

Best Acknowledgments of 2012

BY MARGARET HEILBRUN ON JANUARY 23, 2013



Over a year ago, with *LJ* posting its various “Best of...” lists of 2011, I added one of my own, “Best Acknowledgements of 2011,” for which I looked in lots of that year’s history and biography books (the genres that most often entail library and archives research) to find authors who fully thanked—*by name*—the library and archives staff who helped them.

Sheesh, it was hard to find my winner! Most historians and historical biographers, much though they use libraries’ research collections, don’t take down the names of the people who helped them. Or if they take them down, they lose the list during their years of composition. Amanda Foreman’s thorough and professional acknowledgments in her *A World on Fire: Britain’s Crucial Role in the American Civil War*, last year’s winner, are hard to match. Yet this year, figuring that a piece on acknowledgments should perhaps recognize more than one winner, I’ve picked three.

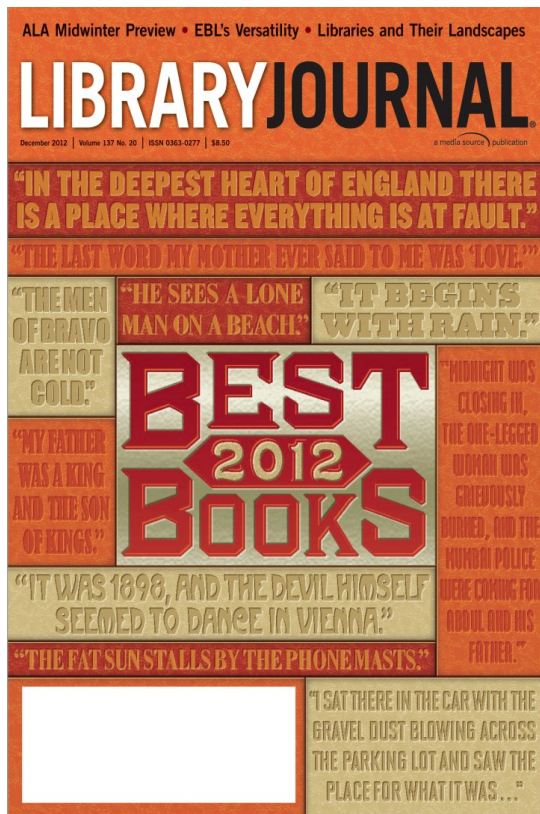
First, here are some unfortunate trends in acknowledgments that I noted in 2012.

The Thomas-the-Tank-Engine Approach

A world in which large and complicated trains operate on their own, and the stationmaster talks to them directly, with scant evidence of conductors, engineers, or passengers. An example of this trend, as paralleled in 2012 acknowledgments: “Yale’s Beinecke Library and Harvard’s Houghton Library allowed me to use their holdings.”

Even the Best Books Have Their Lapses

Among the authors of *LJ*'s 10 best books of 2012, only one mentioned using research and archival collections. The author, I confess, merely acknowledged that she was "grateful to the following institutions and their staffs...", and named the institutions, but not the staff members.



Giving with One Hand and Taking Away with the Other

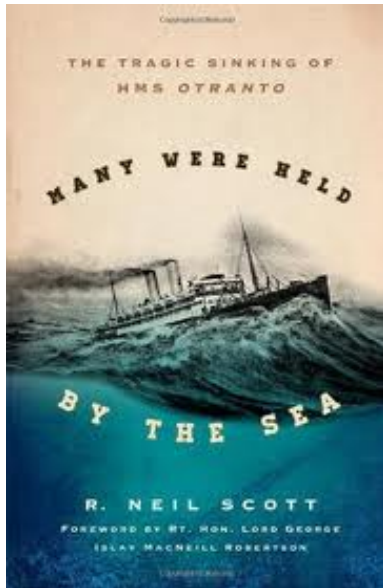
Public-service staff who have helped an author will eagerly turn to the acknowledgments when the resulting book makes it into their library, searching to see if/how they are thanked. Did their hearts stop in anticipation when one 2012 author began grandly with, "It is customary to thank librarians, and I am indeed grateful to the many librarians who helped me and my research assistants...."? Eagerly, they would have read on: "The libraries and archives whose resources enabled me to write this book include—" at which point all hopes and expectations were dashed. Such books should have closing credits that say, "No staff members were named in the completion of this book...."

