



Research in Backgrounds in Librarianship

HAYNES McMULLEN

THE WORD "BACKGROUNDS" is vague enough to cover almost anything. Perhaps the backgrounds of librarianship include social history, intellectual history, and the history of mass media of communication. However, in this issue of *Library Trends* the word "backgrounds" is used to cover writing which is about libraries and which either shows their relationship to other aspects of life or deals with general characteristics of groups of libraries.

This article will first review recent writing about what is perhaps the most general of all library topics, the philosophy of librarianship. Then it will move to a small group of studies about the relationships of libraries to society. It will then mention a few more studies which describe the functions of differing types of libraries. Finally, it will review some of the many publications in the most popular "background" field, library history and biography. In each instance suggestions for future study will be mentioned.

Some librarians believe that there can be no such thing as a general philosophy of librarianship, and other librarians believe that it exists but that it is not a form of research. So some sort of definition or defense is needed if philosophy has a right to a place along with other forms of serious writing about librarianship.

Some librarians who argue against the existence of a general philosophy of librarianship say that every library exists to serve certain particular needs of particular groups of human beings and that, therefore, the philosophy of each individual library is not really a library philosophy but is a reflection of the philosophy of the group which it serves. Others feel that if librarianship as a whole is to have a philosophy it must be related to some general philosophy of life which is accepted by large numbers of people and that, even if we limit ourselves to non-communist countries, we can find no such generally accepted philosophy.

The librarians who have been writing in the last few years about the philosophy of librarianship are inclined to recognize these two

The author is Associate Professor, Division of Library Science, Indiana University.

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major difficulties, agreeing that specialized libraries such as college libraries, those serving religious groups, or those serving populations in totalitarian countries will necessarily adopt the philosophy of the parent body but that public libraries in the free world can and should exercise their freedom by developing a general philosophy of librarianship. These librarians concede that it is perhaps impossible to find a universally accepted philosophical system which can be applied to librarianship, but they feel that a set of principles can be developed from a few basic ideas which enlightened librarians accept.

We must admit that philosophy cannot be considered as research if we define research as an inductive process based on experimentation, counting, or measuring. But philosophy may be included if we expand our definition of research to include all serious study which carefully considers the validity of data and reaches conclusions through the application of reason.

The few librarians who write on the philosophy of librarianship agree with each other as to the need for an organized philosophy, but they tend to disagree as to what it should be. This is to be expected because a person would have no reason to write a theoretical work if he were in agreement with the views expressed in the works of others. The fact that the body of literature on library philosophy is small may therefore indicate a state of agreement among librarians, but its smallness is probably also due to a disinclination on the part of librarians to think in general terms about the work in which they are engaged.

It is very difficult to review philosophical work briefly without being unfair to it. For a reviewer to state a philosopher's general conclusions without listing the steps by which he has reached them is almost as unfair as to divulge the name of the culprit in the review of a detective novel. All of the books and articles to be discussed in the next few paragraphs deserve careful reading.

Of the small group of librarians who attempt to write about the philosophy of librarianship, one of the most prolific and persuasive is S. R. Ranganathan, of India. His "five laws of library science," promulgated almost thirty years ago, are still being used by him and his followers as guides in the conduct of library affairs. They sound simple: (1) books are for use, (2) every reader his book, (3) every book its reader, (4) save the time of the reader, and (5) a library is a growing organism. However, the humanitarian theory of library service based on them is complex enough to deserve the name of a philosophy and should be of interest to western librarians.¹⁻⁴

Two books by British librarians, A. Broadfield's *A Philosophy of*

*Librarianship*⁵ and Raymond Irwin's *Librarianship; Essays on Applied Bibliography*,⁶ were published by the same publisher in the same year. Broadfield admits in his preface that in the field of library philosophy, "objectivity is difficult and certainty impossible" but goes on to present a carefully reasoned plea for the library as an agency which is centrally concerned with the preservation of the individual's right to freedom in the choice of reading material. The key to Irwin's book is in its sub-title. He sees librarianship as essentially a process in which bibliographical techniques and bibliographical knowledge are applied, so he sees little value in statistical research or the study of library administration.

An American librarian who, like Irwin, has been concerned about the bibliographical aspect of librarianship is the late Pierce Butler.⁷⁻⁹ He was primarily concerned with the role of the library as one of the agencies for the preservation of scholarship, which he defined as the system of ideas used by a culture to implement its traditional pattern of conduct, in other words, the intellectual content of a culture. Butler explored the relationship of libraries, scholarship, and civilization in considerable detail.

No American librarian has come forward to present a reasoned and extensive development of the theory widely held in the United States that the library should actively serve the ends of the democratic society. Perhaps a defense of this faith should be the subject matter of the next book to be published on the philosophy of librarianship.

This discussion of writings on library philosophy can be closed on a harmonious note because P. J. Madden, in a series of articles in the *Irish Library Bulletin*, has attempted to reconcile the social views held by many American librarians with the concern expressed by other librarians for the preservation of individualism.¹⁰⁻¹³ Madden believes that the explanation of the true function of the library is to be found in human nature which contains tendencies towards both social action and the preservation of the independence of the individual.

