



America's Library: The Story of the Library of Congress, 1800-2000

James Conaway

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The Library of Congress, considered by many to be the greatest library on earth, holds over 110 million items/books in 450 languages, irreplaceable national documents, priceless art works, and objects of cultural fascination. From a modest collection of 740 books purchased by the Congress in 1800, the Library has grown to house hundreds of miles of bookshelves. Laid end to end, they would stretch from Washington D.C., to Chicago. This book tells the continuously interesting story of the first two hundred years of the Library of Congress. It is a vast history, filled with an immense cast of characters ranging from presidents, poets, journalists, and congressmen to collectors, artists, curators, and eccentrics. James Conaway centres this history around the thirteen men who have been appointed by presidents to lead the Library of Congress. The author investigates how the Librarians' experiences and contributions, as well as the Library's collections, have reflected political and intellectual developments in the United States. Each Librarian confronted great challenges: the entire Library collection was lost when the British burned the Capitol in 1814; in the 1940s, a backlog of one and a half million objects waited to be catalogued; the gigantic task of replacing the card catalogue with a computerised system was undertaken in the 1980s. Yet each Librarian also enjoyed the excitement of acquiring unique treasures, from Walt Whitman's walking stick to the papers of the Wright brothers, from the Civil War photographs of Mathew Brady to the archives of Leonard Bernstein. This lively account of the Library of Congress and those who guided its progress of two centuries is the history of an American institution that today is truly a library to the world, serving readers and researchers everywhere.

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