Book Review: A Colonial Southern Bookshelf, Reading in the Eighteenth Century, by Richard Beale Davis

Huntsville-Madison County Historical Society

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The author is one of the deans of southern letters and what he has to say carries weight in the world of learning.

His thoughts here are basically a distillation of his career-long study of Southern life, given in a series of lectures at Mercer University in Macon, Georgia, and published as that institution's Lamar Memorial Series Number 21.

Davis has found, much contrary to "Sahara of the Bozart," that Southerners of many social and economic levels during the colonial period owned and read books. This conclusion is drawn from his study of three groups of books popular among Southern readers: books in history, politics and law; books on religious topics; and belle lettres. Davis is probably the first essayist of note to utilize inventories of books in private and public libraries, bookseller's lists and sales catalogues.

His conclusion leads him to question most historians concerned with the colonial period, who have tended to underestimate the degree of literacy in the Southern colonies. Even "the poorest and least educated usually had the Bible and a simple commentary or two," and the better libraries "represent a broad spectrum of interests and views."

Davis also finds distinction between the tastes of the Southerner and his more northern counterpart. For example, the Southerner "owned and enjoyed belleslestric writing with apparently fewer inhibitions than his Pennsylvania or Massachusetts neighbor, and especially the dramatic and the somewhat bawdily satiric."
This book is highly recommended and deserves a much wider audience than it will probably reach.

Editor
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