

REEL VS. REAL LIBRARIANS

by Steven J. Schmidt



Librarian. a person who is skilled in library work. — *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*

“Let’s try a game of word association. What profession do you think of when you read or hear “ambulance chaser,” “take two,” “slide rule,” “pork barrel,” “open wide,” “shbb”? You probably think immediately of lawyer, doctor, engineer, politician, dentist, and librarian. You are reacting to common stereotypes, even though these professional people perform important tasks. My line happens to be science/technical information specialist and library administrator, but you’d call me a librarian.”¹
– Wayne Wiegand

“...the days of the librarian as a mouser in musty books must pass...” Melvil Dewey.

In 1986, the popular television game show, *Family Feud*, posed a question to a group of 100 people and then asked the contestants to identify the four most frequently given answers. The question was: “What are the typical characteristics of a librarian?”

Survey said, librarians are:

- quiet
- mean or stern
- usually single or unmarried
- Wear glasses.

At the time, this program irritated a number of librarians, but whether their irritation was based on the question, the answer or the fact that the contestant guessed all four “correct” answers is still to be determined.

Librarians are a funny lot. We like to spend a great deal of time and energy describing and defending what we are and what we do. This phenomenon is not new. In his story “The Last Librarian,” Norman Stevens chronicles the birth of the librarian image. Stevens starts with Dewey, who described librarians in 1876 as “a mouser in dusty books” at a time when the profession was predominately made up of men. Less than three decades later mainly because of Dewey’s efforts, the profession was primarily made up of women.

Melvil Dewey’s influence on the structure of the library profession can not be over emphasized. The librarian’s profession has existed as the care-taker of knowledge, but the library profession truly came of age in the late nineteenth century in large part because of his efforts. Dewey established a highly efficient organizational scheme for libraries which, coupled with Andrew Carnegie’s philanthropy and the desire of the middle- and upper-classes of the time to control the reading habits of the masses, created the public library movement. The effectiveness of this troika is demonstrated in the jump in the number of public libraries. In 1876, there were just 188 public libraries in the world. Less than forty years later, there were nearly 4,000.

The “library science” which Dewey designed to support this structure was a combination of library management and library expertise, dealing essentially with reference and classification. His structure did not give the librarian the authority to determine the “best reading” materials. That duty was relegated to other professionals, more knowledgeable in literary and scholarly matters, who he believed would be more capable of judging the value of the objects librarians acquired, organized, and made accessible. The only exception to rule was in the “area of children’s literature where, he believed, that cultured and refined women had a “natural” ability to distinguish between “good” and “bad” reading.”

“To select good books wisely requires an abundance of time, knowledge of books, and sympathy with the popular taste,” Dewey protégé Mary Cutler Fairchild told a New York Library Association audience in 1895. “Such reviews and criticisms as can be found in the *Literary World*, *Critic*, *Nation*, etc., will also be helpful.”²

Dewey’s library science was driven by a “library faith” which supported and was supported by the reading standard of a white middle-and upper-class patriarchy. Dewey recruited women into the profession in order to fill the supporting role he had assigned it both cheaply and efficiently. As far as Dewey was concerned, these women were not a threat to the

decisions of literary and scholarly experts. He expected the turn-of-the-century female library professionals to deliver “the uplifting messages others had already prescribed as valuable for the masses.”

Not everyone agreed with Dewey’s focus. Cutler wrote that the ALA motto, “The best reading for the largest number at the least cost,” smacked of “arithmetic and commerce.”

Dewey countered by saying that “It is sometimes said that the spirit of the library should be that of a merchant and his well-trained clerks, anxious to please their customers.”³ Cutler disagreed, saying that “it should be rather the fine spirit of a hostess with the daughters of the house about her greeting guests.”

The gender switch in these two sentences is significant; Cutler thought the typical male orientation toward commerce and management would have a cold and distant influence on librarianship. She thought the female inclination toward family and domestic tranquility would offer a warmer and more involved influence on the profession.

