
When and Why Is a Pioneer: History and Heritage in Library and Information Science

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All the past we leave behind,
We debouch upon a newer mightier world, varied world,
Fresh and strong the world we seize, world of labor and the march,
Pioneers! O Pioneers!

—Walt Whitman

THE IMPORTANCE OF HISTORY

Underlying this collection of papers is a belief in the value of history in helping us to achieve a reasonably full understanding of current trends of development in what we might call society's "knowledge apparatus" and in the institutional arrangements to which libraries and information services are central. Such a historically based understanding presents a richer, more considered context for planning for the future than would otherwise be possible. I am intrigued by the paradox that history is only in part about the past. History provides us with a way to think about the present and the future. Because we can never know it directly, it is actually constituted and reconstituted by what we bring to it from our ever-changing presents. It offers the opportunity to question both simplistic descriptions and quick and easy explanations of what seems to be happening, what seems to be the case in the present. It also offers the opportunity from the ever-changing perspective of the present to go back to reassess what seems to have happened, what seems to have been the case in the past and how it has influenced the present. It is this dialectical process that keeps history as a discipline always unfinished and alive.

The idea that we learn from the past seems to me powerful in its implications, but it is not easy to grasp how we learn or what is actually learned. I suspect that what is most important in what we learn from the past is not

really direct and instrumental, though we often seem to think it is. The old saying that those who do not understand the past are destined to repeat it seems to me essentially a rhetorical ploy designed to support a desired course of action in the present. Nothing is ever the same, not even from one minute to the next let alone across extended periods of time or from place to place. One cannot simply apply history in a given situation, though every situation has a historical context that can illuminate the situation. And yet, there *are* continuities, parallelisms, similarities—one moment is indeed much like the next until time gradually exaggerates the differences or something striking happens to create a change in the course of events.

Thus, I see “history” as problematic conceptually—the past is slippery and exists only in viewpoint-dependent recreations. It is problematic analytically—what uses can we reasonably make of historically based argument? Because of the difficulties history presents, it is easy to dismiss it as arcane or irrelevant in the face of the pressing exigencies of the current moment, especially in relation to a group of modern library and information science–based occupations reconstituting themselves around cutting-edge technology.

But we are nothing without a past. Personal, social, and institutional identities are inevitably created in important ways by experience through time, that is, historically. Not only how we think but what we think and when we are able to think it depend to some degree on historical circumstance. Each time we seek from historians an account of something important to us as a group—a profession, the lay public, a cadre of scholars—the past changes because of what the group as consumers of history, and historians as its producers, bring to it and seek from it. What is brought to it are different frames of references and knowledge of the current status of the cumulating record of earlier historical studies. These help determine what will be recognized now as important both as historical evidence and as explanation. What is sought from the past are different kinds of understanding that may involve possible and desired explanations, sometimes justification for a particular state of affairs, sometimes reassurance—or perhaps the opposite, confirmation of our fears and trepidation—about the direction of events. But most generally what is sought may be described as a rather amorphous awareness of having attained a special insight into the phenomena, the events, the personalities under historical investigation.

In bringing these observations to library and information science (LIS), one may argue that LIS as a field and the interrelated communities of practice that it entails are in the midst of major transformations under the impact of new technologies. These technologies and the social, economic, and political circumstances of their development and use seem to be leading to a restructuring of society’s “knowledge apparatus” and the libraries and information services of various kinds that have been and will continue to be an important part of this apparatus. LIS institutions are a fundamental

component of the infrastructure by means of which societies manage access to public information through time. They store, retrieve, and provide information in anticipation of use. Their commitment to time is essential, definitional, and helps to establish their particular role in relation to other components of society's information infrastructure.

It seems particularly important in a period of great sociotechnical change to try to understand the background of LIS as a field of research and development and the professional practices and organizational structures it incorporates. How can we best reassess its roots and the ideas and ideologies (the belief structures) that have shaped the systems and organizational arrangements within which work in LIS is currently being carried out? How can we relate these developments to the demographic, economic, technical, social, and other changes that provide the context for LIS and within which it is ultimately constituted? In the light of new developments in LIS, what aspects of its past are now being thrown into relief, becoming newly visible and relevant to us in the present in ways that might not have been apparent at an earlier period? What can we think about now that did not seem possible in the past? How can we now think about the present and plan for the future in the light of our understanding of historical developments and circumstances?

HERITAGE: WHO IS A PIONEER?

