Against the Grain

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Wryly Noted-Books About Books

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Wryly Noted — Books About Books

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The Library: A Catalogue of Wonders by **Stuart Kells**. (ISBN: 978-1-640-09020-0, Counterpoint Publishers 2017, \$26.00 HB.)

When I once asked my friend **Bob Wilig** why he had opened a bookstore (**Troubadour Books** for Saints and Holy Fools) he replied: "Because books are oceanic. They contain everything." I couldn't agree more. The book at hand is for those who hold a similar belief and want to read a book that confirms it. **Stuart Kells** is an authority on rare books and book-trade history. He has previously written a history of **Penguin Books**, *Penguin and the Lane Brothers*, and he is the author of *Rare*, the biography of **Kay Craddock**, the first female president of the **International League of Antiquarian Booksellers**. Because of his background, he is the ideal companion for a fresh tour through the minutiae of library and book collecting history.

With chapters on Renaissance book hunters, English bibliomaniacs, secret library compartments, destructive library fires in history, and infamous book thieves, we follow him through almost every country and time gleaned bits of history and odd facts. He is also fond of lists and tells us about his education in book history when he learned about book collectors such as the "black-letter men, gilt toppers, rough edgers, tall copyists, broadsiders, Aldusians, Elzivirians, Grangerites, pasquinaders, and tawny moroccoites." For his research he delved into "national libraries, workingmen's libraries, subscription libraries, scholarly libraries, corporate libraries, club subscription libraries, plush private libraries, and also modest libraries such as a 'found' library amassed by a demolition man."

The author begins his book with a unique idea: that the first libraries were oral libraries and he cites the Aboriginal people of Australia as having the oldest continuous oral tradition. Their stories include histories and fables and religious "texts" and especially descriptions of Songlines, or dream tracks. These libraries are highly organized and intact after thousands

of years of history. The author also mentions the Kope people of New Guinea, the Mandika griots of Mali, the nomads of Mongolia, and indigenous tribes of the Amazon as possessing similar "libraries."

Soon after the author delves into the history of the **Alexandria Library** and compares it to an even earlier exemplar, the cuneiform libraries of Sumeria. The **Royal Library at Nineveh**, founded by **King Ashurbanipal**, preceded the **Alexandria Library** in its attempt to gather all available knowledge in one place. He even speculates that cuneiform writing gave rise to hieroglyphic scripts.

Fortunately, much of tradition of the **Alexandria Library** was passed on to the great libraries of **Constantinople: The Imperial, Patriarchal**, and university libraries. He also speculates that the demise of the **Alexandria Library** was attributable to the simply mundane fact that papyrus is extremely fragile and that the collection simply "wore out" in the damp conditions of the Nile River delta.

In his typically meandering and idiosyncratic style, **Stuart Kells** breaks up his history with digressions on the pleasure of books where book collectors describe their books as "garden flowers, elixirs, meteorites, gems, friends, tenants, devils, and wraiths." These book collectors were engaged in a "psychically loaded enterprise" that engendered "anxiety, avarice, envy, fastidiousness, obsession, lust, pride, pretension, narcissism, and agoraphobia."

A perfect example of the above obsessions is the Renaissance book hunter, **Gian Francesco Poggio Bracciolini**. In 1416, during a church general council in present day Switzerland, **Poggio** took a break as secretary

to the Tuscan representatives to follow up on a rumor that a nearby monastery guarded an ancient library. The monastery in question was the venerable **St. Gall** which traced its roots to Irish monks in the seventh century. Books were central to Benedictine monastic practices and **St. Gall** held incredible treasures of the illuminator's art. Among the books discovered here by **Poggio** are such key works as *Vitruvius' On Architecture*, works by **Quintilian** and commentaries on **Virgil**, books that had been unknown outside of this monastery library.

This was just the beginning for **Poggio** and his companions who began to scour monastery libraries throughout Europe, sparking a renewed interest in many ancient authors and thus the Renaissance itself. **Poggio** and his band considered themselves saviors of lost and mistreated texts. They called the monastery libraries filthy, damp and dusty backwaters and promoted themselves as benefactors of civilization, even though many considered them to be thieves who were profiting off the naïve monastics. Despite **Poggio's** and subsequent book hunter's predations, the **St. Gall Library** remains rich in "herbals, breviaries, evangialaries, antiphonaries, psalters, missals, gradu-

als, hymnals, processions, pontifical, decrees, edicts, satires, allegories, epics, festschrifts, palimpsests, calendars, and lexicons."

Further on the author chronicles the history of many private book collections, including the **Morgan and Folger Libraries**. He also explores imaginary libraries, such as those of **Jorge Luis Borges**, **Umberto Eco** and **J.R.R. Tolkien**.

For such a dense and detailed book, it is lacking in both an index and footnotes, serious impediments to returning to find those intriguing and odd facts that **Stuart Kells** piles up. This is a book to fill in those missing pieces from standard book histories. 🐉

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that is too rarely consulted these days; it serves as both a collection development tool and an ever-present reminder that reference books still have a place.

Co-editor **Steven W. Sowards** is associate director for collections and past head of reference at **Michigan State University Libraries**; he also serves on the board of **ARBA**. (He is also a reviewer of books for **Monographic Musings**). **Juneal Chenoweth** is managing editor of **ARBA** and **ARBAonline**. All of the five hundred entries were originally published in **ARBA** (*American Reference Books Annual*) or the **ARBA-**

online database, although a few have notes indicating publication of a more recent edition. Each review includes the scope and organization of the work, strengths and weaknesses, audience, price at time of publication, **Dewey** and **LC** classifications, and, if applicable, changes from previous editions. Some reviews include comparisons to similar works.

The editors are clear about the scope of the book and what reference tools were included and what were not. **Sowards** and **Chenoweth** do not include many search engines, directories, and only a handful of dictionaries. About ten percent of the items listed in the work are free online resources, (including government documents and resources from commercial and nonprofit sites). The reviews of online sources are from the original review date, which in some cases is a decade ago with a

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