Early stereotypes of librarians may have grown from perceptions of the job market that opened to women for the first time in the 1870’s. Prior to that time, most librarians were male. As the profession began to grow in the late 1870’s, librarianship became a “suitable” occupation for single women (who were generally the only women to enter any job market). While Dewey deserves a lot of credit for facilitating the entry of thousands of women into the profession, he must also bear the blame for laying the foundations of the profession’s low status. It is undoubtedly from this beginning that the perception of the unmarried female as the librarian stems. From this starting point society went on to create the image of the spinster librarian, with both negative and positive characteristics.

It was not until the 1930s that the image was examined through scientific studies.

Two of the earliest studies of librarians’ personalities were conducted in 1934 by E.K. Strong⁴ and in 1948 by Alice Bryan⁵. Strong developed a vocational interest profile for female librarians, drawing a sample from the membership of the American Library Association. She found that female librarians exhibited the highest interests in the outdoors, writing, music, and physical science, with the lowest scores in teaching, religious activities, and social service. Strong only reported the high and low scores for the twenty-two categories surveyed. Based upon this pattern of interests, librarians were grouped with artists and authors. Male librarians were not tested at this time.

Bryan used the Guilford-Martin Inventory of Factors (GAMIN) and the Strong Vocational Interest Blank, to test approximately 2,400 librarians in 60 public libraries

in the United States. Of the librarians sampled, 92% were women, a figure that was representative of the librarian population throughout the country.

Her results showed that public librarians were submissive in social situations and less likely to show qualities of leadership. Bryan found these librarians to be reasonably well-adjusted; however, they exhibited less self-confidence and greater feelings of inferiority. As a group, the women she tested scored highest in the “librarian” occupational group. They also scored high in the artist, author, and office-worker occupations. Male respondents scored highest on the scale as musicians, writers, public administrators, advertising men, and printers. At the time of the study, the tool Strong used did not have an established occupational norm for male librarians.

In *The Personality of the Librarian*, Robert Douglass⁶ reported the results of studies conducted in 1947 and 1948 using a battery of tests administered to 144 male and 400 female library school students. The trends he identified were similar to those reported by Bryan. As a group, library school students were orderly, conscientious, responsible, conservative and conformist, introspective, aloof and impersonal, and lacking in vigor, ambition and imaginative thinking. They were also found to be weak in self-confidence and leadership qualities.

Douglass did however find a few differences between male and female library school students. Male students were found to have a strong sense of responsibility and strong theoretical interests, while female students were more orderly and self-sufficient, and exhibited stronger social and religious values than their male counterparts. Both groups were more interested in the cultural and aesthetic aspects of life than in science, technology, politics and economics.

In the late 1950s, Perry Morrison⁷ tested over 700 academic librarians, including administrators, middle managers and non-supervising librarians. Although each group showed high intelligence, they also displayed a lack of supervisory qualities and the desire to supervise. Overall, Morrison found a weakness leadership and decision-making skills, although he found that female librarians in the lower supervisory ranks scored much higher in these areas than their male colleagues. Bryan had spoken of the frustration of female librarians who held middle administrative positions without any real chance for advancement into the realm of top leadership which was populated by a disproportionate number of men. Writing in 1950, she noted that librarianship had formerly been a profession where women were welcomed and could rise to the top.

In the 1960s, personality studies came into vogue, and studies of librarians started to produce more detailed personality and interest profiles. Studies by

Baillie⁸ and Rainwater⁹ confirmed the findings of Bryan and Douglass. McMahon¹⁰ tested a small sample of professional librarians in Tasmanian libraries. She found that male librarians were sociable, sensitive, prone to worry, insecure, and somewhat over-controlled. Female librarians in the study were found to be sensitive, idealistic, socially and withdrawn, with feelings of inadequacy. The results for both male and female librarians found that they placed a strong emphasis on aesthetic values with a low emphasis on economic values.

