

Louis Shores and library history

By: O. Lee Shiflett

[Shiflett, O.L.](#) "Louis Shores and Library History." *Libraries and Culture* 35(Winter 2000): 35-40.

Made available courtesy of University of Texas Press:

<http://www.utexas.edu/utpress/journals/jlc.html>

The definitive publisher-authenticated version is available through the University of Texas Press.

*****Note: Figures may be missing from this format of the document**

Together with Wayne Shirley, Louis Shores began the American Library History Round Table in 1947. With the addition of N. Orwin Rush and John David Marshall, they dominated its proceedings for the first two decades. When Shores and Shirley turned over the control of the Round Table to Shore's appointed successor, Michael H. Harris, and his democratically elected successors in 1972, the four founders left an organization that, though small, was popular and had focused the agenda of library history.

The two keynote papers of the American Library History Round Table (ALHRT), those delivered by Louis Shores in San Francisco in 1947 and Stanley Pargellis at ALA Midwinter in Chicago in 1948, differ in details but share a common vision for the new round table. It should construct a history that could elevate the professional consciousness of librarians. For Shores it was "the chronicling of our professional achievement as manifested in the ever increasing dissemination of good ideas through libraries." (1) To Pargellis it was the possibility that "librarians can take inspiration from the lives and achievements of the great librarians of the past." (2) Shores and Pargellis shared a common perspective on history--a conservative position that both, in their original statements, directly contrasted to history as a social science. For them, the purpose of library history was to impress upon librarians the greatness of the profession's past leaders and to celebrate the importance of libraries in American society. Facts, dates, and data were not the materials from which history and libraries derived meaning. They called for a history that commemorated rather than criticized and that inspired rather than informed. To be fair, it must be added that Pargellis allowed for "room in Clío's pastures for every kind of animal, even social scientist's history," and Shores himself, while refusing to allow that degree of liberality, never insisted on any orthodoxy among the participants in the meetings of the ALHRT. It was sufficient that they shared his enthusiasm for history and libraries. Indeed, through the first twenty-five years of the ALHRT, Shores took delight in presentations that focused on the foibles and failures of the great librarians and always took greater delight in a well-told tale than in an appropriate moral.

Pargellis had been drafted for the duty and had no continuing involvement in the ALHRT. Shores, as its founder, did. From 1947 until 1970 he served as secretary of the new Round Table with his close friend, Wayne Shirley, as chairman. It was an informal organization at best. Apparently, for the first two decades of the Round Table's existence, there were no by-laws

governing the operations of the group. When asked about them in 1971 by ALA's Flora Colton, N. Orwin Rush reported that Shores "seems to think that something was drawn up but is not sure," and Wayne Shirley had no idea. (3) There was never an official membership list--Shirley and Shores and, later, Rush and John David Marshall simply passed around a pad of paper among the people attending the programs, and anyone signing the list was considered to be a member. There were no dues to be paid, and there was no business meeting following the program. Life was simple. At each annual conference of the ALA, there was only the annual program meeting, usually arranged and orchestrated by Louis Shores himself.

The papers delivered at the early meetings to a great extent followed the charge laid out by Shores and Pargellis. They tended to exalt, to celebrate, and to promote the cause rather than to address significant issues of the profession, but this seems more a function of the informality of the ALHRT than a philosophical principle of its founder and major officer. Many of the papers of the early Round Table were published in the *Wilson Library Bulletin* and other library publications, but many others were lost--they were simply discourses of the moment. Shores spent much more of his time trying to find people who could be cajoled into sharing their ideas and work with the frequently large audiences the Round Table meetings attracted than evaluating papers submitted for presentation. To this end, Shores tapped on his colleagues, his friends, his students, the friends of colleagues, the friends of friends, and the friends of students to fill the programs. In 1950 he had Hazel Pulling, who had served as assistant dean of the library school at Florida State University under Shores, and Carl Vitz, who had hired Shores as a page in the 1920s at the Toledo Public Library, on the program. Marian Manley, whom Shores knew from ALA committee work, spoke in 1952 and again in 1954. David Berninghausen, chair of the ALA's Intellectual Freedom Committee, of which Shores was a member, talked about the history of the committee in 1953, and Robert Lester of the Carnegie Foundation and Ben Powell, both of whom Shores had known well since the 1930s, shared the program in 1956. And, of course, Wayne Shirley was ever ready to step in when no suitable presentation could be found, as he did in 1959 and again in 1964. The list goes on but is probably not important, as Shores knew practically everyone in the library business by that time. Coincidence, of course, probably played a major role. Ellen Schrecker, who delivered the paper at the morning session of the ALHRT on 27 June, 1998, was the daughter of the main speaker at the 1955 meeting of the Round Table, Edwin Wolf II, who delivered an excellent paper on the Library Company of Philadelphia. (4) Wolf's paper was exceptional, though. The number of presentations at ALHRT meetings that approached the quality of his effort were few. When Ed Holley reviewed John David Marshall's 1961 compilation of the papers read before the ALHRT, *An American Library History Reader*, he noted the unevenness of the formal presentations and gave the clear impression that more of them should have been lost. (5)

