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Using Rare Books to Inspire Learning —
Part 1: Anthropology - Diaries

by Gene Waddell (College of Charleston) <waddelle@cofc.edu>

Editor’s Note: We know you will all enjoy Gene’s list of great books, and we are pleased to publish the entire list in Against the Grain. Gene has been very thorough and the list quite extensive, so we will be publishing it in two parts. Please be sure to watch for Part 2 in an upcoming issue. — KS

Numerous lists of great books have been prepared, and this list contains many of the same titles, but differs in significant respects. It includes subjects that have generally been omitted from series of great books: anthropology, art history, architecture, art, book arts, correspondence, essays, exploration, geography, geology, inventions, law, sociology, speeches, and sports. It also includes shorter works that represent a turning point in the understanding of a subject.

I have included first-person accounts of major discoveries, explorations, systematic observations made possible by new instruments, sound analyses, verifiable experiments, and methodologies created for more specialized fields of knowledge. Each title set a new standard for scholarship and excellence, created a new scholarly discipline, or set a new course for the study of a subject. In my opinion, the approaches used by these authors are the ones most likely to continue to provide the best basis for adding knowledge.

Even when the information they contain has been largely superceded, these titles represent the best thinking that had been done on their subjects at the time of publication. They provide models for how to try to deal with an entire field of knowledge and how to go about solving problems. They are most worth reading to learn how major problems were finally solved.

I have had to omit many famous histories and works of literature to be able to focus on the ones that I considered most worth acquiring. I have preferred well established principles to theories. I have nearly always omitted titles by living or recently deceased authors.

In some cases, better editions than the first have been subsequently published, and these editions and translations are also needed. In some cases, such as the first printing of the Columbus letter or the Gutenberg Bible, a facsimile or later edition will nearly always have to suffice because of their extreme rarity. One first edition of a Shakespeare play could substitute for the First Folio. Regardless, every library should have as many first editions of key works as it can acquire.

To make more facsimiles and translations widely available of standard works is also a publishing opportunity. A surprising number of these titles are out of print, and some have never been fully translated into English.

As more first editions are becoming available online, what is the point of having copies that are too valuable to be handled? The point is to inspire similar accomplishments. A first edition can be as inspiring as an original work of art no matter how many copies exist. It is to make readers wonder why these books are important, what it took to create them, why they have been so influential, and why so many of them still need to be read.

For many titles and dates, I have relied on Robert B. Downs’ Famous Books: Ancient and Medieval (1964) and on his Molders of the Modern Mind: 111 Books that Shaped Western Civilization (1961). His summaries are a reliable introduction to the most influential books in Western Civilization, and they provide an excellent basis to set priorities for reading. Dr. Lawrence Simms corrected many of my titles and translations.

Anthropology

Vico’s Principi di una Scienza Nuova Interno alla Natura delle Nazioni (1725 [Principles of the New Science Concerning the Common Nature of Nations]) — the initial basis for anthropology as a science

Mackenzie’s Voyages from Montreal on the River St. Lawrence Through the Continent of North America, to the Frozen and Pacific Oceans in the Years 1789 and 1793 (1801) — comprehensive summaries of the customs of the major linguistic stocks encountered

Kenyatta’s Facing Mount Kenya: the Tribal Life of the Gikuyu (1938) — daily life as lived by someone who later became an anthropologist and led his nation

Kroeber’s Anthropology: Race, Language, Psychology, Prehistory (2nd ed.; 1948) — coherent summary of current knowledge on the goals, achievements, and potential of anthropology by one of the leading contributors to the field

Ford and Beach, Patterns of Sexual Behavior (1953) — an exemplary cross-cultural analysis of the sexual customs of 190 societies

Archaeology

Schliemann’s Trojanische Altertümer (1874) — established a factual basis for the existence of the Mycenean Civilization and a historical basis for Homer’s Iliad, greatly stimulating further excavations

Curtius and Adler’s Olympia: die Ergebnisse der von dem Deutschen Reich Veranlaerten Ausgrabung, im Auftrag des Königl Preussischen Ministers der Geistlicher, Unterrichts- und Medicinal-Angelegenheiten (Olympia; 1890-1897; 10 vols. [5 vols. text; 4 vols. plates; atlas]) — a model for the complete excavation of a site and the complete publication of the results

Carter’s Tomb of Tut-anhk-Amen: Discovered by the late Earl of Carnarvon and Howard Carter (1927-1933; 3 vols.) — exemplary patience and techniques were used to recover everything possible from the only intact tomb of an ancient Egyptian monarch

Lanciani’s Forma Urbis Romae (atlas; 1893-1901) — a comprehensive and accurate visual summary of the plans of all buildings known to have existed in ancient Rome located precisely with reference to existing streets

Art History

Winckelmann’s Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums (1764 [History of Ancient Art]) the first systematic study of any aspect of art history and a model of scholarship, perceptive analysis, and descriptive writing.

