

[\[Review\] Battles, David M. *The History of Public Library Access for African Americans in the South, or, Leaving Behind the Plow* \(Metuchen, NJ; Scarecrow Press, 2009\)](#)

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The History of Public Library Access for African Americans in the South; Or, Leaving Behind the Plow. By David M. Battles. Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2009. 182 pp. \$40.00. ISBN 978-0-8108-6247-0.

For at least thirty-five years and probably since the formation of the Library History Round Table in 1947, library historians have been exhorted to broaden their narrative appeal to a wider range of publishers, to the public, and most of all to other historians, since the annual *Bibliography of American History* has not yet deigned to legitimize the history of librarianship as a separate field of study by its inclusion. As Wayne Wiegand has noted, for "a profession dedicated to multiculturalism, our historical literature demonstrates too much tunnel vision" (*Libraries & Culture* 35 [2000]: 12). The proliferation of new disciplines, the morphing of traditional disciplines into postmodern variants, the legitimization of nonquantitative methodology and social history, the human rights movement, and the expansion of professionalism and corporatization of the academy have added hurdles for library historians to clear but also offered new opportunities to add narrative vigor and broad relevance to a story that many of librarianship's own practitioners consider to be dry-as-dust irrelevancy. Add to these caveats the information science versus library science debate, and it is small wonder that to date librarianship has penetrated only the annual Popular Culture Conference more than once, where special sessions on the librarian stereotype provide amusement.

That library ignominy, and thus library history obscurity, is a situation that bears immediate correction is clear to David M. Battles, the author of *The History of Public Library Access for African Americans in the South*, for as he states in his closing paragraph, "Access to public libraries, particularly in the South, has been a major goal in the century-long African American effort to attain the civil rights promised them in the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments" (146). There could hardly be a higher justification for libraries in a democratic society.

This is an important book that chronicles major developments in library service to African Americans within the larger context of African American history. The bibliography includes nearly every major work and many lesser ones concerning library service to African Americans, from William F. Yust's reports at the 1913 Kaatterskill, New York, American Library Association (ALA) conference to recent detailed studies by Cheryl Knott Malone, Toby P. Graham, and Allison Sutton. In twenty pithy and concise chapters Battles covers the important developments in African American struggles for civil rights and library access from colonial antecedents until about 1970, and he does so in a manner that is for the most part evenhanded and fair. Southern white allies are identified suggestively (e.g., members of the ALA committee to study civil rights [119] and Patricia Blalock of the Selma, Alabama, public library [129]), so that southern librarians are not all tarred with the racist brush. But who deserves to be an antihero? W. Stanley Hoole of the University of Alabama emerges as an obstreperous segregationist concerning the integration of the Alabama Library Association (99-100, 104), but Sarah Jones of the Georgia Public Library Textbook Division, the most prominent of a group of "southern dragons" who were vociferous in their opposition to ALA's movement toward integration, escapes without admonishment (although the information on Jones's activities is not detailed in documentation, only in the memory of a few survivors of

that era). A few heroes are missing too: Edward G. Holley at the University of Houston, for example, who hired Charles Churchwell to be the first African American executive in an academic library in 1967.

The literature of library history has distortions and gaps that will diminish only very slowly, however, and the virtue of Battles's book is that it provides a broad framework on which to hang future emendations. Researchers in southern library history and diversity in librarianship should be grateful not only for the insightful précis of major previous works and reports (e.g., Tommie Dora Barker, Eliza Atkins Gleason, Louis Shores, *Handbook of Black Librarianship*) but also for his gathering together the many scattered association reports, journal articles, dissertations, and master's theses as well as some firsthand archival evidence that students have learned about previously only by osmosis.

One may complain about lacunae, of course, although how substantial are the gaps left by their absence is debatable: the Reconstruction librarianship of Richard T. Greener at the University of South Carolina, far more "professional" than that of his predecessors (Greener's daughter, Belle da Costa Greene, is the subject of a biography by Heidi Ardizzone, also reviewed in this issue of *L&CR*); the tempest over the Negro Library Conference of 1930 at Fisk University organized by Louis Shores, hastily amended by ALA officials at the last minute to include southern (white) library leadership; and the shoddy treatment of Eliza A. Gleason and Virginia L. Jones while they were students at the University of Illinois (although Battles makes clear elsewhere that racism was a national, not only a southern, problem). William Munthe's *American Librarianship from a European Angle* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1939), with its critique of segregated library facilities, is not included in the bibliography, although it is often mentioned in accounts of pre-civil rights era librarianship. Overall, however, the story is as completely told and expertly schematized in chronological form as could be wished. The index is complete and fairly detailed, and for the most part typos and editorial errors are minimal: Mollie H. Lee appears as "Molly" (74); Lloyd W. Josselyn (55) was male, not female, and director of the Birmingham Public Library before Carl H. Milam; "Chapel Hill University" should be the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (77); "case" instead of "ease" appears in the Carrie Robinson quote at the top of page 104. These editorial glitches are few enough and perhaps prove merely how well Battles's narrative commands the close attention of a reader as well as of a reviewer.