



The Librarian

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DURING THE COURSE of the Public Library Inquiry Robert D. Leigh and his associates discovered that there is a strong basic belief among librarians which has inspired and sustained them through the years. Leigh isolated and defined this belief, calling it "the librarian's faith." He defined it as "a belief in the virtue of the printed word, especially of the book, the reading of which is held to be good in itself, or from its reading flows that which is good."¹

Although librarians may never have reduced this belief to a formal statement or thought of it as a faith, it is a principal part of their heritage. The librarian of 1954 wishes to accept this traditional faith of his fathers, but like the modern theologian he is disturbed by gnawing doubts. He has learned just enough from research to want some demonstrable facts to support his faith. Is there virtue in all reading? Is the reading of a light novel of more value than viewing its televised dramatization? Can the individual reader drain a book of its meaning, or must he match his reactions with those of others in a discussion group? What are the actual effects of reading upon the various categories of people?

Though he lacks positive answers to these questions, the librarian still follows in the faith despite his doubts. Today, as in the past, he believes that there is virtue in the printed word—and in its audio-visual counterparts—and he acts upon it. It is still the determining factor in his decisions; it inspires him in his work, bringing to it a strong sense of social significance.

The public librarian has had, however, to revise his belief in the power of the book and the library to attract readers of all kinds. Our grandfathers acted upon the assumption that every literate person is thirsting for knowledge, that the world is waiting for us to bring it a book. Later, our fathers learned that this was not true. Now we in our day must cope not only with the natural human apathy toward

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any type of self-improvement which requires effort, but we face new forms of mass communication which have reduced effort to the minimum.

The so-called revolution in mass communications, affecting the way in which most people spend their hours of leisure, has profoundly changed the world as the librarian must view it. With entertainment and information available in every man's living room by the mere turning of a knob, or at the nearest newsstand at modest cost, there is little incentive for the casual reader to go to a somewhat distant library for a book. The librarian can no longer win success for his library by simply providing a stock of readable books.

Today's librarian is compelled to reappraise his library's objectives, and to select certain ones of them for emphasis. He must fit his library's services into those channels in which the more popular media are inadequate. Instead of the former shot-gun type of service which is aimed generally at the community at large, he must develop specific ones which are focused with pin-point precision at limited groups which need and will respond to special services. All of this demands a much wider knowledge of the ways of the world, a keener insight into the needs and interests of people, and the ways in which they group themselves according to occupational, racial, cultural, and other factors.

Because of his faith in the value of reading, the librarian has never bowed to public apathy. When the book alone failed to attract enough of all kinds of people, he used it as the basis of adult education programs. Since his experience had been with individual readers, his first efforts at adult education were directed at individuals through readers' advisors and reading-with-a-purpose courses. After a time this individual approach lost much of its appeal, and today the librarian is engrossed in a variety of activities with groups.

It must be admitted that much of the librarian's efforts in adult education have been based more upon faith and enthusiasm than upon extensive training or knowledge of the field. He has, however, had a measure of success, and in one form or another adult education programs appear to be a continuing and growing library activity.

So the librarian is becoming an educator. The motivation of adult learners, means of awakening and sustaining interest, methods of building book-centered programs, techniques of leading discussion groups and film forums—these and a hundred other problems are now added to those with which former generations of librarians wrestled.

His entry into educational fields has brought advantages as well as

problems to the librarian. He finds new acquaintances and broadened interests as he sits in adult education councils, Great Books committees, Foreign Policy Association chapters, film selection and all of the other groups which are concerned with informal education for adults. His association with these groups has no doubt resulted in an increased awareness on their part of the library's book and personnel resources, and greater recognition of the librarian as something more than a distributor of books.

During the last two decades the librarian has also had to face many new internal problems. Recordings and films require new policies and techniques for selection, organization, and use. Microphotography is replacing parts of the library's own printed material and demands some technical knowledge. In larger libraries subject divisions have brought many problems in coordination. Public service has been more sharply defined by age groups. There are specialized activities for the preschool toddlers and the teen-agers and Golden Age Clubs for those who are in retirement.

Who is the librarian of 1954? What is his education and training for all of these widened responsibilities?

The newer librarian has had more formal education than his predecessors. As recently as the Public Library Inquiry, completed in 1949, only five out of twenty of the older group of librarians possessed an academic degree, as compared with seventeen out of twenty of the younger ones. Eventually every librarian will have earned a degree since the 1951 standards of the Board of Education for Librarianship of the American Library Association require it for admittance to an accredited library school. Advanced degrees in subject fields are still rare among public librarians, but much less so among those in college and university work where the doctorate in either a subject area or librarianship is becoming a common requirement for the highest posts.

The English major—the applicant who “just loves books”—is still welcomed, though somewhat reluctantly, by the library schools, all of which are alert to the widened demands now made upon the librarian. The schools are recommending a broadly based college course, with some emphasis upon the social sciences for most applicants; majors in the appropriate subject fields for those hoping to become specialists.

The library school student now learns more about the social, educational, and governmental structures in which the library must function; the objectives of librarianship in its various areas; and the methods by which they can be attained or approached. In spite of the newer

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and additional demands made upon the librarian, however, he is still concerned primarily with the selection, organization, and use of books, and service to readers. Basic courses in these fields require much of the student's time, so that he is compelled to face many of his newer responsibilities with insufficient library school guidance.

Many of the schools now include instruction and practice in research methods, and there is already a substantial body of investigations relating to library problems. Surely the librarian of the future will base his decisions more upon objective investigation and fact, less upon rule of thumb, faith, and enthusiasm.