Smith’s Sculptures of the Parthenon (1910) — folio with high-resolution images of some of the finest Greek sculpture and reconstructions.

De Tolnay’s Corpus dei Disegni di Michelangelo (1975-1980; 4 vols. [Complete Drawings by Michelangelo]) — facsimiles of all of Michelangelo’s drawings (verso and recto full-sized and in color) making comparisons possible that previously could not be made

Architectural History

Stuart and Revett’s Antiquities of Athens (1762-1794) — set a new standard for measured drawings of historic buildings and sculpture

Piranesi’s F. Raccolta de Tempj Antichi, 2 (1790 [Collection of Ancient Temples]) His measured drawings of the Pantheon set another new standard for comprehensive and accurate measured drawings of a single building.


Morse, Japanese Homes and Their Surroundings (1885) — a comprehensive and well illustrated account of Japanese domestic architecture without Western influence and that influence Western architecture

Middleton’s Remains of Ancient Rome (1892) — set a precedent for including the use of materials and methods of construction in architecture.

Kimball’s Domestic Architecture of the American Colonies and of the Early Republic (1922) — model for the use of primary sources for design and construction

Dinsmoor’s Architecture of Ancient Greece (1950) — comprehensive account of primary continued on page 71

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and secondary sources for a crucial period by a major archaeologist

Van Nieuw’s Santa Sophia in Istanbul: an Architectural Survey (1966-1987) — set another new standard for accuracy and completeness for recording the architecture of a major building

Architecture

Vitruvius’ De Architectura (1483-1490; written c. 25 BC [On Architecture; often entitled, Ten Books of Architecture]) — the earliest surviving architecture book and the architecture book most often translated and reprinted

Palladio’s Quattro Libri dell’Architettura (1570 [Four Books of Architecture]) — the designs that most influenced subsequent architecture

Adam and Adams’ Works in Architecture of Robert & James Adam (1778) — one of the most influential styles ever created with a detailed discussion of its characteristics

Ledoux’s L’Architecture Considérée sous le Rapport de L’Art des Moeurs et de la Legislazione: Tome Premier (1804 [Architecture Considered Appropriate for the Art of the Times and Laws: Volume One]) — the first part of a proposal for the adoption of an architectural style that was more compact and less ornamented, a proposal that had little impact at the time, but that provided principles and designs for the American and German Greek Revivals.

Schinkel’s Sammlung Architektonischer Entwürfe (1829-1835 [Collection of Architectural Designs]) — some of the finest and most influential designs produced during the Greek Revival through the architect and artist’s own drawings.

Mckim, Mead, and White’s Monograph of the Works of McKim, Mead & White, 1879-1915 (1914-1915) — 4 vols.; model publication on the work of the most successful architectural firm in the World during its existence.

Wright’s Ausgeführte Bauten (1910 [Executed Buildings; “Wasmuth Portfolio”]) — the lavishly produced portfolio with plans, elevations, and perspectives of Wright’s early architectural designs.

Astronomy

Copernicus’ De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium (1543 [On Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres]) — proved that the sun was the center of the presumed universe

Galileo’s Sideres Nuncius… (1610 [Stary Messenger]) — first major discoveries using a telescope for astronomy

Newton’s Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica (1687 [Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy]) — demonstrated mathematically that gravity could keep the known universe in equilibrium

Hubble’s “NGC 6822, a Remote Stellar System” (Astrophysical Journal, 1925) — “the first object definitely assigned to a region outside the galactic system”

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Atlases

Ptolemy’s [Cosmographia] (first Greek edition edited by Erasmus, 1533; written by AD 170) — coordinates that made possible the construction of the first accurate atlas of the world

Bartholomew’s Oxford Economic Atlas (1937) — economic geography with a great amount of detail clearly and superbly depicted

Bartholomew’s Times Atlas of the World (1967) — a model of good design for presenting the geography of the World clearly and comprehensively

Biography

Cellini’s Vita di Benvenuto Cellini, Orfece e Scultore Fiorentino da lui Medesimo (1703 [Life of Benvenuto Cellini, Florentine Goldsmith and Sculptor Written by Himself]) — exceptional for its viviness and candor and as an eye-witness account of 16th Century Renaissance art

Rousseau, Les Confessions (Oeuvres Posthumes, vol. 9; 1781) — set the precedent for honesty in autobiography

Franklin’s Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin (1st edition in French, 1791) — an exemplary life with consistently good advice on how to live one

Douglas’ Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass (1845) — slavery, exhortation, and excellent prose

Taw’s Roughing It (1872) — seven years in Nevada, California, and Hawaii at early points in his and their developments

Sullivan’s Autobiography of an Idea (1924) — exceptional on childhood experiences and important for the origin and design of the skyscraper

Geronimo, Geronimo’s Story of His Life (1906) — oral autobiography of an Indian leader with comprehensive and reliable information on daily life of the Apache while still an independent nation

Lindbergh, Spirit of St. Louis (1953) — how the first non-stop trans-Atlantic crossing by air was planned; written as though the flight were taking place

