

Book Review

△ Mason, Ellsworth. *The University of Colorado Library and Its Makers, 1876-1972*. Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1994. 387 p. \$47.50

△ Reviewed by: David Kaser, Distinguished Professor Emeritus, School of Library & Information Science, Indiana University

It has been this reviewer's privilege over the past four decades to have read and reviewed most, or perhaps even all, of the histories ever written of American university libraries. Dr. Mason's new study of the evolution of the library at the University of Colorado has to rank among the top two or three. In it Dr. Mason does not simply chronicle the many events that affected the development of that library during the ninety-six years covered in the book, although all of those events are thoroughly covered in its pages. Rather he also analyzes and evaluates all of these factors in light of their respective eras, relating them to their causes and results not only on the Boulder campus itself but more importantly in the light of contemporary American political, social, and educational thought and development. This comprehensiveness makes the book as valuable to the generalist reader as it is to the library historian. Hopefully it will be brought also to the attention of those broader audiences.

The University of Colorado Library is an especially felicitous subject for such treatment because between 1876 and 1972 it encountered almost the

complete gamut of experiences that can affect a library. Only "acts of God", such as fire, earthquake, and tempest have been absent from its fortunes. On the hand, such "acts of man" as political infighting, economic vagaries, ignorance, and maybe even a bit of just plain cantankerousness, recurred there with seemingly unmitigated frequency, resulting in wide swings in the ability of the Library to meet effectively its responsibilities to the University's academic and research programs. Yet Dr. Mason in no way suggests that the University of Colorado encountered an unusually large dollop of obscurantism in the forces that came to bear upon its Library fortunes. Most experienced university library deans can probably recount a similar litany of untoward circumstances that many have dogged their own institutions.

Yet, as would also be the case with most institutions, not all of the forces that shaped this library's development were forces for evil. Indeed several of the book's principals were knights in shining armor. As players on the American academic library field in the last half century would guess, one

of those heroes was Ralph Ellsworth who was twice the director of libraries at Boulder, his first stint being from 1937 until 1943, and his second extending from 1958 until 1972. In fact, that author of this book dedicates his work to Dr. Ellsworth, "who WAS the history of University of Colorado Library" and to his wife Theda (p. [iii]). Yet the book is not simply an adulation of Dr. Ellsworth's all-encompassing persona. The man's errors and weaknesses—and we all have some—are documented in its pages as well as his successes, but he still comes out deservedly as the hero of the drama.

Dr. Mason is a fine writer, and his great still has never shown more fully than it does in this book. He portrays for us the University of Colorado Library in all of its seasons—from periods of fine service to

periods of poor service, from periods of near wealth to periods of shabby impoverishment, from periods when it was the campus poster boy to periods when it was the campus whipping boy. As we have also come to expect from him, his research is both thorough and impeccable. He writes also from a personal vantage point of extensive university library administrative experience in his own life, including appropriately having served from 1972 until 1984 as the director of libraries at the University of Colorado. This also accounts understandably for the fact that his story of its diverse adventures ends a quarter century ago with his own appointment there. The book, which is fully annotated, well illustrated, and thoroughly indexed, belongs in any collection that embraces American higher education.

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