One way of trying to find answers to such questions is to identify those who have been in some way important in the development of the field either in terms of their research and theoretical writings or in terms of institutional developments of various kinds for which they were primarily responsible. Their distinction as pioneers may be attributed to them by their contemporaries and confirmed by subsequent historical analysis, or their distinction may be discovered or recognized later. It is important, however, to understand that the determination of who is a pioneer and why is always changing.

At one level of analysis we might say that pioneers are those who happen to have been present at a particular time and left traces of their presence behind. They are those from whom, in a complex, potentially anonymous process of transmission, we inherit documents, ideas, complex problems, and technology—the four aspects of heritage relevant to LIS according to Buckland (2004, p.171) . The pioneers in Whitman's great poem, "Pioneers! O Pioneers!" were at one level the anonymous multitudes who were pushing westward and settling the frontiers of the United States at the time he was writing—"tan-faced children" with pistols and axes, the Colorado men, and "the central races" from Nebraska, Arkansas, and Missouri. But at another more symbolic level the pioneers represented for Whitman the restless energy and progress of a youthful nation assuming leadership from a moribund Europe:

have the elder races halted?
 Do they droop and end their lesson, wearied over there beyond the seas?
 We take up the task eternal, and the burden and the lesson
 O Pioneer! O Pioneers!

The task of the pioneers is to shoulder the burden of sacrifice that their work exacts and prepare the way for the future—"the followers there in embryo wait behind." What is inherited from them is a fully opened nation and the new exemplary way of life it epitomizes.

The parallel to these pioneers today would be all of those who, anonymous but committed to the impending transformations, labor to harness the new technology, create new systems, and offer new services; they are hard at work transforming the organizational contexts within which the technology, systems, and services are incorporated. At each stage of development in LIS, as in any other area of human endeavor, can be found these faceless, dedicated laborers who create, transmit, and constantly add to our heritage of documents, ideas, complex problems, and technology, to echo Buckland again. Symbolically, these are the Colorado men and women who are preparing the way for the new knowledge apparatus of the future, however we describe what this apparatus comprises and seems to be becoming. They are the individuals who provide us with our heritage, and we celebrate them as forbears. Without them, libraries, librarianship, and what we call information science—all that is now entailed in the field of study, instruction, and professional practice that we rubricate LIS—would not have existed at all or in the form that we understand them to have assumed today.

WHY AND WHEN IS A PIONEER

But while such a view may lead to celebration and the breathless apostrophizing of which Whitman is a master, the attempt to understand this heritage—to create plausible evidence-based narratives about people, actions, and events in the past and to situate them in the contexts that such narratives must construct to give the people, actions, and events meaning—is to engage in historical analysis. Once we begin to examine historically particular aspects of the heritage of LIS, faces begin to emerge of those who were influential in its development, who actually produced particular ideas and documents, articulated new ideological reformulations to undergird professional practices, designed actual systems, found new uses for emerging technology, and created and led the organizations that are of current interest. They become individuals who have taken on identity in terms of time and place and are set apart from the mass because of some special distinction. They are pioneers not in the sense of simply being there or being first but because they can be shown to have had a palpable influence on developments that are important from the point of view of those who write about them in the present. But it is also important to recognize that

whoever is a pioneer of this kind is not necessarily known as such during their lifetime or even now. We create such pioneers from our own perspective when we attempt to assess the nature and extent of their achievements, often comparatively by reference to the achievements of others. To decide when and why a pioneer becomes a pioneer is essentially an historical task.

In their article in this issue of *Library Trends*, Melanie Kimball, Christine Jenkins, and Betsy Hearne stress the role of Effie Power as representative of an important group of pioneering figures. In their earliest discussions with the editor about their article, Kimball, Jenkins, and Hearne sought to find a way to study Power's work from what we might call the Whitmanesque point of view. They were concerned with her role as one among many in the emergence of an ever-widening network of individuals from whose collaborative work modern approaches to children's literature and library services derive in important ways. For them, the important historical phenomenon seemed to be the network of individuals who were contributing to developments at this time. They were concerned, therefore, that singling out one person risked distorting what was happening, unless the study of this individual was considered a form of synecdoche in standing for the study of the many, perhaps in lieu of a collective biography of some kind. And yet in a curious sense, Power to some degree resisted Kimball, Jenkins, and Hearne's efforts at synecdoche. When they analyzed Power's professional activities and writings, the reception of her work in her own time and its implications in ours, they found that she was in fact distinctive and that her leadership role was widely acknowledged by her contemporaries. It is because of this distinction that her work is available for study and can be used, as Kimball, Jenkins, and Hearne use it, as the basis for an historical argument about the dissemination of ideas and normative practices about library work for children in the early decades of the twentieth century.

