

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Harald Ilsøe. *Det Kongelige Bibliotek i Stobeskeen. Studier og Samlinger til Bestandens Historie Indtil ca. 1780, Vol. I-II.* Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 1999. 720 pp. Kr. 500 (cloth), ISBN 978-87-7289-550-5.

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On September 7th, the new building of the Royal Library in Copenhagen will be inaugurated. This black glass building, which is popularly called “The Black Diamond,” has already become a characteristic architectural feature of central Copenhagen, though opinions differ as to whether it should be seen as an embellishment or not. Besides a library, with reading rooms and other facilities, the Royal Library houses several additional cultural institutions, such as a book museum, and a museum of photo art. On the occasion of the new library building’s opening to the public, the Royal Library has published a book about how it all began.

Entitled, *The Royal Library in the Melting Pot*, the book is about the development of the Library from its humble beginning, as the private book collection of the Danish King Frederik III (who governed between 1648 and 1670), and how the collections of the library grew to become what they are today. The portrayal of the library’s history ends in 1780, when a major reform of the collection took place. The text is not a monographic history of the library as an institution, however, but focuses specifically on the books contained in its collection.

This collection is not portrayed in a cultural, social or political context, but focuses rather on when and how books came to the Royal Library, i.e. the provenance (in Danish: *provenienser*). The purpose of the new publication is “to comply with a need among researchers to be able to find information about when and from where a remarkable book or a certain manuscript have or might have entered into the collections of the Royal Library” (p.10). A further emphasis has also been placed upon general historical aspects of the library. Consequently,

the book should be regarded as a reference source for collections of books and library historic material, or as a commented bibliographical survey. It is not intended as a source to be read from beginning to end.

The author, Harald Ilsøe, is a historian and the author of several books and articles that focus especially on bibliographical and library historical subject matter. Ilsøe served at the Royal Library as a research librarian between 1965 and 1994 and has now retired, but is obviously still strongly engaged in scholarship. According to the Introduction, he has been working on this book since 1965, however not uninterruptedly. The more or less zealous efforts of the various royal librarians between 1670 and 1780 are thoroughly described in one section of the volume, followed by sections on the accession and acquisition of new books and of various private book collections, the composition of which are described and characterized. Books and manuscripts for the library were acquired, one by one, by the different royal librarians. Private libraries sometimes found their way into to the Royal Library collection, through inheritance from members of the royal family, through the acquisition of valuable private book collections, by donations to the King from hopeful authors wanting to draw royal attention to themselves, and through donations (e.g. from royal family members). On a few occasions, books also came to the Royal Library of Copenhagen as spoils of war. Finally, there is a special section about the acquisition of *incunabula* (i.e. books printed no later than 1500), which is co-authored by Karsten Christensen. All this detail has been thoroughly and mapped out and registered by Harald Ilsøe.

Ilsøe also documents the history of some materials before they arrived at the Royal Library, and the fate of some materials after joining the collection. Many books were duplicated, and copies were used for exchange, or donated to other libraries. Whenever possible, all of this detail has been disentangled and included.

The author's method of research has mainly been the use of old book catalogues and archival sources, such as accounting books from the royal household (where book purchases were registered). But Ilsøe has not only searched the registered titles of the books, he has actually had many of them in his hands, and has physically searched for traces of the owners. A book owner may have written his or her name in the book, or made notes that would make an identification possible. An inscription from the author or from someone else wanting to ingratiate himself may be inside the cover. Or the binding might carry a certain owner's logo on it. In addition to this personal inspection through spot checks of roughly 1,000 books and manuscripts, Ilsøe read through at least 70,000 catalogue titles (p.25). In order to make *Det kongelige Bibliotek i stobeskeen* usable as a handy reference source, he has included a register of the manuscripts in the Royal Library (in numerical order, according to their numbering in the catalogues), with references to the pages where the manuscripts are mentioned. That means that even if one does not know when and from where a certain manuscript came to the Royal Library, it is now easy to find out. Correspondingly, there is an alphabeti-

cal register of personal provenance both on book owners and donators, for all printed books.

The author modestly stresses (p. 25) that his investigations should in no way be considered exhaustive, and that they should be seen in connection with other published studies on the field. But the thoroughness and perseverance behind this book are tremendous and admirable. As is its intention, the volume is first and foremost appealing to bibliophiles: to those who are interested in history of books and libraries, and consequently in knowing the provenance of various books and manuscripts. Others may be foremost interested in what a certain book is about, and receiving a copy, or finding out whether the Royal Library has such a copy or not. Because Ilsøe's book has many learned comments and references, it should always be worth consulting—just in case.

*Det kongelige Bibliotek i stobeskeen* includes a list of selected sources and literature of interest. To include a list of all related sources and literature, general or specialized, might have been advantageous, but due to the strict and clear disposition of the book this omission appears to be a slight one. Many illustrations of books, bindings, and pages are included, all beautifully reproduced. With this volume, the Royal Library is now the master of its own origin and past, and should have a solid foundation for its entry into the 21st century in its new building, "the Black Diamond."

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