The study of the relationship of libraries to society and to government seems to be no more popular than the study of theoretical aspects of librarianship and is much less popular than the study of processes which take place within libraries. Perhaps librarians are not inclined to study matters over which they have little or no control. Or perhaps, because they are people who have been drawn to a profession involving small-unit operations (individual books for individual patrons), librarians do not find large-unit thinking a congenial occupation.

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However, there have been one or two recent studies which have described and commented on the external relationship of libraries. If the Public Library Inquiry is recent enough to be considered current research, then the Garceau report, *The Public Library in the Political Process* should be mentioned first.¹⁴ The author (a non-librarian, by the way) investigates the relationship of American public libraries to the local governmental units within which they operate and gives librarians some unpleasant but much needed facts about the present situation and how it can be improved.

The relationship of public libraries to American state library agencies is described in detail in the U.S. Office of Education publication, *The State and Publicly Supported Libraries; Structure and Control at the State Level*.¹⁵ It not only gives information about individual states but also presents concise summaries which describe the main types of state agencies.

Moving from research which describes the external relationships of libraries to research which describes and generalizes about a particular type of library in all of its relationships, we should begin with the most ambitious recent work of this type, L. R. McColvin's *The Chance to Read; Public Libraries in the World Today*.¹⁶ McColvin describes the condition of public libraries in many countries, and draws conclusions about the reasons for differences in adequacy of service. He writes lucidly about conditions and argues convincingly about problems and solutions.

Two other recent books each discuss many aspects of a particular type of library. The second edition of L. R. Wilson and M. F. Tauber's *The University Library* includes a large amount of recent material describing, generalizing and commenting about the function and operation of American academic libraries.¹⁷ W. R. Roalfe's *Libraries of the Legal Profession* does a similar type of job for a very special kind of special library.¹⁸ His book is based on questionnaire returns and interviews; but in addition to describing American law libraries as he has found them, he also tells what he thinks they should be.

Turning from research about libraries of the present day to research about library history and the biography of librarians, we come to the most popular field. There are many reasons for this popularity, but it is possible that two of the most compelling are the unquestioned respectability of history as a form of research and the relative manageability of the data. One or two European librarians who frown on other types of research about libraries are happy to write library

history, and the beginner's errors in handling facts are not likely to be discovered if he builds his story on source material that is unfamiliar to his critics.

The amount of historical writing has not only been large in comparison with that of some other forms of library research but has also been increasing in amount lately, if the number of books, articles, and theses written about libraries and librarians of the United States is representative of the field as a whole. During the last ten years, between seven hundred and eight hundred pieces of research about United States library history and biography have been published or have been made available in some other way. *Library Literature*, the most helpful tool for the location of this material, lists about four hundred and fifty items issued during these ten years. *Writings on American History* is second in usefulness to *Library Literature*; but it lists publications for only four of the last ten years, 1948 through 1951. For those years there is some duplication between the two sources; but it is possible to calculate that if and when *Writings on American History* volumes are issued for the year 1947 and for 1952 through 1956, this bibliography will contain about three hundred items not included in *Library Literature*. The two sources together will include almost all of the literature on American library history which has been issued recently. Their lists of research published before about 1949 are noticeably shorter than are the lists of more recent material.

In discussing some recent examples of writing about library history and biography, it will probably be most useful to divide the subject matter geographically, taking up separately the writings about each country. If we start with general works, and take the largest of the general works first, then we should start with *Geschichte der Bibliotheken*, the third volume in the revised and enlarged edition of Milkau's *Handbuch der Bibliothekswissenschaft*.¹⁹ This monumental history of libraries is appearing in fascicles, seventeen of them so far, containing to date more than sixteen hundred large pages. In this revised edition, the history of the libraries in most of Europe has been brought close to the present date and the history of libraries in the United States is appearing now. Only a small amount of material remains to be issued. The revision of the sections in the new edition has been made in some instances by the person who wrote the original section and in others by a new author. The different sections vary somewhat in treatment, but the work as a whole will undoubtedly become the standard history of libraries.

Another general history, also a revision, but much shorter, is Vors-

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tius' *Grundzüge der Bibliotheksgeschichte*, a fifth edition of which appeared in 1954.²⁰ In this latest edition the text has been changed in many places, but revision is most evident in the chapters about recent events.

A series of studies by Irwin in the *Library Association Record* has some international aspects, although the emphasis has been on the history of British libraries.²¹ Eleven articles have appeared since February, 1954. These studies are gracefully written, thoroughly documented, and exhibit a satisfying awareness of the social and cultural forces that have been so important in library history.

Before leaving the field of general library history, one other monograph which is extremely general should be noted. H. J. de Vleeschauwer's "Encyclopaedia of Library History" which appeared in *Moussion*, is not an encyclopedia in the usual sense of the word but is, in effect, an interpretation of the history of libraries which lists few dates, persons, and places but contains many thought-provoking observations about libraries and their cultural surroundings.²²

The habit of setting a library down solidly in its cultural surroundings has not been generally followed by writers of books published during the 1950's about American libraries. The way was nobly led by three fine histories published in the 1940's: Gwladys Spencer's *The Chicago Public Library; Origins and Backgrounds*,²³ Sidney Ditzion's *Arsenals of a Democratic Culture*,²⁴ and J. H. Shera's *Foundations of the Public Library*.²⁵ Few writers have followed their lead yet here is an area where much could be done.