But pioneers can also be made or discovered within the residues of the past. They can be rescued as it were from oblivion when the nature of what they did or wrote is perceived to have a new or special significance that it did not have at an earlier time. Why should we be interested in a middle-aged female librarian fired in 1950 from her post in the Bartlesville Public Library for including subversive literature in her collection? Miss Ruth Brown in a sense has been created by Louise Robbins's important book *The Dismissal of Miss Ruth Brown: Civil Rights, Censorship and the American Library* (1996). The quietly principled stand this woman took over the attempts to censor what were called subversive materials leads to Robbins's revelation that there were other more deep-seated and hidden reasons for her dismissal, notably her equally quiet but principled stand on racial integration of the library's services. We now see her as a figure of importance in the process by which public libraries became sites where fundamental social values can be asserted and contested, and as such she contributed to the formation and consolidation of professional values of equally profound importance.

Jonathan Furner's article in this issue seeks to rescue and privilege the work of Margaret Egan, who for many has simply been known as coauthor of several papers by the much better known Jesse Shera. Tarcisio Zandonade examines Shera's ideas about social epistemology and the recognition, if only minimal, that these ideas have recently received in mainstream epistemological studies. But for Furner, Shera owes an important debt to Egan in the development of these ideas, and he attempts to identify why and how this is so using the relatively recent methodology of bibliometrics. The reassessments and the rediscoveries that Robbins's book and Furner's article represent provide examples of some of the ways in which the concept of a "pioneer" is negotiable.

HISTORY, HERITAGE, BIOGRAPHY, AUTOBIOGRAPHY

To study the work of pioneers as they have been defined for this issue of *Library Trends* is to raise questions about the relationship between biography and history and the issues of heritage that stimulate the formal study of those whom we designate pioneers. Good biography is an important form of historical writing, though the biographical impulse can lead to hagiography, which is surely bad history as well as bad biography (see, for example, Dawe, 1932).

There is a pyramid of biographical resources and studies in the field of LIS. At the most basic Whitmanesque level are all those claiming membership in the professional associations, such as the American Library Association, various special library associations, and the American Society for Information Science and Technology, that help give "social" shape to the field of LIS in the United States. Their names and affiliations appear in membership directories issued by the associations. At a slightly higher level in terms of systematically presented biographical detail are contemporary biographical directories or dictionaries. In the United States, *Who's Who in Library Service* was first published in 1933 with subsequent editions at roughly ten yearly intervals (1943, 1955, 1966). In 1970 this became *A Biographical Directory of Librarians in the United States and Canada* (Ash & Uhlendorf, 1970) and in 1982 *Who's Who in Library and Information Services* (Lee, 1982). Such directories aim at comprehensive coverage, and the detail of entries is provided by the subjects. With the passage of time such works become indispensable sources for the historian and biographer. (There are equivalent directories in the United Kingdom [Landau, 1954, 1972].) An important development of these sorts of directories in the digital environment is the Pioneers of Information Science project developed by Bob Williams and maintained on the American Society for Information Science and Technology (ASIST) Web site (American Society for Information Science, 1996). Because of the way in which information science developed historically and has been "institutionalized" in ASIST, many figures important in library development are listed among these pioneers.

The most important “collective” biographical work in the field is *The Dictionary of American Library Biography (DALB)* (Wynar, 1978) and its two substantial supplements (Wiegand, 1990; Davis, 2003). To be included the subjects must be deceased and their contributions judged to have enduring importance. The *DALB* and its supplements are now standard reference works and are models of the particular kind of historical scholarship exemplified in the monumental United Kingdom *Dictionary of National Biography* (a major revision of which is about to be made available electronically as well as in print) and the *Dictionary of American Biography* (now revised as the *American National Biography* and also available in print and online). Similarly authoritative biographical entries are to be found in the several editions of what became the *World Encyclopedia of Library and Information Services* (Wedgeworth, 1980, 1986, 1993). The articles in these works are intended to provide relatively brief, biographically complete, scholarly accounts in a standard format with sources noted. A different, more modest approach to listing past figures judged to be of continuing importance in the British scene is represented by Munford’s small but indispensable handbook, *Who Was Who in British Librarianship, 1899–1985* (1987). On a more occasional basis, *The ALA Yearbook* (1976–83) in the course of its eight-year life published a number of short biographical entries related to current figures of some note who were in the library news. Unlike entries in the *DALB* and the *World Encyclopedia*, however, the entries in *The ALA Yearbook* were not carefully researched historical pieces but rather good journalism that twenty years later represents a biographical resource that should not be overlooked. Several of the papers in this issue of *Library Trends* draw on this range of resources for fundamental biographical detail.

