsided into a chink of similar syllables, and the clench of an ambiguous word."

Paradoxically, the most impressive passages in this potpourri of a book are D'Israeli's hard-won insights into the laws of history and human nature. By studying the romantic and mysterious origins of printing, he discovers that inventions of this nature are always gradual. His *aperçus* may be pithy, but they are never epigrammatic in the Oscar Wilde style, because they always come out of a deeper context. "Writing is justly denominated an art," he writes. "I think that reading claims the same distinction." There follows an acute discussion of the psychology of reading, culminating with the observations that "there is something in exquisite composition which ordinary readers can never understand" and "the pleasure of abusing an author is generally superior to that of admiring him." At times, D'Israeli's insights, like blazing comets, seem to come out of nowhere. "We like remote truths, but truths too near us never fail to alarm ourselves, our connexions, and our party."

This book is recommended for libraries with collections on the history of books and reading or on literature. D'Israeli is not for the fainthearted, but those inclined to make the effort will be impressed. —*Jean Alexander, Carnegie Mellon University*

**Dilevko, Juris, and Lisa Gottlieb.** *Reading and the Reference Librarian: The Impor-*