Books

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Darwin’s On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life (1859) — established through the extensive use of inductive evidence that existing species evolve from pre-existing species; explained extinction and provided a new basis for biology

Mendel’s “Versuche über Pflanzen-Hybriden,” Verhandlungen des Naturforschenden Vereines in Brunn (1866 [Experiments on Hybred Plants])

Morgan’s American Beaver (1868) — comprehensive and systematic record of undisturbed beaver colonies made shortly before being destroyed

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The DLB at Thirty

by Matthew J. Bruccoli (President, Bruccoli Clark Layman; Phone: 803-771-4642; Fax: 803-799-6953)

The Dictionary of Literary Biography is the most comprehensive published literary reference work: 390 illustrated volumes covering world authors for all periods — 95,000,000 words.

The project was developed for Gale Research by Matthew J. Bruccoli and C. E. Frazer Clark, Jr. with the backing of Frederick G. Raffner, founder of the Gale publishing organization. Bruccoli and Richard Layman are the Editorial Directors. The first DLB Volume, The American Renaissance in New England, edited by Joel Myerson, was published in 1978. Twenty-three DLB Yearbook volumes were published between 1980 and 2002; and there are forty-six volumes in the on-going DLB Documentary series.

Bruccoli Clark Layman produces the DLB for Thompson Gale (now Gale Cengage) and has editorial authority for the volumes. The DLB volumes are stand-alones: except for a few two- or three-volume sets, each volume provides coverage of a genre or movement or period of literature. The intention from the start was to make it possible for libraries to purchase single volumes as needed. It has never been necessary for institutions to place standing orders for the entire DLB — although standing orders are welcome.

The editorial director of a literary reference book has no business trying to shape the canon. But he does it nonetheless because the selection of entries and the wording assigned are personal decisions. The editors bring to the task their taste, judgment, standards, biases, values, and all of their reading experience. When Dr. Johnson was asked if his reports of parliamentary debates were fair, he replied that of course they were fair; but he made sure the rascally Whigs didn’t get the best of it. His monumental Dictionary is personal and idiosyncratic. An impersonal reference book — outside of the sciences — isn’t possible or even desirable.

The DLB inevitably reflects the convictions of the outside volume editors and contributors. BCL editing endeavors to impose an objective tone on the entries: first-person enthusiasms are tranquilized, and insightful lit-crit is purged. Writers I regard as over-rated or even worthless have been accorded the space their inflated reputations require. The function of the DLB is to record literary history — not remake it. Nonetheless, the authors I believe in get the best of it; thus the Documentary volumes for James Gould Cozzens and John O’Hara, both edited by me.

I don’t edit or vet all the DLB entries, although I should. I work on the entries for the authors I care about as well as the entries I’m uneasy about. In order to produce 390 volumes, Richard Layman and I have necessarily relied on in-house BCL editors and outside academic editors. Some 20,000 contributors have written DLB entries.

The DLB volumes are not written in-house; they are planned by outside editors who assign the entries. These volume editors are supposed to vet the entries and reject the hopeless ones or return the unsatisfactory ones for revision; but many of them accept everything that comes in. The pre-production vetting process occurs at BCL; about 25% of the entries are returned for revision and about 10% are killed. Some DLB volumes have been ghost-edited by BCL staff editors because the outside editors were irresponsible and failed to do their work. There have also been fakers who signed contracts and never delivered. They probably never intended to: they just wanted to talk about their work-in-progress or claim departmental credit for it. The abort rate for DLB volume editors and contributors has run 20%.

BCL does what it takes to publish trustworthy volumes. At least three months of in-house editing, revising, and checking every entry are required to make a volume publishable in DLB. Plagiarism is a steady concern. Publishing reference books and scholarly books requires doing the caring for people who don’t care what they put their names on.

It gets harder every year to assign DLB volumes and to obtain publishable entries. Senior professors don’t want to take on the work required. It doesn’t pay enough, and they don’t want to do it for the satisfaction of the work. Junior faculty are unwilling or unable to edit a DLB volume or write entries, because literary history is not “relevant.” Relevant to what? These ill-trained or undertrained academicians want to commit lit-crit. During the thirty-year life of the DLB, at least three generations of graduate students have been damaged by emulating incompetent and undemanding teachers without professional standards. Students who do not learn to use reference books as undergrads and whose grad school mentors advise them that practicing “insightful” criticism is intellectually superior to, as well as much easier than, writing literary history are not likely to develop the capacity to write publishable DLB entries. The ability to write good reference-book material is not the best test of a scholar-teacher’s competence: but it is one test. Literary history cannot be entrusted to the critics and the academicians who don’t like books or literature.

The erosion of literary reference books required the collaboration of the librarians who have restyled themselves information scientists and have accordingly immunized themselves against contamination by books. They don’t waste acquisition funds on volumes that have to be catalogued, shelved, and even evaluated by them. They aspire to reference rooms without reference books.