LIS has attracted its share of autobiographies. These are works that assert the importance of their authors by the mere fact of publication and thus stake their claim to be pioneers. The importance of such works grows as time passes and as they can be increasingly regarded as historical documents available for critical scrutiny and uses that may be different from—and even antithetical to—their authors’ intentions. In effect these autobiographies are the idiosyncratically fleshed-out entries their authors provide in the “who’s who” publications mentioned above. One may note by way of example Eshelman’s *No Silence! A Library Life* (1997), Gaver’s *A Braided Cord: Memoirs of a School Librarian* (1988), Metcalf’s two volumes of reminiscences (1980, 1988), and Ellsworth’s curious *Ellsworth on Ellsworth: An Unchronological, Mostly True Account . . .* (1980). There are similar works by English librarians, such as Bengé’s *Confessions of a Lapsed Librarian* (1984).

Such works are by definition not historical or scholarly in the usual sense, and the motivations that produce them are various. They can, however, provide considerable insight into their subjects and the events or personalities that are touched on as the stories they tell unfold. The impor-

tance of an autobiography published thirty-eight years ago at the end of a long and distinguished career as a basis for a complex historical analysis is demonstrated in Mary Niles Maack's article on Suzanne Briet.

This issue of *Library Trends* also contains such an autobiographical piece of the greatest interest by someone who has been a leader in her field for many years. Marcia Bates's reminiscences of her graduate studies at the University of California at Berkeley in the late 1960s—at the time information science was beginning to revolutionize library school curricula—highlights the importance of a period and a subject in need of further investigation. One of the values of her article is its suggestion of avenues by which such a study might be approached. It also brings into sharp relief the changes that have occurred since the struggles of Perry, Daniels, and Gillis to create professional library education in California fifty years earlier, as discussed in Hansen's article.

Over the years there has been a very slight trickle of excellent, carefully researched formal biographies such as, to be highly and idiosyncratically selective, Williamson on Poole (1963), Holley on Evans (1963), Sparks on William Warner Bishop (1993), and more recently Wiegand's magisterial volume on Dewey (1996). Kister on Eric Moon (2002) had the slightest frisson of scandal about it when it came out, and because it deals with a contemporary figure it is not quite in the same category as the work of Wiegand and the others. In the United Kingdom much of "library" biography seems to be associated with W. A. Munford, who was involved in studies of Louis Stanley Jast (Fry and Munford, 1966), James Duff Brown (1968), and Edward Edwards (1963), as well as various biographical compilations, though one should also mention such standard works as Miller's on Panizzi (1988). All of these biographies are full-scale works whose main focus is the lives of their subjects and the narrative task that brings the subjects to life.

Two collective works resemble in part what is attempted in this issue of *Library Trends*. In 1953 Emily Danton edited *Pioneering Leaders in Librarianship* for the American Library Association, which contained seventeen short biographical studies. This volume was the eighth and last of a series of small volumes published by the American Library Association entitled *American Library Pioneers*; the series had begun in 1924 with a study of John Shaw Billings by Harry Lydenberg. The other collective biography similar to this issue of *Library Trends*, of librarians of Congress, initially appeared as a series of articles in the *Library of Congress Quarterly (Librarians of Congress, 1977)*. It is worthy of note that, apart from the recent Dewey biography by Wiegand and the necessarily limited work of the Round Table on Library History, the American Library Association no longer seems to pay attention to the history of the profession it represents or to be interested in those who create that history, unlike the American Society for Information Science and Technology, which has a strong recent record of historical work.

