the duties of library superintendents at this point” (363). In chapter eight, footnote 49 reads, “Regarding the abbey of Cluny, see pp. 000-000.” In the index, readers will be confused that Richard de Bury and Richard de Furnival are under R, not D, or B and F, but Peter Abelard is listed as “Abelard Peter.”

As Distad said, “Staikos’s earlier book, The Great Libraries: From Antiquity to the Renaissance (3000 B.C. to A.D. 1600), appeared in 2000 in a larger but equally sumptuous volume … A comparison of the two elicits a feeling of déjà vu that extends beyond the format to nearly all of the illustrations, as well as large chunks of text, which, though, slightly rearranged and with minimal rephrasing, are virtually the same in both works.” The curious reader is advised to start with it and Scribes and Scholars: A Guide to the Transmission of Greek and Latin Literature by L.D. Reynolds and N.G. Wilson (3rd ed., 2001).

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Before there could be an Italian literature, of course, there had to be an Italian language, if not a country called Italy. Before the fourteenth century the Italian language as such existed as a range of local dialects – in many ways it still does – and in purely oral form. If all this seems like a barrier to a sense of the place of literature in the roots of Italian society, it isn’t. It was that almost arbitrary choice of the Tuscan dialect as the foundation of modern Italian and the continuing sense of a national identity manifest in its literature that are at the roots of the unity of modern Italy. Italians celebrate their literature in ways the Anglophone world may fail to understand and certainly fails to emulate. On my shelves in Verona I have a dozen or more sets of free CDs, DVDs, weekly newspaper supplements, and build-it-by-the-month histories of Italian literature from the past ten years alone. Italian bookstores sell compilations and anthologies, coffee table books, and children’s guides on Italian literature on a
scale not seen in the English-speaking world. There is a pride in and a self-consciousness about the Italian literary heritage, perhaps only possible in a country whose language is not widely spoken beyond its boundaries, whose book market is therefore limited, and yet whose literary giants are known at least by name if not by their work around the world.

So this book fits easily into that ongoing tradition: it is a sweeping 400-entry survey from the fourteenth century to the present day, more or less. It is scholarly, yet attractively illustrated; bibliographical, yet not intimidating to the non-specialist (there are a few notes on the publication history of each book and a brief physical description); rich in detail, yet with entries short enough to read in five minutes; beautifully produced in large format, with dove-grey linen binding, sweet-smelling paper, 55 pages of indices, a bibliography of further reading, woodcuts, title-page, and cover photographs, and a few pages of brilliant colour illustrations. If you don’t have those free histories, this is as good a way of boning up on Italian literary history as you will find in Italian.

There are opening essays by the compiler, Fabrizio Govi, a student of Italian literature and a Modena bookseller; Giovanni Ragone, professor of Italian literature at La Sapienza, Rome; and Umberto Pregliasco, antiquarian bookseller in Torino. Oak Knoll, the North American distributors, claim on their website that the book includes an English translation of one or more of these essays, but my copy, with the same format and pagination, is all in Italian. Govi writes about the origins of Italian publishing, the way in which private ownership of books gained popularity in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries as production costs fell. He briefly describes the way in which contemporary authors’ works were added to the Latin and religious classics at that time, so that until the mid-sixteenth century Italy was the foremost producer of books in Europe, not least because of the founding of the universities in Padova and Bologna. He points to the way in which twentieth century Italian publishing led avant-garde artistic movements like Futurism. Ragone discusses canon formation, recognising its changing nature based on taste and time and, as he describes them, mood and spleen. He sees the Italian literary canon as a metaphor for the broader phenomenon of the growth of an Italian cultural identity, a multi-dimensional sense of self. This is a brilliant essay, the very best extended discussion that I have read on Italian literature and its role in helping to make Italy and its people what they are.
Giovanni Filippo De Lignamine is cited as the first real Italian printer, working in Rome, though he was from Messina in Sicily. After a few monastic and Latin entries, the bio-bibliography moves into real Italian texts with the first printed edition of Dante Alighieri’s *Divina Commedia* in Foligno in 1472, “Comedia” and “Alleghieri” in the original. The compiler heads it with a description familiar to every Italian school-child – “the most famous text in our literature.” Shakespeare is certainly not as cherished in the English-speaking world.

