From the Reference Desk

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Simon and Schuster has just published a book that will appeal to anyone with an interest in the U.S. Civil War. The Library of Congress Civil War Desk Reference (2002, 0684863502, $45) is crammed full of interesting and relevant facts about this seminal American experience. Edited by three respected scholars, Margaret E. Wagner, Gary W. Gallagher and Paul Finkelman, this book discusses every facet of the war in well focused chapters starting with a Civil War time line, and ending with an "overview of important resources." In between, there are chapters on Antebellum America, wartime politics, significant battles, the two armies, naval operations, the weaponry, the home front, prisons, medical care, Reconstruction and the impacts of the war on literature and the arts. The treatment and structure of the book lends itself to both quick reference and more extensive reading. For example, the chapter on battles and battlefields offers succinct descriptions of major battles, as well as longer discussions of tactics, the importance of maps and logistics and communication. This gives the researcher the option of referring to this book for information on a single battle, or reading the entire chapter to gain a fuller flavor of what Civil War battle consisted of. The text is enlivened with maps, photos, illustrations, charts and tables, as well as numerous quotes from contemporaries. There are also biographies interspersed throughout each chapter. The one downside is the index. It is not as thorough as it could be. For example, in looking for information about gambling, a popular pastime among civil war soldiers, a look in the index revealed nothing. But luckily, the table of contents is well developed and by looking there under the chapter, the Armies, I located the subcategory, "pastimes-sanctioned" and "pastimes-unsanctioned." Guessing that gambling would be an unsanctioned pastime, I checked on the referenced page number and learned that civil war soldiers were "intensely devoted to gambling--of any sort, at almost anytime and anywhere." Despite this problem, the Library of Congress Civil War Desk Reference will be a welcomed addition to the shelves of most libraries, not to mention Civil War scholars and enthusiasts. While it is also appropriate for circulating collections, it will take its place next to other related Civil War reference sources like the Historical Times Illustrated Encyclopedia of the Civil War edited by Patricia Faust (OP but available through Amazon.com). In addition, larger libraries with significant interest in Civil War sources should definitely consider the 5-volume Encyclopedia of the American Civil War published by ABC-CLIO (2000, 1576070662, $425).

A Chronology of American Musical Theater (2002, 0195088883, $46.50) is both more and less than the title would suggest. Published by Oxford University Press and compiled by Richard Norton, this 3-volume set is actually a listing of musical theater productions in New York City from 1850-present, with select entries from the prior 200 years. However, it is also more than just a chronology, or listing of productions by dates. With details drawn from individual theatre programs, the entries are far more than a listing of events. Whenever possible, they provide full production information including the names of playwrights, composers, scenery and costume designers, producers, musical directors and even management. In addition, the opening and closing dates, names of the cast, act and scene titles, as well as the musical numbers, are included. As Mr. Norton notes in his introduction, the criteria for inclusion is a "broad as possible" and includes all types of musical plays, operas, operettas, burlesques, spectacles and extravaganzas, revues, dance drama, pantomime, as well as other variants of musical theater. The sheer volume of information in this set is truly impressive and luckily there are multiple indexes to assist the researcher pinpoint needed facts. There are individual full indexes by show and song titles, as well as a selected index, by person. Each production is assigned an entry number within the year it appeared on stage. Thus the original Rocky Horror Picture Show is 1975.08 while its revival 25 years later is assigned 2000.17. In either case they are easy to locate in the correct volume. The Chronology of American Musical Theater is a work of devoted scholarship. While intended as a companion to Gerald Bordman's third edition of American Musical Theater: A Chronicle (also published by Oxford University Press: 2001, 019513047X, $75), Mr. Norton's work stands on its own merits. It is a meticulously researched testament to the diversity of American musical theater and is essential for academic libraries supporting theater history. It is also deserving of full consideration by larger public libraries where there is heavy interest in the theater.

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Another compelling work of scholarship is the 2-volume Oxford Chronology of English Literature (2002, 0198600267, $230.25). Edited by Michael Cox and covering the years 1474 through 2000, this work is an annual listing of publishing events ranging from William Caxton's first book, The Recuyell of the Histories of Troye to J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire. While the listing is in no way comprehensive, the selections are "a substantial sampling of printed publications in time," a list of "significant and representative works." And to be honest, a chronology of this sort does not have to be comprehensive. As with any good chronology, its value is not only derived from providing the date of an event, but by placing events within the same time frame and offering a context from which to view the broader canvas. For example, the time from Shakespeare's first printed work Venus and Adonis in 1593, through 1623, the date of the first folio, was one of vibrant literary production. Browsing through this chronology shows that other giants of English letters including Donne, Jonson and Marlowe, as well as lesser luminaries like Kyd, Campion and Lyly were being set to print during those years. This was also a time when the works of the philosopher and scientist Francis Bacon were being published, as well as a time with propaganda and vanity publishing, i.e., the poetry and political musings of King James I.