LIBRARY TRENDS: PIONEERS IN LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE

The works mentioned above allow the similarities and differences of this “pioneers” issue of *Library Trends* to be highlighted. The pioneers involved are all important for various reasons as noted below. But the notion of “pioneers” is intended to function as an heuristic for detailed analysis of aspects of the past in the light of present trends of development and vice versa. The articles here have no particular theoretical- or subject-based connection, nor were they prepared according to any particular formula as are entries in biographical dictionaries. The articles were not intended to be primarily biographical in focus, though they necessarily have a strong biographical element. They were also not intended to celebrate our professional heritage and the heroic achievements of those whose work we might now designate as pioneering, though some of the articles inevitably do a little eulogizing in passing. Rather, the articles are intended to offer detailed critical assessments of matters of importance employing methods that were appropriate to what the authors conceived their task to be. Methodologically most of the papers are historical and use the documentary sources indispensable to all good historical work. But oral history is of fundamental importance, for example for La Barre’s article, as is bibliometrics for Furner’s and Dubin’s articles,) and a form of textual analysis for Beghtol’s.

Each contribution to this issue of *Library Trends* studies some aspect of the body of work of an individual who can be argued to have played an important role in the development of LIS. The individuals dealt with in these articles may be considered to be important in part because

- they were influential in their time in establishing a direction of development; or, not quite the same thing, they epitomize something about the status and direction of development in their time;
- although overlooked at the time, their ideas can now be seen as having captured something valuable to the definition or development of the field;
- their ideas are of continuing importance in helping us understand and perhaps shape current developments;
- though some of their ideas may have achieved “iconic” status and are often referred to in passing, they are in need of reevaluation in the light of current trends.

The contributions of pioneers as revealed in the articles in this issue of *Library Trends* can take a variety of forms, such as

- a literature important for theory, practice, and research—for example, the articles by Beghtol on James Duff Brown, Furner and Zandonade on Egan and Shera’s ideas about social epistemology, Kester and Jones on Frances Henne and the evolution of school library standards, Black

on Lionel McColvin's ideas about national planning of library service in the United Kingdom, and La Barre on Richmond's work for classification;

- innovations in information systems and services—such as (at one emerging information science extreme) Dubin on Gerard Salton's vector space model of information retrieval and (at the other library service extreme) Kimball, Jenkins, and Hearne on Effie Power's work for children's library service and literature;
- important institutional developments in the organization and provision of library and information services—such as Gunselman on the work of Marvin and Isom in Oregon, Jumonville on Essae Culver in Louisiana, Hansen on the ultimately competing early attempts at the provision of library education in California, and Cragin on Forster Mohrhardt's work as LIS diplomat;
- a combination of the above—to be especially noted here are Marcia Bates's memoir on early information science education and Mary Niles Maack's article on Briet.

In preparing this issue of *Library Trends*, we looked for studies of pioneering figures from both librarianship and information science. We also hoped to generalize its contents beyond the United States, though in the final analysis we had room for only three articles not dealing with American figures. They are included because of the contrast they provide and the unexpected light they throw on developments in the United States. Beghtol argues for a reexamination of James Duff Brown's classificationist ideas in the context of modern approaches to the organization of knowledge, and her article can be read in conjunction with La Barre's account of Richmond's later ideas about classification. Alistair Black provides a fascinating account of the tension between local provision and national planning of library services in the United Kingdom in his study of Lionel McColvin, which offers a counterpoint to Jumonville's article on the provision of statewide services in Louisiana by Essae Culver, and Gunselman's study of the work of Marvin and Isom in Oregon. Maack's article on Briet introduces a series of contributions in France, which is related conceptually to the work on documentation by Shera, Egan, and others in the United States in the 1950s to which so much of the early history of information science is linked.

Each of the articles that follows incorporates many if not all of the following elements: a brief biographical sketch; an account of the state of affairs both broadly social and more narrowly professional and technical at the time the individuals began to make their contributions; a detailed analytical examination of the work involved; a critical assessment of how the work was received; relevant developments today that suggest a contemporary framework for evaluating the work; and comprehensive references to the relevant literature.

My hope is that these papers will stimulate interest in the historical study of aspects of library and information science by suggesting the necessarily endless range of possibilities for exploration that the field presents to the curious. And so perhaps in the final analysis, my hope is that this issue of *Library Trends* ultimately contests the claims that Whitman asserted for his pioneers in the epigraph that began this paper. Perhaps we do not, can never, and should not attempt to leave the past behind. Perhaps the newer, mightier, more varied world upon which we debouch, for surely it has been such for pioneers of all times, is so only because of our search for understanding in and of the past from which the world as we know it emerges. Yet, to be sure, we can claim along with Whitman:

Fresh and strong the world we seize, world of labor and the march,
Pioneers! O Pioneers

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