The volume’s subtitle indicates that its purpose is to forge what it describes as a new bio-bibliographical canon of Italian authors. It successfully achieves this through its survey of authors born or working in Italy. So as well as the standard authors from Boccaccio, Petrarca, and Machiavelli to Ungaretti, Montale, and Moravia, there are works by explorers Cristoforo Colombo, Marco Polo, and Amerigo Vespucci, historical figures including Savonarola, Caterina da Siena, and Garibaldi, and names even foreigners will recognise such as Vasari, Casanova, Collodi, Manzoni – even today Italian schoolchildren know his characters like friends and can recite sections of his text – d’Annunzio, Tomasi, Levi, Calvino, Pirandello, Svevo, and Sciascia.

The point of these landmark texts and authors is that both culturally and linguistically they lie at the roots of Italian society and that even today they help reinforce the links between the diverse elements that constitute modern Italy. They are a constant affirmation that Italy is more than Metternich’s geographical expression. Perhaps that is why some of the less well-known authors included in this volume are so important. There is, for example, Carlo Alberto di Savoia whose 1848 Statute is the first constitutional document of the new Italy. Yet Mussolini gets only the token nod modern Italians feel he warrants, on nothing like the scale of his true literary output.

Despite its claims to be right up to the minute, the volume peters out in the second half of the twentieth century and barely acknowledges the current one. Eco gets one entry, inevitably for the 1980 *Il nome della rosa*, though every book he writes, fiction and non-fiction, becomes a best-seller. Camilleri is probably Italy’s best-selling writer this century, but gets only one mention for a 1994 book. Baricco, the very best of Italy’s writers for the past decade and a half, is omitted, as are the very popular Tamaro, Carofiglio, Pincio, and a dozen more. Italian literature may be in a precarious position. Half of every Italian bookstore is full of foreign authors translated into Italian. Websites like amazon.it, internetbookshop.it, and abebooks.it threaten the existence of those bookstores, and all
this before electronic readers have begun to make an impact in Italy. (At the moment you can buy a Kindle in Italy, but try buying Italian texts for it.) That time will come. If, or perhaps simply when, Italian publishing comes under threat, maintaining the new as opposed to the classical Italian canon may become fundamental to preserving the country’s identity.

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It is no surprise that a book on the history of the decorative fonts used in the past 400 years to represent the Irish language should itself be beautifully designed. This is the second, enlarged edition of Dermot McGuinne’s well-documented work. It was first published in 1992 to critical acclaim, and at that time it was noted that only three print historians had tackled the subject, the most recent being in 1958. Aside from his meticulous and fascinating research, McGuinne has employed his own expertise as a graphic designer to produce a book that is an important reference source and a visual pleasure.

The Irish alphabet has 18 letters and is called Babel-loth, or Beth-luis-nin, because it begins with the letters b, l, f or b, l, n respectively. McGuinne quotes the grammarian John O’Donovan in explaining the alphabet’s origins: “Each of the letters of the Bobel-loth alphabet took its name from one of the masters who taught at the great schools under Fenius Farsaidh (the legendary creator of the Gaelic language), and in the Beth-luis-nion alphabet each letter was named after some tree, for what reason we know not.” McGuinne suggests that the alphabet evolved from the Roman letters written in Christian liturgical manuscripts that came into Ireland in the fifth century. The half-uncial rounded letters used in the Catach (the psalter copied by St. Columba) and the Book of Kells were influential in the formation of the Carolingian minuscule and, later, of the lower roman types used in Northern Italy.

While relating the fine details of the development of the Irish type, McGuinne ties in their significance to how the named fonts...