

Correspondence

To the Editor of the Journal of British Studies:

As a reviewer and as editor you must have often wondered whether authors ask themselves, for whom am I writing? Probably many do, certainly all bibliographers should, for few students are likely to consider a bibliography a work of art, sufficient unto itself. Some bibliographies to be sure do add perception and criticism to mere citation; but chiefly bibliographies are elementary tools of the trade, the hammers and saws and screwdrivers. Is such a character enough? To drive a nail straight, to saw a board square, to turn a screw truly are no mean skills. So to get the mechanics of scholarship straight demands more skill than casual readers know; and here the bibliography plays its part. Therefore, to lighten the task of the user it should be accurate in citation, sensible in organization, critical in judgment, and fruitful in suggestion. It cannot be objective; it must not be banal. It cannot be cheap; it should give good value.

What are we to say of *The American Historical Association's Guide to Historical Literature* (New York, The Macmillan Co., 1961, \$16.50)? What indeed shall anyone say? Certainly he must not by his criticism asperse the enormous labor back of it. On the other hand, industry is not criterion enough. How doth the busy bee improve each shining hour! But who amongst us aspires to be a bee? I feel constrained to ask some tolerably relevant questions of this heavy volume, nearly a thousand pages and closely printed. My first and perhaps most pertinent question is, whom is this bibliography for? The scholar, the conscientious teacher remote from research library, the graduate student, the undergraduate major? How much beyond a bundle of references would any of these men derive from millenaries of citations? Will these references aid the scholar, will they mean anything to the youngster? Can the student in one field find help in working up another? Are the citations likely in any case to open a window on the historical landscape or will they close a curtain, suggest that herein is all?

The accuracy we'll take for granted, but what of the organization, the judgments implicit and explicit? Is the selectivity defensible? In sum, when a young instructor or an advanced gradu-

ate student asks me, shall I buy this \$16.50 book, and why, what am I to say? I must be critical, I must be kind; I must for a moment erase some decades of learning and teaching and writing and try to put myself in his place. The query, however simple, is hard. The answer is not made easier by scrutiny of the materials relevant to English History, though in many instances a judgment on one area applies to several. First of all, no one can complain that England is neglected though for the period 1450-1914 he finds France getting 1280 items, virtually double the number for the United Kingdom which receives almost exactly the same as Russia. Is this testimony to the vitality of French historical studies or to the withering of English studies or to laziness? To be sure, although France gets more items in the medieval period, the reader must attend to the hundreds of items relating to Britain overseas (some of them oddly placed as I shall note below). Moreover, items must be weighed as well as counted, and attention paid to their varied usefulness.

The organization and selection perplex me, I must confess. I pick examples at random. Under the headings, "British Colonization, History," less than half the minuscule sixteen citations deal specifically with colonization and several might much more properly be listed under "Commerce and Trading Companies." R. L. Schuyler's excellent *Fall of the Old Colonial System* is nowhere cited, but his *Parliament and the British Empire* is cited twice, once under USA "Discovery of America to 1789" and once under the meaningless catchall, "Colonial and Administrative History and Methods" in the section "Expansion of Europe." Why, oh why, tell me why, is Namier's *England in the Age of the American Revolution* ("a wildly misleading title," Plumb called it, and here so proven) described under USA and merely cross referenced under UK? And why are Clark's *British Opinion and the American Revolution* and Ritcheson's *British Politics and the American Revolution* put under USA but Guttridge's *English Whiggism and the American Revolution* under UK?

But let me give you one for the book, any book. You have perhaps heard of a historian named Maitland, F. W. Maitland I believe. You won't much longer if the *Guide* be an augury, for he is about to become one with Nineveh and Tyre. This sweet prince of historians gets a single reference whilst half a thousand peasants surpass him; and treason though it be, especially in York state, I dare to suggest that a dozen items for Becker and one for Maitland reflects abysmal stupidity. If ever a bibliography has warrant be-

yond a survey booklist it is that its readers be introduced to men whose writings will be gold as long as history is read and written.

Such a gap as this one points up one way of judging this book. What did the compilers leave out? To cite conspicuous omissions of individual authors would be tedious, unconscionably lengthy, and quite eye-raising. For instance, the list of English periodicals is pitifully inadequate. Some such omissions are understandable though, contrary to a dubious proverb, not always forgivable. But it is topical omissions that are questionable. Why do we have a section on the "History of Religions" and none in this day and age on the "History of Science," although admittedly if one searches he will find many works on the history of science.

If organization and selection are perplexing, the comment accompanying the choices is dubious. I think much is to be said for the practice followed in the French section where no comment is included. Citation I presume postulates value. Why then string along a sandy rope of "useful," "standard," and "authoritative," when indeed none is accurate? Such adjectives beg questions. To whom are these works useful? For whom are they authoritative? By what standpoint are they standard? What point of view inspired or conditioned such judgments? The sheer factor of time has made a work cited at the onset of compilation six years older — and often poorer. Especially is this true of manuals. Not merely new facts but new angles of vision have altered the usefulness or authority of the book. To cite a trivial survey (1947) in this bibliography is ridiculous.

Another feature distresses me — the unwitting intrusion of the bibliographer's age. To describe a book as revising traditional interpretations is confusing, even dangerous. It merely indicates that the bibliographer resembles the 60-year-old professor who still lectures as if his students were all contemporaries of Lloyd George and invariably assumes that they remember the Parliament Act of 1911, the Munich Crisis, Anthony Eden. Even more, he assumes that what he learned as a boy is still being taught (and no doubt his practice proves him right), *ipsissima verba*. Historiographically as well as chronologically he is Georgian. Revisions do get into manuals and lectures, and have themselves long since become traditional. Interpretations even run full circle. Who then is to say what is traditional and what is revisionist, anymore than what is useful, standard, authoritative, or thorough?

But I must not go on. Nor must I fail to applaud the industry here displayed, and not in the "but on the other hand" vein; a con-

scientific beginner *might* get a good deal out of this volume. If I have voiced criticism in my questions it is because I feel that he might have gotten much more out of a better book. How could a better bibliography have been contrived? By assigning shorter jobs to more people, by seeking a more uniform plan of citation, selection, arrangement, by eliminating jejune comment, by insisting that the individuals do their home work. Perhaps bibliography shares a character with college teaching where young men who teach introductory courses exhaust the listener long before they exhaust the subject. When they compile bibliography they exhaust their knowledge long before they exhaust the subject. What is needed, however, is not more facts but more wisdom. Mechanically bibliography is a young man's wheat; historiographically it should be a mature scholar's cake. Let us eat cake.

Yours (more in sorrow than . . .)

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