Michael Gorman’s thought-provoking and stimulating series of essays on a range of issues relating to books, libraries, and librarianship will be familiar to many. His output has undoubtedly helped keep alive the spirit of service and commitment to knowledge dissemination that librarians hold (or should hold) dear. In addition, his contribution to the development of the modern iteration of the Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules (AACR2), through which books and other material may be properly described and identified, renders perpetually in his debt not only librarians, but all those who need to list, locate, and use information sources.

This book, published in Gorman’s 70th year, is a biographical account covering his life up to 1978. He is one of a number of British librarians who made their way, as a few others had done before, ‘across the pond’ to the United States, where he pursued a highly successful career. At what might be regarded the peak of his career, Gorman enjoyed the ultimate professional distinction of being elected President of the American Library Association—the oldest and largest such organization in the world.

This volume chronicles Gorman’s life from its beginnings in wartime Oxfordshire in 1941 to his appointment as Director of Technical Services at the Library of the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana, in 1978. In between, we learn of his foray into a career in finance as a clerk in a building society before he eventually settles on libraries as a path for the future; a path that he was encouraged to try because he liked books and reading! (How many other innocents have embarked on that journey only to discover that the essence of library service is not in enjoying books, although that is important, but in the successful bringing together of books, information, and readers?)

Gorman’s first job as a librarian is in Hampstead Public Library and this prompts him to study for the Library Association’s professional qualifications, at which he excels. Thereafter, he is enlisted to work on a research project at the British National Bibliography. He eventually becomes enmeshed in efforts to coordinate cataloguing at the newly formed British Library; a role that eventually leads to a hectic international round of work on AACR2. This takes him to the United States, first as a library school teacher filling in for someone’s sabbatical, where he is able to explore ways of making cataloguing interesting and indeed relevant, especially to non-cataloguers. Then he lands a permanent position at the University in Illinois. He devotes a special chapter to his experiences in developing AACR2, which underlines the difficulty of achieving consensus across continents and designing anything by committee. It is almost as if were you to put two librarians together, they would emerge with three ways of cataloguing a book! Thanks largely to Gorman, it doesn’t have to be like that these days.

When Gorman describes his life, especially the later professional goings and froings, he is at his most interesting; although when scribbling about his early days he appears to have many chips on his shoulders—chips which one might expect would have worn away by now. There are some courageously candid passages in which he describes his debilitating early fear of flying, enabling the reader to appreciate his achievements even more. When he ventures into comment rather than description, he sometimes disappoints, displaying a not-too-kindly disposition towards those of whom he disapproves or with whom he disagrees in his encounters through life. An opinionated and dogmatic approach can, however, be understood when he is pontificating about matters library, literary, and educational. Why wouldn’t a thinking man (and Gorman is certainly a thinker) who has spent his life in libraries and education have some robust opinions about both? He is well known and admired by many for his very particular views on many matters professional.

Gorman’s book contains pages of very attractive prose, especially when he is in reflective mood or when he is describing some of
the places he visits. On the other hand, there are occasions when the editor’s pen really should have intervened: for instance, the too-frequent examples of his use of ‘etc.’ that suggest he has got bored with that particular sentence, and an over-reliance on parentheses that distract and arrest the reader’s flow rather than assist it.

Ultimately, it is hard to know what Gorman’s book is for. Is it meant to be, as the subtitle suggests, ‘A library life’; a plain biography of an admittedly accomplished professional librarian that is meant, as most biographies are, to entertain and divert? Or, on the other hand, is it meant to be a polemical vehicle for airing Gorman’s prejudices and professional preoccupations? If it aims at both, it does not really succeed; for much of Gorman’s life is fairly ordinary, and the profound ideas and views which are of interest to bibliophiles and librarians are better documented elsewhere (see the references above). Where it works, however, is as a record, by someone who was there, of the evolution of AACR2. But that is only one chapter.

There is another very worthwhile, if brief, chapter. In the month that this review is being penned, the British House of Commons, Culture, Media, and Sport Committee is conducting an enquiry into public library closures in the UK. Gorman’s concluding Epilogue chapter is a succinct, persuasive, and disarmingly powerful piece of advocacy for libraries and librarians, and anyone who needs to be convinced that libraries still matter in 2012 should be given it to read. It should be top of the Prescribed Reading List for the Commons Committee!

Dr J. Eric Davies  
Honorary Visiting Research Fellow,  
Department of Information Science  
Loughborough University

DOI:10.1163/195796512X640439

Notes

1 Our Own Selves: More meditations for librarians (Chicago: ALA, 2005);  
The Enduring Library: Technology, tradition, and the quest for balance (ALA, 2003);  
Our Enduring Values: Librarianship in the 21st century Chicago (ALA, 2000);  
Our Singular Strengths: Meditations for librarians (ALA, 1997);  

2 Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules, 2/e Rev. (ALA, 1988).

3 The Concise AACR2, 4/e (ALA, 2005).