Libraries and the Enlightenment

By Wayne Bivens-Tatum. (Los Angeles,
CA: Library Juice Press, 2012).
Reviewed by Erik Estep

The Enlightenment may not seem like an obvious topic for a book about libraries. Our country was founded on Enlightenment principles and it is so imbedded in our culture that we are like the proverbial fish who doesn't know he is in water. However, those principles have been under attack recently, ranging from the jihad against science declared by one of our political parties to the slashing of library budgets. Reason seems to be in retreat. So it is all the more reason to welcome Wayne Bivens-Tatum new book, *Libraries and the Enlightenment*.

Bivens-Tatum, the Philosophy and Religion Librarian at Princeton University, lays out his book in a fittingly logical fashion. He lays the foundation with a long introduction to Enlightenment thought and then shows how it has influenced public, academic, and universal libraries. Bivens-Tatum makes a strong case that it is impossible to understand libraries without first grasping their intellectual foundations. He is also fluent in the primary and secondary literature and convincingly takes to task several scholars for attacking the Enlightenment from the Post-Modernist Left. The book is a pleasure to read and readers, especially those unfamiliar with Enlightenment thought, will learn a lot.

However, the book has a serious flaw, it is called *Libraries and the Enlightenment* but it should really be called *The Enlightenment and Libraries*. Bivens-Tatum assumes the reader knows nothing about Enlightenment thought and painstakingly goes through the history in too much detail. The introduction

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makes up twenty five percent of the book and that understates the time spent on the Enlightenment; he goes back again and again in other chapters to the basics of Enlightenment thought. It would have been much better book if he had cut his work on the Enlightenment and added some muscle to the chapters on libraries.

Even with that flaw, I still recommend this book. Bivens-Tatum writes better than most academics and he makes a thoughtful and impassioned case for the supporting the Enlightenment and libraries. Too often, books on libraries are dry exercises in academic jargon, and Bivens-Tatum deftly avoids that by adopting a conversational tone. His chapter on the history and foundation of public libraries should be used by instructors teaching library history and he does skillfully weave together his two topics into one strong theme. This book should be on the shelves of anyone interested in the intellectual foundation of libraries.