



English Public Libraries

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THE PUBLIC LIBRARY services of Great Britain differ from those of other countries in that all are provided under one body of library legislation and governed and financed by local authorities. All are managed by library committees appointed by, and responsible to, the elected councils of urban and county areas which are independent of one another and of the central government—the latter having no share in their management or financing—and which are free to determine their own standards, provisions, and activities. This administrative framework was determined by the Public Libraries Act of 1919, which permitted county councils to provide libraries in all districts for which urban (or rural county-district) authorities had not adopted the preceding Libraries Acts.¹ The result is not an administrator's ideal. The nearly six hundred independent authorities serve populations ranging from less than two hundred to over a million. Few county library systems cover the whole of the geographical, much less the administrative, county area; some counties provide for municipalities much larger than others with their own municipal services; there is little coordination of independent towns and the surrounding county districts, and much duplication of provision where county headquarters are situated in towns with their own libraries.

Nevertheless, despite this untidy, unsuitable framework, a great deal has been achieved, and progress continues steadily. Only 42,000 people in Great Britain and Northern Ireland are without any public library. Issues per head of total population have increased from 4.4 in 1935 to 6.77 in the year 1951-52, and expenditure from 1s. 0½d. to 4s. 1½d. Summary statistics showing conditions are published every year in the *Library Association Record*.² The present state of county libraries is described in a conference paper by H. D. Budge.³ The fifth quin-

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quennial *Report on the Municipal Library System of London and the Home Counties, 1944* was issued in 1946.⁴ A detailed account based on the personal investigation of twelve surveyors in 1936 appeared in the Library Association's *Survey of Libraries*,⁵ and the McColvin Report⁶ of 1942 describes the situation as it was at that time. Further, McColvin outlines the position of 1950 in the centenary issue of the *Library Association Record*,⁷ which also includes a brief account of the movement since its beginnings by W. A. Munford,⁸ the author of the most recent history of British public libraries, *Penny Rate*.⁹ For a popular account of public library development and organization the reader may go to *British Libraries*, by McColvin and Revie.¹⁰

As may be expected absolute local autonomy, with neither aid and encouragement nor intervention and policy dictation by central government, has produced a wide variety of provision. Progressive authorities have been able to develop and experiment; apathetic and backward authorities have been permitted to offer grossly inadequate services. The Library Association has continuously striven to spur the latter to achieve at least average standards. Of its many activities to this end mention should be made of a booklet entitled *A Century of Public Library Service*,¹¹ which was sent to all authorities asking them to review their work, and which many followed with excellent results. Much of the same material was used in another booklet¹² designed for general circulation during 1950, in observance of the one-hundredth anniversary of passage of the public libraries act.

Nevertheless, the disadvantages of the present system have been long manifest. The public library service now caters to the needs of all sections of the community, setting no bounds to the range of materials provided, excepting that on the one hand more and more librarians are paying less heed to popular demands, and that on the other closer cooperation with, and recognition of the existence of, special libraries, limits certain categories of more highly specialized supply. This catholic and all-pervasive book provision demands that readers, whatever their needs, shall have access, directly or indirectly, to an almost unlimited range of materials, mostly far beyond the local resources of the smaller authorities. Moreover, if the public library is to achieve its cultural and educational functions, representative stocks must be on display at all, even the smallest, service points. The former objective may be attained in large measure by cooperation; the latter, and its corollary, the full exploitation of trained staff, de-

mands a measure of drastic reorganization. Much progress has been made in the former, little in the latter direction.

Cooperation has manifested itself in several forms, notably in schemes for the inter-lending of books. The nationwide system of regional bureaus, embracing all public and a great many special nonpublic libraries, with the National Central Library as the coordinating element, was described in Luxmoore Newcombe's *Library Cooperation in the British Isles*.¹³ Briefer but more recent accounts are given in articles by R. J. Bates on the National Central Library,¹⁴ P. H. Sewell¹⁵ and J. G. Scurfield¹⁶ on the regional bureaus, and L. W. Sharp¹⁷ on library cooperation in Scotland. This interlibrary lending system has gone far towards giving truth to the boast that there is available "any book for any man anywhere"; but, like every living aspect of librarianship, it is always subject to the criticism of those who would improve it, and the Executive Committee of the National Central Library and the National Committee on Regional Cooperation recently commissioned R. F. Vollans to prepare a detailed critical report, which has lately appeared.¹⁸

However, since libraries can lend only the books that they possess, attention has been given to securing the maximum coverage within each of the regions. The most important scheme is being developed by the London metropolitan boroughs—a plan which divides between the various boroughs the responsibility for acquiring current publications and for retaining older materials in a joint reserve, a part of the total field of knowledge being allocated to each borough. This and certain allied projects are described in articles by K. G. Hunt,¹⁹⁻²¹ and a similar arrangement in the South Eastern Region is outlined by W. J. Hill.²² The London metropolitan boroughs have also agreed to lend books on one another's borrowers' tickets, thus overcoming the limitations imposed by local government boundaries. Over 86,000 volumes were so lent in 1951. This tendency is spreading throughout the country, though it is still handicapped by the existence of unequal standards in neighboring areas. Nevertheless, the example of one London authority, which will lend on the ticket of any library authority in the world, may well in time be universally followed.

