Crawford, Alice (ed.), (2015). ***The Meaning of the Library: A Cultural History***. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2015.

Editor Alice Crawford groups the essays in this collection into three categories:

1. The Library Through Time (how libraries developed through history),
2. The Library in Imagination (artistic interpretations of the place of the library in society),
3. The Library Now and in the Future (interpretations of the present and potential future directions in which libraries may evolve).

Each scholarly essay takes a different approach, examining libraries under a new light. Readers come away with a broad understanding of what libraries meant to societies throughout the ages, and will likely discover new areas to explore.

Part one, *The Library Through Time*, surveys the history of libraries: from the ancient Greeks and Romans, through the development of the codex and the flowering of the illuminated manuscripts of the Middle Ages; from the invention of printing to the mass-production processes of the Industrial Revolution. Following clues from the cultural artifacts of the periods they study—plays, illustrations, poetry, corporate and private records—the authors reconstruct the role of the library in its cultural context.

In the first piece, “Adventures in Ancient Greek and Roman Libraries,” Edith Hall begins with the first mention of libraries in ancient Greek drama (around 450 AD) and examines the evolution of libraries throughout the Greco-Roman period. Next, in “The image of the medieval library,” Richard Gameson minutely examines the illustrations inside manuscripts produced during the medieval period, and what they tell us about libraries and reading. (These colour illustrations appear further on in the book.)

Figure 1. Boccaccio and Petrarch from BL Royal 14 E V, f. 391 (detail).

Andrew Petegree looks at “The Renaissance Library and the Challenge of Print.” Describing the profound market and societal changes engendered by the invention of printing, he describes how they affected libraries and the book industry. Paired with Robert Darnton’s essay, “From Printing Shops to Bookshelves: How Books Began Their Journey to Enlightenment Libraries,” an in-depth picture of the book industry at that time emerges. Both booksellers and librarians possessed a keen understanding of the vagaries of the emerging book market, of the tastes of their readers, and of the ravages of the censors. Both of these chapters are surprisingly full of adventure and derring-do.

David Allen looks at the beginning of the subscription library movement in the 1780s. Sprung from the earlier book club movement, especially popular in rural areas, subscription libraries and clubs of all sorts became stabilizing influences in the Georgian era. Allen’s title, “The Advantages of Literature: The Subscription Library in Georgian Britain,” emphasizes the “improving” ideal which led to the founding of many libraries. He showcases the wide variety of libraries established during this period.

With the building of the Carnegie libraries and the establishment of libraries as a public good, John Sutherland’s “Literature and the Library in the 19th Century” touches on

more familiar territory, at least for most librarians. The 19th century was also a period of intense upheaval, and Sutherland draws parallels with our own time: how new technologies reshaped the book, making them much more affordable to the common person, and how affordable literature combined with fast rail travel and widespread literacy to create a new reading public. New kinds of libraries evolved to meet new kinds of demands: national, metropolitan, institutional, industrial, personal and even railroad libraries sprang up during this period.

The essayists featured in the *Library and the Imagination*—the second, much shorter part of the book—examine the library as portrayed throughout history in film, in poetry and in story. From Gilgamesh to Scheherazade and from Borges to Eco, Marina Warner looks at “The Library in Fiction.” Robert Crawford’s “The Library in Poetry” shows us the library as seen through the eyes of poets from different countries and times. Finally, Laura Marcus’ “The Library and Film: Order and Mystery” discusses how libraries are portrayed in images and dialogue on the big screen.

Part three, *The Library Now and in the Future*, contains essays focusing on the modern library, as well as essays considering the potential future of libraries. In “Casting and Gathering: Libraries, Archives and the Modern Writer,” Stephen Enniss examines the place that special collections hold in the modern literary landscape, taking the archives of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes as illustrative examples. Enniss also discusses how, due to the changes in the production of literary works, the nature of archival material is changing. Finally, he explores how authors use library collections to create new works.

Academic librarian John P. Wilkin constructs his “Meanings of the Library Today” around four pillars: curation, engagement with research and learning, publishing, and space. Wilkin looks at curation in both the traditional and the Big Data aspect of selection and maintenance, discusses librarians who do research and those who teach, and addresses the importance of publishing to libraries, archives and museums. He also talks about the central role the library building plays in the campus ecosystem. Next, he discusses the current challenges facing each of these pillars. Finally, he examines “work at scale”, taking as his example the HathiTrust project, a multi-institution, international collaborative digitization project. Describing both the benefits and drawbacks of work at such a scale, he concludes on a hopeful note, looking toward a future of great change but also of great innovation, elaborating on the increasing importance of libraries in the scholarly discussion.

The final chapter is written by James H. Billington, former Librarian of Congress, who looks at “The Modern Library in Global Democracy.” Billington posits that librarians are becoming more, not less, important in the age of digital communications, and that the “library as place” plays a key role in a healthy, participative democratic society.

The central message of this volume is that, from clay tablets to modern cloud-based computing, libraries have always evolved alongside those who created and used them. Having met many challenges, they will do so again.

The book is structured so that you can either read it in sequence or flip straight to the sections that interest you. Regardless of your approach, you'll probably find something to interest you, and the amply footnoted bibliography will point you towards relevant, high-quality resources.

I think that anyone interested in libraries, the history of librarianship or the history of the book trade, will discover many interesting perspectives in this informative, scholarly work.

Donna MacLeod, MLIS

donna@dmacleod.ca

Présidente, L'Association des bibliothèques de l'Ontario-Franco, Ontario Library Association