Low Brachial Index

My last paper in college was on the high brachial index of the gibbon, meaning that a gibbon's forearm is much longer in relation to its upper arm than in other primates. Since authors are all primates, I have adapted this index to measure length of acknowledgments (forearm) in relation to number of sources cited (upper arm). Example? One 2012 book on the Civil War (there, now you know just the book I mean!) had almost 300 citations and listed over 50 research sources, but had no "Acknowledgments." An "Author's Note" took up less than one page and thanked the guy who helped him with illustrations.

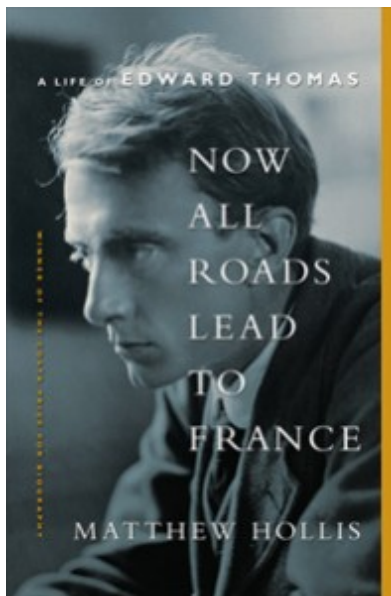
And now the winners.

BEST ACKNOWLEDGMENTS AS MEMOIR



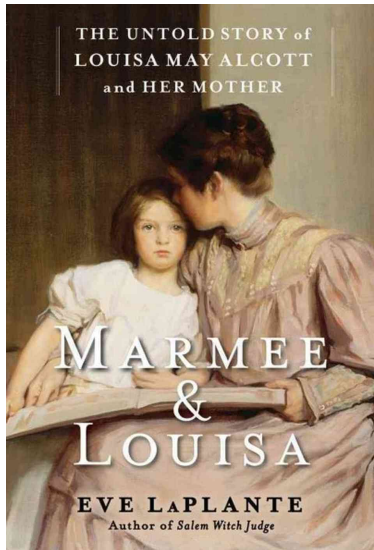
This is an increasingly popular approach. The reader learns about uncles and aunts, and various hosts who put the author up on extensive research trips, with each trip getting its own narrative. Though these are largely character driven (“...my dad had always wanted to show me the area...”), sometimes there’s also a plot (“...we ended up at the cemetery”), and when fully constructed, these acknowledgments peg the names of all the kind souls in libraries (no, not in the cemetery) who helped. Thanks go to R. Neil Scott and his *Many Were Held by the Sea: The Tragic Sinking of the HMS Otranto* (Rowman & Littlefield), pp.xi-xvii, for caring, generous, and specific acknowledgments.

AMANDA FOREMAN AWARD



Named after our inaugural winner, this award acknowledges an acknowledger who uses the Foreman format. (Say that three times!) Matthew Hollis, in his *Now All Roads Lead to France: A Life of Edward Thomas* (Norton), pp.341-42, writes: “I am grateful to the following institutions and individuals,” and then names every library he used, with the name(s) of the staff members who assisted him in parentheses after. A fine exemplar of the Foreman tradition.

ELEGANT THANKS OF 2012



Eve LaPlante shows us, in her *Marmee & Louisa: The Untold Story of Louisa May Alcott and Her Mother* (Free Pr.: S&S), pp.297-98, how Acknowledgments can teach us the old fashioned arts of expressing gratitude, and that the word “grateful” cannot be repeated too often, especially when connected to the names of the people who helped.

Congratulations to the winners! To all authors who use libraries and archives, when we librarians learn of your gratitude in the same detail you apply to your notes and sources, we are more grateful than you will ever know.