While the meetings of the ALHRT were well attended, the impact of the Round Table on the ALA itself was negligible. The published proceedings of the ALA conferences that summarized the round table meetings for the 1950s and 1960s frequently enough ignored the ALHRT, probably because Shores as secretary neglected to send in a report, and, when the proceedings did summarize the Round Table meetings, they often simply called ALHRT the "American History Round Table." Though there had been a high level of interest in its programs, the ALHRT was looked upon by ALA staff members and those librarians who proudly "look to the future rather than the past" as, at best, a harmless hobby and, at worst, a waste of effort and time.

It is quite obvious from the bibliographic work of Michael Harris that the ALHRT was not responsible for the renaissance in library history that Shores hoped for in the twenty-five years he controlled it. (6) Library history was being produced independently and without regard for the ALHRT, which remained, ultimately, an informal forum that perhaps delivered its greatest value to the ALA by providing intellectual entertainment in the midst of the dreary array of utilitarianism that fills an ALA annual conference.

In 1968 the ALA Committee on Reorganization called for the regularization of the Round Table. The demand was that the ALHRT establish a formal membership with dues and by-laws and provide for the formal election of officers. Since the ALHRT had no real membership and never held business meetings, Shores and Shirley were in a quandary. Both were amenable to the reforms proposed by the ALA but were uncertain how to effect them, particularly since there was no mechanism by which someone could officially join the Round Table.

In response to the ALA demand that the ALHRT conduct itself more as an ALA unit, Shores developed an elaborate justification of library history that, while failing to answer the questions posed by the ALA about the Round Table, did provide something of an agenda for the ALHRT when he detailed what the Round Table could do for ALA. He called for the writing of a history of the ALA, the publication of a directory of librarians who had been assigned the duties of official historians of their own libraries, the development of support for libraries to deal with their own archives, an ongoing bibliography of library history publications and works in progress, and support of oral history projects. He did not deal with the issues raised by the ALA for by-laws and a membership list and ignored the demands for organizational accountability. (7)

These ideas were not new for Shores. Since 1961 he had been trying to negotiate a grant from Crowell-Collier, publishers of Collier's Encyclopedia, for which Shores served as editor-in-chief, to fund these and other projects through the ALA. It was an effort that Shores approached with his customary enthusiasm and pursued with vigor and one that, like too many of his projects and plans, achieved no results. (8)

While Shores thought his formal response to the demand that the ALHRT regularize its activities adequate, the ALA kept pressing. Shores and Shirley, both of whom were at that time faced with the prospect of retiring soon, realized that a new generation needed to take over. While Shirley wished to continue the organization as it had operated since 1947, he realized the impossibility of that course, and in 1969 N. Orwin Rush and John David Marshall took over as ALHRT officers, largely at the suggestion of Shirley, who wanted them as interim officers until the question of an official membership could be resolved. (9) They continued to serve unopposed until 1972, when what many considered a coup occurred, and Michael Harris was elected chair with David C. Libbey as secretary. Harris was a Marxist revisionist to whom the notion that history was to be in the service of the profession was absurd. Harris represented a new generation of library historians for whom the ideals of historical research were more compelling than pious hagiography and who seriously attempted to make sense of the historical record. For many, it was nothing less than the storming of the citadel.

Harris's election, however, was only a natural extension of Shores's concern with the Round Table. Shores had known Harris for years and had been a mentor to the young librarian, encouraging him in his writings and his doctoral work. In March 1968 Shores had written Harris, who was then a doctoral student in the library school at Indiana University, to thank him for sending him an autographed copy of Harris's *Guide to Research in American Library History*. Shores suggested to Harris that there were several research projects that he would like to see Harris undertake, all involving the significance of library history: "One of the jobs I'd like to see you do, because I think you could probably do it better than anybody else, is to study the impact on library history since World War II created by at least three, and possibly four, forces." Shores went on to specify the ALHRT, the Library History Seminar Series, and the *Journal of Library History* as the first three. The fourth area was vague for Shores but had as its focus the relationship of library history to history as practiced in departments of history in colleges and universities. He wrote Harris: "It is my dream and hope that not only will history and historians influence the writing of library history, but I think there is a possibility that we who write library history may yet introduce a new dimension into historiography, provided we don't tiptoe as we have with science and the scientific method." With that, Shores, who had just retired as dean of the library school at Florida State University, passed the bucket to Harris, telling him, "I believe the new generation, of which you are a fine representative, will have the courage to stop being ancillary." (10)

When it became inescapable that a real election had to be held, it was Shores who took Harris aside and told him what to do. Before the nominations could be closed, with the names of Rush and Marshall entered as the only people standing for election, Harris thrust his conference badge in front of Peggy Sullivan, the main speaker of that session, and asked her to submit his name. She did, and Harris was elected.