Supplementing the library schools are the many workshops, seminars, and special summer courses which deal with one specific phase of librarianship. It is a significant reflection of the times that Ralph Shaw's seminars on research methods in management have been well attended. Twenty-five years ago they would have been foredoomed to failure.

There are some who think that the librarian has veered too far into the field of management, and shows too few of the bookish traits of his predecessors. These critics appear to relate bookishness only to the polite forms of literature and to the rarities of the book world; expertness in the literature of political science or physics is not an acceptable substitute.

Today's administrator can only answer that the expansion and increased efficiency of his library are directly due to his wider knowledge of management; that greater familiarity with the belles-lettres would not help him cope with the problems of his day. The subject specialist can only reply that he must confine much of his reading to his own area if he is to gain proficiency in it.

The fact is that the librarian, like all other professional workers, is the victim of specialization. The literature of librarianship itself has become so extensive as to require much of the reading time of those who would keep abreast of current thought and development. The large library must have some staff members whose expertness in personnel management, public relations, audio-visual materials and equipment, adult education, and the public school curriculum is far more important than absorption in purely cultural interests. The chief of the smaller library often faces the impossible task of learning all of these specialties himself.

Since World War II the percentage of men in the library schools has been substantially higher than their percentage among practicing librarians. Improved salaries and the widely publicized shortage of

librarians have without doubt played their parts in attracting men, but the library's expanded program, the opportunities for men of varied backgrounds and aptitudes, and the somewhat greater prestige now accorded the librarian are believed to be strong contributing factors. The library schools appear to be getting more young men who decided upon librarianship while still in college, fewer older ones who are turning from other occupations which they found to be unsatisfactory.

More men with creative and administrative ability are needed, but in seeking them we face the real danger of losing those women who are equally gifted. Scores of other occupations are now open to women, and those with the highest potentials are unlikely to choose librarianship if they continue to see most of the more desirable posts go to men. Whatever the need of men may be, we must not discourage the type of woman who should be ready to succeed the Flora Belle Ludingtons, the Amy Winslows, and the hosts of women who are carrying the banner perhaps less conspicuously, but no less ably and devotedly. Governing boards and top administrators can best serve librarianship by making appointments and promotions solely on the basis of fitness for the position.

From some of our older librarians we hear warnings that we are not producing "leaders and statesmen," that the professional giants of a former day are not being replaced. It is true that librarianship once had a few pre-eminent leaders who occupied the national stage with rather little in the way of a supporting cast. In their times, William Warner Bishop came close to being "Mr. University Library," and John Cotton Dana, "Mr. Public Library." The spotlight was focused upon these leaders almost to the exclusion of all others. Certainly it is a sign of growth and progress that the cast of able players has become so large as to preclude individual stardom on such a national scale as these men knew it.

On the local scene, there were many libraries in which a single strong leader kept the control of every detail of operation in his own hands. Mary Frances Isom *was* the Library Association of Portland, Oregon; now three assistant directors supervise various phases of that library's public services. Perhaps to a lesser degree, Adam Strohm dominated the Detroit Public Library; today Ralph Ulveling works with and through a strong team of able associates. This change has brought many more opportunities at or near the top for librarians with creative imagination and administrative skill.

A degree may be merely a symbol, but the master's degree, as now

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given after the basic library school course, has unquestionably added to the librarian's prestige. It has brought the school librarian to parity with teachers who have spent a fifth year for a master's degree. It adds somewhat to the academic respectability of the college and university librarian. It impresses city councilmen when the public librarian seeks a higher salary scale.

The university librarian, particularly, has gained in prestige through advanced education. In the not distant past, many of the more prominent university and college libraries were administered by men who had been brought in from the teaching or other fields. It is known that some such appointments were made after the university president had canvassed available library personnel and found it lacking in the scholarly attainments which he required. Today practically all major university and college libraries are in charge of professionally educated librarians.

The librarian of 1954 enjoys a better salary than his predecessors, thanks largely to the inflationary influences of the postwar period and to the demand for more and more librarians. Beginning salaries have, in general, risen beyond the cost-of-living index, indicating that the young librarian is better off than ever before. In far too many cases, however, the salaries of experienced librarians have not risen proportionately. There is often too small a gap between the beginner and the librarian who began a dozen years ago at \$1,800. Low salaries are still the principal cause of dissatisfaction.

In spite of low salaries, extreme devotion to his own library and to the advance of library service in general has always been a primary characteristic of the librarian. Librarianship has been a cause to be served with the zeal of the missionary. Hours, effort, and personal sacrifice have meant little to the majority of librarians as long as they were serving the public at home or carrying the gospel into the hinterlands.

Sometimes one wonders what has become of this devotion when the current graduate inquires in far greater detail about salary, vacations, sick leave, the five-day week, evening assignments, and working conditions than about the opportunities for professional growth and service. We can hope that it is a sign of the times, and that these young people are merely taking their cue from the columns of the library press in which libraries, desperate for help, emphasize all of these material advantages and even boast of climate and opportunities for week-end travel. We also know that when these young people come to grips with the job, most of them settle down like old-timers.

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It may also be true that selfless devotion has been carried too far. The typical small library—and too many larger ones—is outgrown and outmoded, devoid of comfort, and lacking in the ordinary mechanical aids which every industrial worker demands as a right. It is understaffed and the staff is underpaid. Perhaps too much self-sacrifice, too great a devotion to service at whatever personal cost, is one root of the trouble. The librarian has been too modest, too willing to accept and actually be thankful for little. A more aggressive attitude, a readiness to fight for more liberal support for his library and for himself are traits with which the librarian may well balance his devotion. This younger generation may show us the way.

Reference

1. Leigh, R. D.: *The Public Library in the United States*. New York, Columbia University Press, 1950, p. [12]