A larger study consisting of 648 Canadian library school graduates was conducted between 1960 and 1967 by Laurent-Germain Denis¹¹. Denis found male academic librarians to be self-sufficient, orderly, achievement-oriented, respectful of authority, conservative, conformist, kind, unselfish, and sympathetic, although oddly enough, they were not prone to helping people. Female academic librarians tended to be independent and highly achievement-oriented.

In 1967, David Campbell¹² tested 410 female librarians, drawn from "Who's Who in Library Science", and discovered that his subjects scored their highest interests in writing, public speaking, music, and law/politics, with the lowest falling in sports and medical services. These results, as well as the results of a 1965 study by Earl Nolting¹³, supported the vocational interests discovered by Strong, i.e.—Writing and music were consistently ranked high, but other interests varied.

This idea was further supported by a 1969 study by Goodwin¹⁴. After comparing library school students with other graduate students at the University of British Columbia, Goodwin concluded that the library school students formed a distinctive personality group. Using the Sixteen Personality Factor Questionnaire, she determined that the personality profile of library students included: reserved, intelligent, easily upset, sober, shy, suspicious, apprehensive, anxious, self-sufficient, tense and conservative. This study also showed the emergence of new characteristics: expedient, rule-evading, undisciplined, careless of protocol, socially precise, imaginative, unconventional, careful, and proper.

Studies of the 1960s and early 1970s, along with those conducted by Clayton and Magrill, showed little overall change in the personality or interest profile of librarians: results of personality studies continued to reflect the image of "Marian the Librarian," even during the freer and more turbulent society of the Sixties and early Seventies. The beginning of a shift toward non-conforming, imaginative librarians, however, was also evident.

Beginning with Strong's earliest studies and continuing through studies conducted in 1990, the

general pattern of the librarian's personality type appears to shift. The pattern that emerges in the 1990s is of an updated female "Marian" who has been, since the 1940s, consistently intelligent, introverted, self-sufficient and interested in a life of the mind and in the arts. At the same time, studies in recent years show more interest by librarians in social services and people-oriented work than in the past. These changes also show librarians to be expedient, rule-evading nonconformists.

Of great significance for the profession, the pattern of librarians' personality characteristics and interests also includes imagination, decisiveness, self-respect, and leadership qualities in sharp contrast to those found in the early studies. These qualities point out the increasing appearance of female "Marian", rather than male "Marion," in administrative and supervisory positions. While the general profile for librarians describes an individual who is reluctant to face change, taking comfort in solutions of the past, there are signs also of librarians who can characteristically apply innovation and creativity to the use of information technologies.

In her work *Stereotype and Status*, Pauline Wilson pointed out that librarians have been struggling against this image since the early part of the 20th century. Article titles such as "Are We Librarians Genteel?" (1937), "Can't Librarians be Human Beings" (1945) and "Librarians Do Have Dates!" (1947) peppered the early days of the professional literature and reveal an early backlash against the spinster stereotype.

In 2000 Stacie Marinelli and Tim Baker, two library students at the University of Maryland, created a web page that looked at the image of librarians in the profession. Their research found that while many people like librarians and have a fairly realistic image of what a librarian does, many of the negative stereotypes still linger. "Indeed, there are people within and outside the profession who believe that negative images have affected the professional status and self-image of librarians. Where these stereotypes come from, how they affect library professionals, and whether our new role as "information specialists" relying on computer technology will change how we're regarded will be explored here."¹⁵

One of the most recent salvos in the battle for the image of the librarians is the "Library Action Figure". Reactions to the figure have been mixed, but at least some saw the humor in it. Lewiston, Idaho librarian Heather Stout is quoted as saying "I thought [the action figure] was a riot, myself. It'll bring a chuckle to many librarians who know it's a play on an old stereotype...and I hope that other people will see that it's the librarian of the past."¹⁶

In 1997, an informal survey asked members of the Kentucky Library Association about their personal lifestyle in an attempt to define typical librarians. The respondents of the survey were 93% female, with men appearing primarily in academic and special libraries. 91% were 36 years of age or older. Over two-thirds of the respondents were married, with 11% divorced and 3% widowed. Approximately one third of the respondents described themselves as teetotaler, while the remaining two-thirds admitted to having less than one drink per week. Nearly half described themselves as political moderates and 22% classed themselves as liberals.

