
Volume 5 in a set of six volumes (Volume 6 still to appear) comes from what is probably the major publishing project on libraries in our era. It represents a considerable financial investment as well as significant event in the existing huge multilingual literature with its many peaks of scholarship and learning. Where does this work, apparently with a sole author, fit in with demanding scholarship of this vast field? Reviewers are confronted with delights, but also puzzles. This reviewer has not seen Volumes 1-4, where perhaps answers to some puzzles may be found.

This handsome, large format work has striking full-page colour photos of many Renaissance library interiors. Its text is extremely diverse and wider in coverage than even the title suggests. Although liberally referenced and with an extensive bibliography, it seems directed principally at a general readership, and the style is not noticeably demanding in language or treatment. Its approach is suggestive of an earlier era, where compendious surveys on cultural topics found a ready reception. Its title is misleading and should better read ‘Contributions towards a history…’

The text is translated from the Greek and offers much information on the world of books, the rise of printing, collecting manuscripts of ancient texts, and of the work of many scholars and bibliophiles; but its chief focus is the rise and role of libraries. There is curiously little information provided on the author and his credentials in a field thick with scholarship and learning.

An examination of the bibliography (pp. 519-554) exemplifies dilemmas already mentioned. Works in over six languages (but not Russian) are listed in a mixture of monographs, serial titles and journal articles, all in one alphabetical order under author or title. No attempt is made to distinguish primary materials from secondary items or indicate the relative importance or scope of works. The listing of German scholarship is deficient. This is far from acceptable in a work dealing with a cultural theme so rich in history and scholarship.

Whilst one must admire the author’s industry and knowledge, his sweeping title invites misgivings. The scope, taking in the Reformation as well as the Renaissance, needs a band of contributors under a firm editorial hand. This work can be profitably consulted for much general
orientation, but it is unwieldy and uneven in content. The photos will remain of permanent interest.

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