The entries are alphabetical by author within each year. Each entry starts with the author's name and dates followed by the category the work has been assigned, i.e., non-fiction, fiction, verse, etc. The main title, other title page matter, the imprint and a note that outlines a brief publishing history complete the entry. The entire 2nd volume of the Chronology consists of three indexes. The author index is by surname and gives the author's dates, his/her genre and a list of works with the corresponding date. An alphabetical title index lists all the titles covered, and provides the author's names and date of publication. There is also a brief index of translated authors.

As pointed out above the Oxford Chronology of English Literature is not comprehensive. However, it is successful in its goal of listing "writers and texts in every period whose influence has been decisive and permanent," as well as works that "exemplify contemporary tastes." Graduate students and faculty will find the Chronology a helpful and valued resource. Most academic libraries will want to consider it for their reference collections while some libraries with hefty budgets may want it in circulation.

ABC-CLIO has published a three set reference series on warfare under the general editorship of Spencer C. Tucker. One of the sets, Naval Warfare: An International Encyclopedia (2002, 1576072193, $295) he edited personally, and reflects the quality of the other works in the series. As some of you may know, Mr. Tucker is responsible for a number of other works on military history including the well-received Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War (1998, 0874368345, $275) and the Encyclopedia of the Korean War (2000, 1576070238, $275). The same scholarly care evidenced in these sets is present in the new Naval Warfare encyclopedia.

Covering 2,500 years of naval history in some 1500 articles, this compilation is impressive. As you would expect much of the concentration here is on naval battles and their commanders, as well as individual, and classes of warships. There are also articles on individual national navies, tactics and strategy and the impacts of technologies like radio, sonar and nuclear power. While the coverage is necessarily historical, the research is timely. For example, the controversy regarding the sinking of the German battleship Bismarck is alluded to and the current theory that the ship was scuttled is given credence. The text is fact laden and the contributors are scholars in their fields. Added features to the set include an alphabetical listing of the contents of all three volumes, a selected bibliography, a glossary and, of course, a general index. However, one missing feature that would be useful is a thematic index or a listing of articles by category.

All in all, this is a set that will be welcomed in many academic and public libraries. In fact, it is easy to view this encyclopedia, along with the others in the series as a unified resource. Air Warfare: An International Encyclopedia (2002, 1-57607-345-9, $185) and Ground Warfare: An International Encyclopedia (2002, 1-57607-344-0, $295) are of similar quality, and together with Naval Warfare offer a nice package. Unfortunately, there is no index uniting them. Maybe that is something ABC-CLIO can consider for the future.

The title of Routledge's Country Music: A Biographical Dictionary (2002 0415938023, $395) is mildly misleading. While the vast majority of the entries center on individual artists and bands, there also entries on country music genres like bluegrass, cajun music, cowboy songs, country music, outlaw country, honky tonk and gospel, as well as articles on the influence of radio, music publishing, record labels, and of course, the city of Nashville. There are even articles on specific instruments like the five string banjo, the fiddle, the mandolin and the pedal steel guitar. Nonetheless, the primary emphasis of this resource is on biography and the coverage is diverse and substantial. It ranges from traditional artists like the Carter Family and Roy Acuff to outlaws like Waylon Jennings and Johnny Paycheck to country rock groups like the Byrds and the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, as well as to articles on top today's stars like Shania Twain, Alan Jackson and Brooks and Dunn. (I have one minor question on the selection for inclusion, John Denver is included, but not Delbert McClinton?) There is a "name" index that is really a general index and includes the names of artists, songs, and groups, as well as references to the genre and topical articles mentioned above. In addition there are two helpful appendices, a listing of selected entries by musical genre, and one by musical instrument. At home in either reference or circulating collections, Country Music: A Biographical Dictionary will be especially popular in public libraries. It is one of those books that is both useful as a reference and is fun to browse.

A number of second editions have been released recently that deserve mention. In fact, the second edition of the New Catholic Encyclopedia (2002, 0787640042, $1,195) deserves more than mention. Published by Gale in conjunction with the Catholic University of America, it is the first time this standard has been fully updated since 1967. Priority is still given to the history and development of the Western Church; however there are articles on the Eastern Churches and Coptic Christianity, as well as those that cover the Church's development in individual countries throughout the world. Changes in Church liturgy, canon law, the papacy of John Paul II, and biographical sketches of recently canonized and beatified people like Mother Teresa are recent additions. However, I might hold off on purchase at this point. The complete set is supposedly 15 volumes, the last volume containing the comprehensive index. My review copy, as well as one previously purchased for the library, was only 14 volumes, no index. Before ordering, librarians should verify the availability of the volume 15. A call to Gale revealed that Volume 15 is due out “by the end of the month.”


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I work in an academic library that employs the Library of Congress classification system. Most of our patrons are bustling undergraduates, scurrying to delve into paper topics and desperately seeking literary criticism. Every few weeks, though, a student approaches me at the reference desk and asks, “Where is your fiction section?” I then explain that our library does not have a “fiction section” per se, and I give an extremely-abbreviated explanation of how the Library of Congress classification system affects the location of books. The patron responds: “Can you just recommend a good book to read?” Because I am entrenched in the instruction of InfoTrac, JSTOR, and other databases and indexes for the purpose of course-related research, I am usually—no, always—stamped by this seemingly simple query.

