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## A HOUSE MORE ENDURING THAN BRONZE

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KAUNAS, DOMAS. *MAŽOSIOS LIETUVOS KNYGŲ NAMAI: BIBLIOTEKOS, RINKINIAI, JŲ KŪRĖJAI IR PAVELDO LIKIMAS*: MONOGRAFIJA [THE BOOK HOUSES OF LITHUANIA MINOR: LIBRARIES, COLLECTIONS, THEIR CREATORS, AND THE FATE OF THEIR HERITAGE: MONOGRAPH]. VILNIUS: VILNIAUS UNIVERSITETO LEIDYKLA, 2025. 982, [1] p.

In Lithuanian historiography, and, more broadly, in studies of the book culture of East-Central Europe, there are few works that may be regarded as truly foundational syntheses. Among them, the monumental monograph by Professor Domas Kaunas, *Mažosios Lietuvos knygų namai: bibliotekos, rinkiniai, jų kūrėjai ir paveldo likimas* (*The Book Houses of Lithuania Minor: Libraries, Collections, Their Creators, and the Fate of Their Heritage*), undoubtedly occupies a prominent place. Extending to 982 pages, the volume is the culmination of many years of research conducted by one of Lithuania's most distinguished bibliologists, book historians, and scholars of Lithuania Minor. The significance of this work lies not merely in its impressive scope but also in its uniqueness within a broader scholarly context. By way of comparison, the Polish scholarly literature has yet to produce a single study of comparable comprehensiveness devoted to the history of regional book collections. Certain, albeit imperfect, parallels might be found in such publications as *Historia bibliotek w zarysie* (*An Outline History*

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of Libraries) by Józef Grycz (1950), *Tysiąc lat książki i bibliotek w Polsce* (A Thousand Years of Books and Libraries in Poland) by Barbara Bieńkowska and Halina Chamerska (1992), or Kazimiera Maleczyńska's *Książki i biblioteki w Polsce okresu zaborów* (Books and Libraries in Poland during the Partitions) (1989). More recent contributions of a more specialized character include Józef Szocki's *Domowy świat książek: wybrane księgozbiory polskie w XIX wieku* (The Domestic World of Books: Selected Polish Book Collections in the Nineteenth Century) (2000) and Weronika Pawłowicz's *Księgozbiory polskiego duchowieństwa katolickiego na Górnym Śląsku w XIX i XX wieku* (do

1939) (*The Book Collections of the Polish Catholic Clergy in Upper Silesia in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries [to 1939]*). Yet none of these studies aspired to capture the entirety of the complex history of book collections, their creators, and their significance for local communities.<sup>1</sup>

For several decades, Domas Kaunas has remained a central figure in Lithuanian scholarship on the history of books, printing, reading culture, and libraries. His scholarly oeuvre encompasses both meticulous source-based studies and broader syntheses devoted to the written culture of Lithuanian Prussia.<sup>2</sup> The volume under review may be regarded as the culmination of these

- 1 GRYCZ, Józef. *Historia bibliotek w zarysie* [An Outline History of Libraries]. Warszawa, 1950; BIEŃKOWSKA, Barbara; and CHAMERSKA, Halina. *Tysiąc lat książki i bibliotek w Polsce* [A Thousand Years of Books and Libraries in Poland]. Wrocław; Warszawa; Kraków, 1992; MALECZYŃSKA, Kazimiera. *Książki i biblioteki w Polsce okresu zaborów* [Books and Libraries in Poland during the Period of the Partitions]. Wrocław, 1987; SZOCKI, Józef. *Domowy świat książek: wybrane księgozbiory polskie w XIX wieku* [The Domestic World of Books: Selected Polish Book Collections in the Nineteenth Century]. Kraków, 2000; PAWŁOWICZ, Weronika. *Księgozbiory polskiego duchowieństwa katolickiego na Górnym Śląsku w XIX i XX wieku (do 1939)* [The Book Collections of the Polish Catholic Clergy in Upper Silesia in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries (to 1939)]. Katowice, 2004.
- 2 For earlier attempts to examine the history of libraries in Lithuania Minor, see: KAUNAS, Domas. *Iš lietuvių knygos istorijos*: Klaipėdos krašto lietuvių knyga iki 1919 metų. Vilnius, 1986; KAUNAS, Domas. *Mažosios Lietuvos bibliotekos (iki 1940 metų)*. Vilnius, 1987.

longstanding scholarly interests. In it, Kaunas undertakes the ambitious task of reconstructing the world of libraries operating in Lithuania Minor from the nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, treating them not merely as repositories of books but also as vital centres of social, national, educational, and political life.

