
“The public library is like a constellation, whose history and purpose differ depending upon the teller of the tale and the culture that it serves” (p. 293).

This simile sums up perfectly the role and importance of public libraries and Kathleen de la Pena McCook, tells a very meticulous tale. She begins with the arrival of the first books on North American soil, spells out where public libraries are now and sums up what the future holds for the institution and the profession. In addition to McCook, Linda Alexander and Barbara Immroth co-author a chapter on youth services and Barbara J. Ford contributes another on global perspectives. Both chapters fit in seamlessly with McCook’s larger narrative and do not interrupt its flow.

*Introduction to Public Librarianship* is extremely well-suited to the MLIS student, but even the seasoned professional will find much of interest and of use. Two such items are the resources listed at the end of each chapter and the selected readings found in Appendix A. This bibliographic prowess alone makes it a must see. However, there is so much information contained in its pages that reading it cover-to-cover will not allow the material to be absorbed properly and may leave the reader feeling overwhelmed.

Published in 2004, it has found its way onto many required reading lists at library schools across the U. S. and it is very well suited for course work. Chapters can be assigned to fit in with lesson plans making it easier for students to gain perspective as well as thoroughly learning about the topic. It is an overview, and a very detailed one, but there are many jumping-off points for further research or reading in specialized areas such as youth or adult services, management and community development.

The history of the public library in the U. S. is lengthy and there are many issues that need to be addressed. McCook doesn’t shy away from any of the details. She shows us, almost moment by moment, the birth and growth of public librarianship. We see where it has improved or advanced, where it stands right now and where it needs to go to ensure a successful future. In speaking of the future, while McCook looks at nascent technology, she also considers other non-technical challenges that public libraries will still face which students and professionals will find familiar: equal access, information literacy and lifelong learning.

The only thing missing is any reference to Canada. McCook and her co-authors discuss libraries from around the world and make reference, briefly, to the U. K., but Canada is not even mentioned when discussing Andrew Carnegie’s contribution to public libraries. Even a fleeting glance would have been
appropriate in light of the rest of the work. Otherwise McCook is impressive and librarianship is fortunate to have such a passionate and dedicated advocate. She never loses sight of the ultimate goal of public libraries: free, complete and equal access for everyone everywhere.

Whatever the reason for using a public library: education, fun, or business, it is always visible and tailors itself to the community it serves. It is there to guide, inspire and teach so that individuals and their community may thrive and help continue the legacy. The North Star may guide us home, but a public library opens the pathways of the world.

Sarah J. Gladwell, Reference Librarian, Sarah.Gladwell@gnb.ca
Saint John Free Public Library, Saint John, New Brunswick

This review copy was provided by way of The OLAS tore. Neal-Schuman titles are distributed in Canada by the OLAS tore. Members of the Partnership (http://www.thepartnership.ca/) will generally receive a discount of 5-10% on most publications. For further information about this title, please visit www.accessola.com/theolastore or contact orders@accessola.com.