The Round Table itself, it might be argued, did little more than provide entertainment for ALA conference attendees, but it did keep the cause of library history alive and formed a sort of public advertisement for the more serious concerns of library historians. The ALHRT and its leader, Louis Shores, were directly responsible for the establishment of the *Journal of Library History* (JLH) and the Library History Seminar series, both of which have become significant in the dissemination of research in library history. The JLH and the seminars were, from the beginning, designed as a forum for scholarly research and not for the informal displays of enthusiasm for history that the ALHRT programs had become. Indeed, Shores considered the JLH to have been his most significant contribution to library history. As its two founders prepared to turn over the forum to the next generation, Wayne Shirley felt the need to evaluate the contributions of the Round Table when he wrote Shores in 1968 about the future of the ALHRT :

For 21 years we have provided programs at each Conference; nor have we asked for anything from ALA save a place to meet and a program announcement. In return we have, with the aid of John David Marshall, provided library school students with a much better knowledge than we had. All library schools buy the Marshall titles, and I was pleased the other day to note that Marshall, Shirley & Shores is still in print. (11) I feel also that in our own persons we have provided a sense of history as between us we have heard Dewey, Bowker, E. C. Williams and Putnam, and we have even had a speaker who knew Poole! We got out the list of founding fathers which LJ printed. Again and again our papers have appeared in LB [sic for LJ], WLB &

ALA BULLETIN....So I feel we have much more than repaid ALA for what they have done for us. (12)

Shirley was right. He, Shores, Marshall, and Rush kept the cause of historical studies before the library community through a period of increasing emphasis on technological change in libraries and through a period where research in library and information science was increasingly dominated by models derived from the social sciences. But the demands of the ALA for accountability and the movement of the library community for democratization within the confines of the ALA forced the opening of the ALHRT to a new generation of librarians, and, with the election of Harris in 1972, the rest is history.

Notes

- (1.) Louis Shores, "The Importance of Library History," in John David Marshall, comp., *An American Library History Reader. Contributions to Library Literature* (Hamden, Conn.: Shoe String Press, 1961), 5.
- (2.) Stanley Pargellis, "Long Life to the Library History Round Table," in *ibid.*, 9-10.
- (3.) N. Orwin Rush to Flora Colton, 27 August 1971, 40/1/6-1 (20-2), American Library Association Archives, University of Illinois Archives, University of Illinois, Urbana.
- (4.) Ellen Schrecker, "A Lost Opportunity: Intellectual Freedom in Early Cold War America" (paper presented at the ALHRT, Washinton, D.C., 1998).
- (5.) Edward G. Holley, review of John David Marshall, *An American Library History Reader* (1961), *College and Research Libraries* 23 (July 1962): 349-50.
- (6.) Michael Harris, *A Guide to Research in American Library History* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1968), and Michael Harris, *Fugitive Literature in Library Science* (Albany: State University of New York, 1968).
- (7.) Louis Shores to Ruth Warneke, June 15, 1969, JA-4, Shores Papers, Florida State University, School of Information Studies, Tallahassee.
- (8.) Lee Shiflett, *Louis Shores: Defining Educational Librarianship* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1996), 191-92.
- (9.) Wayne Shirley to Louis Shores, 18 July 1968, JA-4, Shores Papers.
- (10.) Louis Shores to Michael Harris, 27 March 1968, copy supplied by Michael Harris.
- (11.) *Books, Libraries, Librarians: Contributions to Library Literature* selected by John David Marshall, Wayne Shirley, and Louis Shores (Hamden, Conn.: Shoe String Press, 1955).
- (12.) Shirley to Shores, March 27, 1968, copy supplied by Michael Harris.

Lee Shiflett is professor at the School of Library and Information Science at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, where he has been a member of the faculty since 1979. He is the author of *Origins of American Academic Librarianship* (1981) and *Louis Shores: Defining Educational Librarianship* (1996), and is currently working on a study of the editorial career of William Terry Couch. He served as chair of the Library History Round Table in 1984.