The larger unit of library service could result either from voluntary action or from a reorganization of the areas and powers of local authorities imposed from above. Library authorities have always enjoyed the right to combine, and the non-county boroughs can if they wish

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relinquish their powers so that their libraries become part of the county system. Few have done so. In 1941 the Library Association Council, resolved to be ready with a blueprint for the postwar library service, commissioned L. R. McColvin to make a thorough study and field survey, a task rendered financially possible by the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust. His report⁶ included proposals for creating ninety-three library service units, each uniting town and country and possessing the necessary financial resources to make full stock provision and adequate staffing economically possible; suggested grants from the central government and government inspection; and proposed other reforms. This was the basis for the Library Association Council's proposals²³ which were presented to the first postwar General Meeting in 1946²⁴ and adopted, except for the clauses relating to the size of library areas. R. Irwin's discussion of this matter also is of interest.²⁵ One of the principles then accepted was the desirability of a government grant, but the Association's efforts to secure it were rejected by the local authorities' associations at a time when these were in a mood to resent any further participation of the state in local affairs. Yet, though none of the main objectives of the Report and the Proposals have yet been attained, it would be wrong to think that this brave effort to create a better-based national service has been in vain.

Though it is not possible in a short article to isolate and define as trends the ideals and objectives discussed in the books next to be mentioned, they will show how librarians have been thinking, what they have been seeking to do, and, often, what they have been doing. They are L. S. Jast's *The Library and the Community*,²⁶ E. A. Savage's *A Librarian Looks at Readers*²⁷ and *Special Librarianship in General Libraries and Others Papers*,²⁸ McColvin's *Libraries and the Public*,²⁹ and Leyland's *Wider Public Library*.³⁰

There have not been any fundamental changes in basic techniques, which are described in the sixth edition of James Duff Brown's *Manual of Library Economy*,³¹ Headicar's *Manual of Library Organization*,³² Carnell's *Library Administration*,³³ and such works on special aspects as Collison's *Library Assistance to Readers*.³⁴ County library history and practice are dealt with in Carnell's *County Libraries*³⁵ and Osborne and Sharr's *County Library Practice*.³⁶ There has been, however, constant preoccupation with new methods, services, equipment, and such matters, evidenced by a wide variety of periodical articles which have been summarized since 1928 in the Library Association's *The*

Year's Work in Librarianship.³⁷ It is to be regretted that this publication will cease with the volume for 1949, but papers issued since then are included in *Library Science Abstracts*. A brief account of development, with notes on new buildings and the like, appears each year in the Annual Report of the Council of the Library Association.

Special aspects to which much attention has been given in recent years are library service for hospitals³⁸ and prisons,³⁹ and some libraries are providing service for old people, including personal delivery and staff visits to the bedridden and to the elderly folk living alone. The question of how far the public library should engage in extension work is constantly debated, as is the relationship between the school library and the public library's children's department;⁴⁰ and the views of the Library Association on the latter have been outlined in a memorandum.⁴¹ Though only a few public libraries as yet have collections of microfilms or reading and reproducing apparatus, several are developing good loan collections of gramophone records of music and language study courses;⁴² and more attention has been given to the provision of books in foreign languages.⁴³ Local history collections have long been a feature of most libraries;^{44, 45} and renewed interest in the preservation of local archives has led to the formation of a standing committee of the Library Association to promote work with them, and to insure whenever possible a close association of archival material with local collections of books, prints, and other items. The Library Association has recently established a committee to promote the development of library services in the British colonies.⁴⁶

Librarians have not, alas, been as much concerned with library architecture⁴⁷ as they might had conditions been different. During and since the war few new buildings have been erected. We have had to be content with temporary premises and adaptations, and even these are for the time being under an "economy" ban.

Though the last decades have seen no fundamental change in the general basis of staff recruitment and training,⁴⁸ two important developments must be noted. Before the war there was only one full-time school of librarianship in Great Britain; now there are ten, all the new schools being at technical and commercial colleges, preparing students for the examinations of the Library Association. Second, since the war all local authorities have adopted nationally negotiated scales for salaries, with general, clerical, and professional gradings and

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national conditions of service. These scales will not be fully effective until authorities are obliged to grade, suitably and adequately, all their professional staffs; and so far only one award, fixing the minimum grade for an assistant in charge of a branch or department employing three other assistants, has been secured. It cannot be denied, however, that when this first step is followed by others, the improved status and rewards of library workers will go far to attract better personnel, and to offer remuneration to those already employed which is just and better related to their abilities and responsibilities.

Finally, the Library Association has continued to be a great influence in promoting the development of library services, raising standards, uniting librarians, and establishing fruitful relationships between librarianship and many associated aspects of activity. J. D. Stewart gives a useful summary of its work.⁴⁹

What of future trends? In the opinion of the present writer the outstanding ones are these. First, we are steadily and continuously improving standards of provision, and are thus both increasing the volume of worth-while public service and raising the prestige of public libraries. Consequently, libraries have suffered far less from economic blizzards than once they would; they can look to the future with confidence. Second, more attention is being paid and will be paid to reference and information work; and especially, in the immediate future, to making the public library, in close association with research organizations, a better medium for the wide dissemination of scientific and technical information. Third, because our training facilities are vastly better, because of slow but steady improvement in the status and rewards of librarianship, and because of the incalculable value of the Library Association's system of professional registration, we shall have tomorrow a better equipped body of professional men and women, with a keener appreciation than ever before of the vital importance of their work.

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