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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

James Conaway. *America's Library: The Story of the Library of Congress, 1800-2000*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000. xiii + 226 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-08308-8.

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America's Jewel

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James Conaway's history of the Library of Congress provides a panoramic view of the life and times of an institution that has flourished against all odds and in spite of numerous catastrophes. More than simply the story of a building or a great library collection, *America's Library* is the tale of those who built the Library. It is peopled with illustrious presidents, library devotees, literary figures, and wealthy benefactors. The plot is thickened with natural and manmade disasters, war, political frays, and the impressive dedication and occasional peccadilloes of its zealous librarians. Conaway's book moves beyond the confines of the Library, moreover, to set that story within the larger context of the world around it, the American cultural, intellectual, and political life of the times.

Conaway clearly comes not to criticize but to praise, not surprising in a volume published in association with an institution that is its focus, but there is much to praise. The reverential tone of *America's Library* is set early on by an introductory essay from Edmund Morris titled "One Writer's Library." The biographer recounts his ongoing relationship with the Library and the many pleasures of his thirty-three years of research there. Morris eloquently describes the scholar's delight of discovery in this massive trove of treasures, including serendipitous brushes with resources and artifacts that inevitably enrich and inform his work in unexpected ways. In the midst of current trends in digital information, connectivity, and virtual collections, Morris's experiences remind us of the pleasure of being in the Library and physically

following the "osmotic impulse" that its collections impart (p. x).

The experience of reading Conaway's chronological narrative mirrors the pleasure of researching the Library's collections first hand. The book's linear structure is punctuated by richly illustrated stops along the way, short essays on key people, specific collections, and major events that have impacted the Library. The reader happens upon these sections as if discovering materials in the Library itself. In one section the rise of the transformative librarian, Ainsworth Rand Spofford, is explored through his links to great men of his era such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Rutherford B. Hayes. Mathew Brady and his Civil War photographs are highlighted in another section, illustrated by examples of Brady's prints from the Library's collection. The maps and atlases that comprise one of the world's greatest cartographic collections are the subject of another highlight. The vast breadth of the Library's collections is explored in several sections on imagery, rare items, and sight and sound. The reader moves from delight to delight in the footsteps of the scholar.

America's Library is, of course, not the first book about the Library, but it is perhaps the most ambitious because it treats the Library as a whole and explores its position in American cultural history. Herbert Small's classic work on the Library, *The Library of Congress: Its Architecture and Decoration* (New York: Norton, 1982), [1] has been recently revised and published under the title *The Library of Congress: The Art and Architecture of*

the Thomas Jefferson Building (New York: Norton, 1997), edited by John Y. Cole and others. As the title of Cole's revision indicates, this work focuses solely on the Jefferson Building, which opened in 1897. The earlier history of the Library is not told, nor are the collections described. This detailed physical treatment of the most well known of the Library's buildings is unrivalled, but to get a sense of the importance of the building and of the larger institution, Conaway's work is indispensable. What Cole's sumptuous volume does for the Jefferson Building, Conaway's does for the institution as a whole: the Library's historical, social, cultural, and intellectual architecture is drawn in detail for the admiring reader.

If you are looking for an exhaustive description of the Library's collections or a researcher's guide to using them, this book is not for you. Likewise, it is not Conaway's point to recount the minute internal workings, labor imbroglios, or the political complexities of the institution's position in the larger library world. Rather,

this book is a fitting paean to one of the world's great libraries. Conaway's work helps us to understand why the Library of Congress (the defacto national library of the United States) is important and how it became the jewel that it is. The physicality of the Library is brought home to the reader at the very time that the institution leads the nation in exploring free Internet access to digitized versions of its treasures. Conaway's volume will delight those who have had the pleasure of experiencing the Library as place. Equally, it will give those who enjoy the Library's resources remotely the vicarious pleasure of a leisurely visit and the benefit of a solid grounding in the institution's turbulent history.

Notes

[1]. Small's text was originally published not long after the Jefferson Building was completed under the title *Handbook of the New Library of Congress* (Boston: Curtis and Cameron, 1901).

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