Against the Grain

Wryly Noted-Books About Books

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When I once asked my friend Bob Wil-
lig 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 Books-
sellers. Because of his background, he is the
ideal companion for a fresh tour through the
minuiae of library and book collecting history.

With chapters on Renaissance book hunters,
English bibliomaniacs, secret library compart-
ments, destructive library fires in history, and
infamous book thieves, we follow him through
almost every country and time gleaning 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
dgers, tall copyists, broadsiders, Aldusians,
Elitzivirians, Grangerites, pasquinaders, and
tawny morococos.” For his research he
delved into “national libraries, workingmen’s
libraries, subscription libraries, scholarly li-

aries, corporate libraries, club subscription
libraries, plush private libraries, and also mod-
est 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
gruits 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 Al-
exandria 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 mun-
dane 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
ing and idiosyncratic style,

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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 Chonoweth 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 publi-
cation, 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 Chonoweth 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 the
original review date, which in some cases is a decade ago with a

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