The survey asked if the librarians thought we worried about our professional image too much. 34% said yes, while a resounding 84% answered no. Finally, the survey asked, "Overall, do you enjoy being a librarian?" 94% said yes.

What makes up a real librarian? "E. J. Carnell describes the basic requirements as "a lively interest in people, in ideas, and in the exciting, changing world about us, and, second, an intellectual belief in the printed word as a tool of modern man," adding that "People who have not this line of approach to librarianship should go away and type letters for the Town Clerk or learn to be tram conductors or university lecturers or anything else they like so long as they remove themselves from the library profession."

He goes on to say that "all substantial achievement in librarianship has been due to the presence of a strong individual. . . Personality for this purpose implies powers of mind, clarity of thought, physical strength and the ability to follow through policies founded on correct analysis of situations."

Who are the real librarians? Look in the mirror and check all around you. We are everyone.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Wiegand, Wayne A. *Irrepressible Reformer*. ALA, Chicago, 1996. p.207-8

² Wiegand, Wayne A. *Irrepressible Reformer*. ALA, Chicago, 1996. p.207

³ Ibid.

⁴ Strong, Edward K. *Vocational Interests of Men and Women*. Stanford, CA., Stanford University Press, 1943.

⁵ Bryan, Alice I., & Boring, E. G. (1946). Women in American psychology: Factors affecting their professional careers. *American Psychologist*, 2, 3-20.

⁶ P. R. Douglass, "The Personality of the Librarian," Ph.D. dissertation (University of Chicago, Graduate Library School, 1957)

⁷ Morrison, Perry. *The career of the academic*

librarian; a study of the social origins, educational attainments, vocational experience, and personality characteristics of a group of American academic librarians. Chicago, American Library Association, 1969.

⁸ Baillie, G. Stuart. **An investigation of objective admission variables as they relate to academic and job success in one graduate library education program**. MLS Thesis. St. Louis, MO., Washington University, 1961.

⁹ Rainwater, Nancy J. **A study of personality traits of ninety-four library school students as shown by the Edwards Personal Preference Schedule**. Ph.D. Dissertation: Austin, TX, University of Texas, 1962.

¹⁰ McMahon, Anne. *The personality of the librarian; prevalent social values and attitudes towards the profession*. Adelaide, Libraries Board of South Australia, 1967.

¹¹ Denis, Laurent-Germain. "Academic and Public Librarians in Canada: A Study of the Factors Which Influence Graduates of Canadian Library Schools in Making Their Career Decision in Favor of Academic or Public Libraries. Ph.D. Dissertation. Rutgers University, 1970.

¹² Campbell, David P. *Handbook for the Strong Vocational Interest Blank*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1971.

¹³ Nolting, Earl, Jr. *A Study of female vocational interests: pre-college to post-graduation*. Ph.D. Dissertation: University of Minnesota, 1967.

¹⁴ Goodwin, Marjorie. "Correlates of career choice: A comparative Study of Recruits to Health Professions and Other Professional Fields." (Vancouver, BC., as cited in Samuel Rothstein, "Why people really hate library schools: the 97-year-old mystery solved at last." *Library Journal*; 110 (1 Apr 1985), 41-48.

¹⁵ Marinelli, Stacie and Tim Baker. Image and the librarian: an exploration of a changing profession. Hp. 2000. Online. Stacie Marinelli and Tim Baker. Available: <http://home.earthlink.net/~cyberresearcher/ImageHomepage.htm>. 18 Oct. 2004.

¹⁶ Broom, J. (2003). Not all see librarian's finger to lips as tongue-in-cheek. The Seattle Times, July 17, 2003, p. D1. http://web.lexis-nexis.com/universe/document?m=5f2c64a99a976982ae1022315ea5ed4d&_docnum=1&wchp=dGLbVtb-zSkVb&_md=2e879368e918f423512c64ea8c8bd0a7.