Even a careful examination of the extensive table of contents makes it clear that this is not a conventional history of libraries. Rather, Kaunas proposes a much broader analytical framework, in which, the library serves as a point of departure for reflections on the functioning of a national community, the mechanisms of cultural transmission, the role of intellectual elites, and the question of cultural heritage in a borderland shaped by competing civilizational influences.<sup>3</sup>

One of the most impressive features of the monograph is its remarkable scope. The volume is divided into numerous sections and chapters encompassing virtually every type of library that operated in Lithuania Minor. Its fundamental structure is organized around three chronological periods: from the fifteenth century to 1807, from 1808 to 1919, and the interwar era. Depending on the period under discussion, the author examines castle, school, and municipal libraries, as well as the collections of associations, youth organizations, periodical editorial offices, educational institutions, commercial enterprises, and private individuals, extending his inquiry even to the phenomenon of travelling libraries in the early twentieth century. From a methodological perspective, Kaunas's departure from a strictly institutional narrative is particularly noteworthy. Each library is presented as an integral component of a broader system of book culture. As a result, the reader is offered a multidimensional portrait of Lithuanian society in East Prussia and of the cultural networks that sustained it.

Several principal dimensions of analysis may be distinguished within the structure of the work:

1. The history of library institutions;
2. The history of individual book collections;
3. The biographies of library founders and social activists;
4. Issues related to reading culture and readership;
5. The preservation and loss of cultural heritage;
6. The relationship between book culture and processes of nation-building.

This multifaceted approach enables the author to transcend the traditional boundaries of library history and to situate libraries within the broader

3 LEONCZUK, Jan. Rola bibliotek publicznych w kształtowaniu tożsamości kulturowej małych ojczyzn. *"Bibliotekarz Podlaski"*, 2001, no. 3, p. 42–47.

social, cultural, and political transformations that shaped Lithuania Minor. Consequently, the monograph functions not only as a contribution to the history of books and libraries but also as a significant study of cultural history, collective memory, and the formation of modern national identity.

The breadth of this research programme allows Kaunas's study to transcend the boundaries of traditional library science and emerge as a major contribution to both social and cultural history. Such an approach is fully justified given the borderland character of the region under examination, as well as its long-standing exposure to competing cultural influences, particularly Prussian/German and Russian. One of the monograph's most significant achievements lies in its portrayal of libraries as instruments in the construction and preservation of Lithuanian national consciousness. In the case of Lithuania Minor, this issue assumes particular importance. For centuries, the region remained under the political and cultural influence of the Prussian and later German state, while its inhabitants operated within a complex multilingual and multicultural environment.

Through his analysis of numerous Lithuanian associations established during the final decades of the nineteenth century, Kaunas demonstrates that libraries such as those maintained by the *Birutė* Society fulfilled functions far exceeding the mere preservation of books. They served as centres of social integration, national education, and the maintenance of the Lithuanian language. This role becomes especially evident in the chapters devoted to the libraries of youth organizations and cultural-educational societies, including the *Giedotojų draugija* and the *Lietuvininkų susivienijimas*. In light of the evidence presented, the library emerges as an institution actively participating in the formation of the modern nation.

In this respect, Kaunas's work aligns with a broader body of scholarship on national cultures in East-Central Europe, where even relatively modest cultural institutions frequently functioned as substitutes for autonomous state structures. Libraries, reading rooms, educational societies, and voluntary associations often assumed responsibilities that elsewhere would have been performed by national educational or administrative institutions. By demonstrating how libraries contributed to the preservation and dissemination of the Lithuanian language and culture under conditions of political dependence and cultural competition, Kaunas offers an important perspective on the relationship between book culture and nation-building in borderland societies.<sup>4</sup>

4 The role of the Lithuanian language in the formation of Lithuanian nationalism during the final two decades of the nineteenth century has been examined by Barbara Jundo-Kaliszewska; see: JUNDO-KALISZEWSKA, Barbara. The Ethnolinguistic Essence of Lithuanian

One of the greatest strengths of the volume lies in the remarkable number of detailed case studies it contains. Kaunas examines dozens of libraries operating in various localities across Lithuania Minor. As a result, the book does not remain at the level of generalization; rather, it systematically reconstructs the structure, development, and historical trajectory of the region's library network. The institutions under discussion range from large libraries maintained by social and cultural associations to modest collections belonging to local organizations. For each case, the author reconstructs the circumstances of its establishment, the development of its holdings, its organizational structure, the activities of the librarians, and the composition of its readership.

Particularly valuable is the consistent attention paid to the local dimension of book history. Kaunas demonstrates that the development of literary and book culture was the product of the efforts of hundreds of community activists, teachers, clergy, and members of civic organizations. In doing so, he restores historical visibility to individuals and institutions that have often remained absent from mainstream historiography. From a scholarly perspective, this approach is especially fruitful, as it enables the reader to understand the mechanisms through which culture functioned at the local level while simultaneously revealing their significance for broader processes unfolding across the region as a whole.

