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Librarian of Congress in Profile

Previously, I wrote about how the very young Library of Congress was populated in the early nineteenth century with a personal book collection purchased from President Thomas Jefferson (<https://www.murrysvillelibrary.org>; essays #41 and #42). Today, I want to tell you about one particular Librarian of Congress.

Since 1802, there have been fourteen. Daniel J. Boorstin was the twelfth, serving from 1975 to 1987. He was an Atlantan by birth, a Rhodes Scholar educated at Oxford, and a member of the bar in England. He was admitted to the Massachusetts bar in 1942. He taught in the history department at the University of Chicago for a time and was Director of what is now known as the National Museum of American History. He became Librarian of Congress without a degree in Library Science, not the first to do so, by appointment of President Gerald Ford.

His appointment was opposed by the American Library Association because Boorstin's background, "however distinguished it may be, does not include demonstrated leadership and administrative qualities which constitute basic and essential characteristics necessary in the Librarian of Congress." Further proof, as though we need more, that even distinguished, professional leadership can, at times, be narrow in thinking, just plain wrong, and better served by a more open view.

Boorstin was a prolific author of books of distinguished record, including: "The Americans: The Colonial Experience" (1958), winner of the Bancroft Prize; "The Americans: The National Experience" (1965), winner of the Parkman Prize; "The Americans: The Democratic Experience" (1973), winner of the Pulitzer Prize; "The Genius of American Politics" (1953); "The Image" (1962); and his world history trilogy of "The Discoverers" (1983), "The Creators" (1992), and "The Seekers" (1998).

"The Discoverers," a special interest for me, is a wonderful history of technology, and I recommend it highly, assuming that this tome of more than 700 pages will not be off-putting. There are chapters about "sun time to clock time," "sea paths to everywhere," "seeing the invisible," "invention of species," "transforming the book," "the infinite and the infinitesimal," and more. The scope of this book is just amazing, like no other that I can name.

He wrote, as prolific authors do, even while busy in his administrative capacities, while serving as Librarian of Congress, "carefully pointing out that his research and writing took place in the morning at home—and not at the Library." Thomas Jefferson knew too about being a multitasker, even if not a prolific book author specifically. He would have expected no less from a Librarian of Congress, and Daniel Boorstin would certainly have pleased him as a role model.

There are more details about Daniel Boorstin's full life and the lives of twelve other past Librarians of Congress at <https://www.loc.gov/about/about-the-librarian/previous->

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[librarians-of-congress/](#). The fourteenth and present holder of office is Carla Hayden, the first woman and the first African-American to lead the national Library; you can learn about her at <https://www.loc.gov/item/webcast-7396>.

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