Can I recommend a good book to read? Truthfully and unfortunately, I cannot. This is not, of course, because there is not quality reading material available to our coeds. It is because (until now) I have not had the tools to educate myself in the service of readers’ advisory. When the dreaded book recommendation question is asked, I generally fluff through my response by briefing the patron on the book that I am currently reading, after which time I casually pose the same question to my reference desk partner-in-crime, and I then endorse The Salon.com Guide to Contemporary Authors (see ATG 13.3, page 62). Embarrassing, indeed.

From the Reference Desk

The 3-volume resource that provides essays for 233 countries or territories, worldwide. Each essay starts with basic facts and a brief history, and then provides sections on constitutional and legal foundations, an overview of the education system, and specifics on primary and secondary education, as well as higher education. There are also discussions of administration, finance and educational research, non-formal education, the teaching profession, and finally, a summary section. Each essay also has a bibliography. The World Education Encyclopedia gives the reader quick access to information on the educational systems by country by country in an easy-to-use format. The appendices consist of statistics and regional maps and there are charts and tables throughout the text. And although the arrangement is alphabetical by country, there is also a useful index. This is helpful in locating information on these diverse as the role of women, Islamic schools and distance education. One caveat, some of the information is dated. For example, the essay on Afghanistan does not reflect the changes since the overthrow of the Taliban. However, it does reflect the “complete disarray” of the educational system up until that time.

If you found the first editions of these titles useful you may also be interested in Bernand’s second edition of A Statistical Portrait of the United States (2002, 0890595844, $147) and State Profiles: The Population and Economy of Each State (089059578X, $147). In typical Bernand style, the statistics in both of these books are assembled from government sources and compiled and arranged in useful fashion. A Statistical Portrait of the United States updates the 1998 edition with information from 2000 Census Supplementary Survey. (The 2000 census data was in the process of release as this book was being compiled.) In addition, there is a new chapter on “select social conditions.” In updating the 1999 edition, the second edition of State Profiles does incorporate data from the 2000 census in updating its tables and charts. It provides statistics on a diverse number of topics including demographics, income, energy consumption, taxes, government finances, employment figures and health and education indicators. Both books make good use of charts and graphs to enliven the statistical tables and narrative explanations. While some may think this is a pricey way to add a couple of years of recent statistics, it may be worth it to show that you have made the effort to keep current. It also gives you the added capability of placing the first editions in circulation for take home use.

Thanks to the books featured in this month’s Monographic Musings, I no longer have to play guessing games when it comes to readers’ advisory. Shearer and Burgin’s The Readers’ Advisor’s Companion establishes possible reasons as to why librarians’ RA skills are extensively sour and how we can improve our proficiency in this arena. Alternative Library Literature 200-2001, compiled by Sanford Berman and James P. Dancy, reprints essays on what to read, what they read it, and what the book industry has to do with it. Nancy Pearl offers two volumes of Now Read This to guide readers to contemporary mainstream literature. In the Genreflecting Advisory Series, Herman and Kunzel shed light on science fiction reading interests.

Books and other media will continue to be printed and dispersed; accordingly, we will never have a definitive handle on RA. Cyclically and frequently, we will have to hone up on new authors, new titles, and the genres surrounding them. I recommend continuing (or, as in my case, starting) this tradition of RA edification with the following resources. After all, as Herman and Kunzel remark in their introduction, “Readers’ advisory is more an art than a science. It is possibly the best way librarians can cement the importance of libraries in the hearts of taxpayers and the community served by the library.” Happy reading everyone! — DW


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Shearer and Burgin have put together an impressive collection of writing in The Readers’ Advisor’s Companion. Sixteen chapters are divided into three distinct parts: education and foundations of advisors; public and school library advisory services; and further and future advisory roles. A detailed table of contents and a succinct index direct readers to specific points within the book. Introductory and conclusion statements by Shearer and Burgin are given, as well as section overviews. Simply stated, The Readers’ Advisor’s Companion is an authoritative treasury of timely writings.

What makes this collection rankledly stellar? It covers every conceivable aspect of RA. Within those topics, varying points of view and spins on issues are argued. Among all of the authors, though, one common song is sung: let’s beef up our advisory proficiency and dexterity so that we can offer improved services for our patrons. It is important to note, though, that RA is not affected only by public service librarians. Though they are the front line for helping patrons with reading recommendations, collection development librarians are responsible for adding popular (and not-so-popular) titles to libraries’ collections. Likewise, cataloging librarians are responsible for categorizing and organizing those titles effectively. RA—like all parts of librarianship—has to be a term effort.

Section one focuses on the education and foundation of advisors. Wayne Wiegand begins the compilation with a historical look at the waning of RA. First, he declares, the University of Chicago’s original doctoral program in library science ignored patrons’ fiction reading interests, claiming them to be unscientific. Second, he points a finger at our own national alliance, ALA, and contends that the 1839 Library Bill of Rights made concern in readers’ tastes an invasion of privacy. Finally, Wiegand exhibits a study done by the University of Chicago which reckoned that libraries should focus on the propagation of “useful” information, not “stories.” And then began the downward spiral of RA.

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