Equally commendable is the section devoted to private libraries and personal book collections. Within library historiography, this subject has often occupied a marginal position, overshadowed by studies of public and institutional libraries. Kaunas rightly emphasizes that private collections played a crucial role in preserving Lithuanian cultural heritage. His analysis encompasses not only the motivations of collectors but also the organization of their libraries, reading practices, and the subsequent fate of collections following the deaths of their owners. Particularly noteworthy are the chapters devoted to the libraries of Dovas Zaunius and Vilius Gaigalaitis, both prominent figures in the political and cultural life of the Prussian Lithuanians.

The author's interests extend well beyond the contents of these libraries. He is equally concerned with the symbolic significance of the book as a cultural artefact. This perspective is reflected in chapters devoted to ownership marks, manuscript dedications, family chronicles, and various practices of documenting the history of collections. Consequently, the work under review emerges not

merely as a history of libraries but also as a history of the relationship between individuals and books. By integrating institutional history with the study of material culture and reading practices, Kaunas succeeds in illuminating the social meanings attached to books and the ways in which they contributed to the formation and preservation of cultural identity.

Particular attention should also be paid to the extensive section devoted to Klaipėda Region following its incorporation into independent Lithuania. The author examines the functioning of libraries under changing political circumstances and amid competition between various national and ideological influences. The chapters dedicated to public, school, and community libraries demonstrate the extent to which library activities were conditioned by the political situation of the region. Especially compelling are the analyses of the impact exerted by state authorities, civic organizations, and ethnic tensions on the development and operation of libraries. These chapters convincingly illustrate that libraries cannot be understood solely as cultural institutions; they were also arenas in which broader political and national struggles were reflected and negotiated.

One of the book's greatest strengths is its exceptionally rich source base. This becomes evident from the structure of the concluding sections, which contain extensive inventories of archival materials, printed sources, and secondary literature. Each major chapter concludes with a concise synthetic summary, facilitating navigation through what is otherwise an extraordinarily vast body of material. Throughout the work, the author successfully maintains a balance between detailed empirical description and broader interpretative reflection.

The interdisciplinary character of the study likewise deserves recognition. Kaunas draws upon the methodologies of bibliography and book studies, cultural history, social history, regional studies, and information science. This methodological diversity considerably enhances the scholarly value of the work and broadens its potential readership. As a result, the monograph is relevant not only to historians of books and libraries but also to scholars interested in nationalism, cultural heritage, regional identities, memory studies, and the history of East-Central Europe more generally.

For these reasons, the volume may serve as a model of scholarly method and as a source of inspiration for comparative research in other regions of Lithuania and, indeed, across East-Central Europe. By combining meticulous archival research with an ambitious interpretative framework, Kaunas demonstrates how the history of libraries can illuminate broader social, cultural, and political processes. His study thus stands not merely as a contribution to Lithuanian schol-

arship but as a significant achievement within the wider field of European book and cultural history.

The monumental character of the publication constitutes both its greatest strength and, to some extent, one of its limitations. At nearly one thousand pages, the volume demands considerable commitment from its readers. The abundance of case studies may occasionally create an impression of excessive detail, and one might reasonably ask whether certain sections could have benefited from a higher degree of synthesis. In some parts of the work, extensive factual documentation tends to outweigh broader interpretative discussion. This, however, is a characteristic challenge of source-based scholarship and does not diminish the overall value of the study. For readers outside Lithuania, the large number of local place names, organizations, and historical figures may also present a certain obstacle, requiring a solid familiarity with the history of the region. Yet it is precisely this level of detail that constitutes the book's exceptional documentary value. This is unmistakably a work written by an expert for experts, and there can be little doubt that it will rapidly become essential reading for future generations of scholars.

*Mažosios Lietuvos knygų namai. Bibliotekos, rinkiniai, jų kūrėjai ir paveldo likimas* is an outstanding achievement both in terms of its scale and its scholarly significance. Domas Kaunas has produced a work that extends far beyond the conventional boundaries of library history. Here, the library becomes a key to understanding the history of society, culture, and national identity in Lithuania Minor. The monograph represents a fundamental contribution to the study of book history in East-Central Europe. It combines an impressive source base with a broad interpretative perspective while simultaneously restoring historical visibility to dozens of institutions and hundreds of individuals who helped shape the book culture along the Lithuanian–German borderland.

It would not be an exaggeration to describe Kaunas's publication as a landmark reference work that will remain a standard point of departure for scholars investigating the history of libraries, book culture, and the cultural heritage of Lithuania Minor for many years to come. More than a study documenting the past, it demonstrates the enduring significance of libraries as institutions that preserve collective memory and sustain cultural identity. In this sense, the volume fully justifies the metaphor invoked in the title of this review: like the Horatian *monumentum aere perennius*, it stands as a scholarly edifice "more enduring than bronze".