

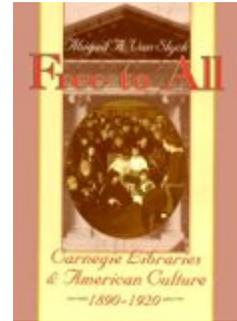
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Abigail A. Van Slyck. *Free to All: Carnegie Libraries and American Culture, 1890-1920*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995. xxvii + 276 pp.

Abigail A. Van Slyck. *Free to All: Carnegie Libraries & American Culture, 1890-1920*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995. xxvii + 276 pp. \$47.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-226-85031-3; \$20.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-226-85032-0.

Reviewed by Tom Glynn (History Librarian, Auburn University)
Published on H-SHGAPE (February, 1998)



In this book, Abigail Van Slyck provides a comprehensive account of the ambitious philanthropic project that built public libraries in almost every city and small town in America around the turn of the century. Van Slyck is a scholar of architecture, art history, and women's studies at the University of Arizona and brings to bear knowledge and methodologies from all these disciplines to describe the material, social, political, and intellectual history of the Carnegie program. This is an excellent book that sheds light on an important aspect of American history.

The first two chapters deal with the evolution of Andrew Carnegie's philanthropy and the various influences that helped determine the design of the Carnegie libraries. Initially Carnegie donated money, with no strings attached, to towns with which he had some personal connection. By the turn of the century, however, he had bureaucratized the process, giving smaller amounts to a much larger number of towns and cities and requiring that they provide a site for the building and an annual tax appropriation to support it. At the same time, the design of the libraries was increasingly influenced by a collaboration between professional librarians and architectural firms specializing in public libraries.

Chapters Three and Four look at the political and cultural conflicts that arose as various groups sought to use the Carnegie program to further their own agendas. Since Carnegie insisted upon the involvement of municipal officials, the siting and design of the libraries often pitted established local elites against emerging im-

migrants in larger cities. This conflict was usually resolved by building a monumental central library in the downtown area and numbers of more modest libraries in working-class neighborhoods. In small towns, middle class club women, who had started inexpensive subscription libraries towards the end of the nineteenth century, competed, with varying degrees of success, with city fathers, who hoped to use the library to spur commercial development.

The final two chapters examine the Carnegie library experience from the perspective of two important groups within public libraries: female librarians and young patrons. The Carnegie program coincided with the entrance of large numbers of women into the profession. Despite the attempts of male leaders to limit them to more clerical roles, many women of this new generation, progressive reformers in particular, used their positions to broaden their horizons and provide innovative services to children and immigrants. Although young readers were enthusiastic users of the Carnegie libraries, they were sometimes intimidated by the experience. This was particularly true of children in small towns; their urban counterparts were more likely to assume their right to use the library and treat it as "an extension of the public street" (p. xxvii).

The treatment of the relation between cultural values and the physical design of libraries is especially well done. The Boston Public Library, for example, is in many respects typical of earlier nineteenth-century library architecture. Patrons entering the building first encoun-

tered a small, poorly-lit entrance hall and were required to climb a long stairway to gain access to the massive, brightly illuminated reading room. Such an arrangement helped convey the idea that “the benefits of culture are not automatically available to everyone,” that “the journey towards enlightenment requires conscious effort” (p. 70). Later library designs tended to be less imposing and to place greater emphasis upon the public nature of the building. In the early twentieth century, architects and librarians often collaborated on interior layouts that placed a delivery desk at the intersection of one or more reading rooms. This design not only promoted greater efficiency but also allowed the librarian to scrutinize the working-class patrons using the library. Van Slyck’s discussion of the architectural aspects of the Carnegie program alone make her book a valuable contribution to the social and cultural history of American libraries.

Although the interdisciplinary nature of the work provides many telling insights, it also accounts for a number of its weaknesses. First, in covering such a wide range of subjects, Van Slyck sometimes assumes a certain level of knowledge on the part of the reader and therefore refers to important matters in a somewhat cursory manner. For instance, in the introduction, Van Slyck argues that the methodologies used by architectural historians to analyze vernacular architecture often do not apply to Carnegie libraries, that “[n]either the innovation diffusion model of cultural geography nor the detailed examination of local construction technologies is a useful model for studying buildings erected in an age of mass production” (p. xx).

Without some background in architectural history, most readers will not find this brief discussion of vernac-

ular architecture very helpful. Also, there are important areas within library history that are covered only briefly or not at all. As early as the 1830s, for example, librarians and library trustees debated the propriety of providing popular fiction to patrons, and this debate had still not been fully resolved during the period Van Slyck examines. Although the reading of fiction was an important part of a patron’s experience in a Carnegie library, it is never discussed in the book. Finally, for certain topics the available evidence is so sparse that Van Slyck’s conclusions are somewhat suspect. This is especially true of the first part of the final chapter in which she examines the experiences of children using Carnegie libraries in small towns. Van Slyck bases her discussion upon the autobiographical reminiscences of three female writers, Eudora Welty, Helen Hooven Santmyer, and Susan Allen Toth. Although their writings may provide some clues as to the typical Carnegie library experience for a child living in a small town, any conclusions drawn from them are mostly conjecture. I assume that other sources of evidence, such as library catalogs or circulation statistics, were simply unavailable.

Despite these shortcomings, this is a very good book. It is carefully researched and meticulously documented. The many illustrations amply clarify Van Slyck’s arguments. *Free to All* provides an interesting and authoritative treatment of a neglected aspect of American social and cultural history.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-shgape>

Citation: Tom Glynn. Review of Abigail A. Van Slyck, *Free to All: Carnegie Libraries and American Culture, 1890-1920* and Slyck, Abigail A. Van, *Free to All: Carnegie Libraries & American Culture, 1890-1920*. H-SHGAPE, H-Net Reviews. February, 1998.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1730>

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.