Several recent books about American libraries have been written with urbanity and have exhibited an excellent choice of fact and incident but have been little concerned with the relationships of such fields as education, architecture, or industrial development with library affairs. W. M. Whitehill, in the Preface to his lively history of the Boston Public Library, nods in the direction of general studies by Shera and others and promises that his book will be "purely an institutional history," a promise which he keeps.²⁶

Another recent history of an American library that is skillfully written is Harry Clemons' *The University of Virginia Library, 1825-1950*.²⁷ Clemons seldom tells us whether events in his library were typical of those in other southern university libraries or whether his university library led or followed the others.

Perhaps we should not expect from the writers about individual libraries that their works exhibit a recognition of all the social forces which may or may not have eddied around their institutions. In the

case of Marion King's loving memoir of the New York Society Library, *Books and People*, we are likely to forget all about the forces because the people are so fascinating.²⁸

Two books which are not about individual libraries but which cover relatively small areas in the field of American library history are J. A. Borome's *Charles Coffin Jewett*²⁹ and G. B. Utley's *The Librarians' Conference of 1853*.³⁰ In both of these books, the authors have made librarians of a hundred years ago come to life. Much of this liveliness can be attributed to the authors' skill in describing the environment in which their men lived and thought and operated their libraries.

Although it is easy to forgive the historian of a particular library for ignoring external matters, we have a right to expect a person who writes on larger subjects to look more closely for causes and effects. C. S. Thompson's *Evolution of the American Public Library, 1653-1876* tells us something about the social and intellectual backgrounds of libraries but we may wish he had spent less time on the history of a few important libraries and had instead taken us a little farther into the complex relationships of social libraries, lyceums, and public education.³¹ Furthermore, he skips all too lightly over the years between 1853, when the first librarians' conference was held, and 1876, the magical year of the second conference. Something of the same thing has happened in K. J. Brough's *Scholar's Workshop*, a history based on printed materials about four American university libraries.³² It contains much useful information, but he could have told us more about the causes behind the events in his story if he had used archival material and had put more emphasis on the roles of educational theories and practices in the molding of American university libraries.

A recent study in which the author has ranged farther to find influences and to gather data is the A.C.R.L. Monograph, *The Development of Reference Services through Academic Traditions, Public Library Practice, and Special Librarianship*, by Samuel Rothstein.³³ Its author has brought together a large amount of elusive material and has presented it in a well organized pattern.

All of the books mentioned above have contributed significantly to our knowledge about American libraries, as have other books, monographs, and articles which cannot be included in a review of this length. It is worth noting that many of them, of which the Rothstein, Spencer, Ditzion, Shera, and Brough studies, are good examples, are Ph.D. dissertations. But we still need other large synthesizing studies about almost all periods of history and on many types of libraries. We particularly need studies on these subjects: (1) public and social li-

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baries outside of New England and the Middle Atlantic states, (2) college libraries since the Revolution, (3) studies of special libraries such as law libraries and historical libraries which have existed in considerable numbers for over a hundred years, (4) studies of some periods of particularly luxuriant library growth such as the 1850's and the 1890's, and (5) almost anything about the complex events of the twentieth century.

If we compare recent writing about British libraries with recent writing about American libraries, we will find no startling differences. Perhaps, on the average, the British would receive a higher score on the matter of felicity of style; and, in the main, they have confined their attention more strictly to the last one hundred years. However, these differences may not be significant enough to deserve to be called trends.

Two books, taken together, give a clear account of the British public library movement since 1850. W. A. Munford's *Penny Rate; Aspects of British Public Library History, 1850-1950*³⁴ is the more obviously general in coverage; but Grace Carlton's *Spade-Work; the Story of Thomas Greenwood*³⁵ contains much information about several workers in the library vineyard even though it is mainly about Greenwood's work as a lay propagandist.

A significant contribution to the history of British university libraries is Sir Edmund Craster's *History of the Bodleian Library, 1845-1945*.³⁶ The author brings the librarians to life and even manages to put some life into his accounts about important accessions. However, he seldom goes outside of Oxford's walls and seldom lets us know whether the events within the Bodleian had any connection with the curriculum or the scholarly work of the University.

Of the recent histories which have dealt with librarianship in countries outside of Great Britain and the United States, there is one which is likely to be of particular interest, E. A. Parsons' *The Alexandrian Library, Glory of the Hellenic World*.³⁷ This is a large book about a large library, but the story is necessarily built on a small body of direct evidence. The author presents his evidence, discusses its limitations, and reviews it in the light of his broad knowledge of classical times before he draws his conclusions.

As we look back over the research which has been published in recent years about the "backgrounds" of librarianship, it would seem that the most successful work has recognized the importance of the background—social, cultural, or other—as well as the importance of the library itself. In looking forward, we can hope that writers in the

future will agree that these two elements should be shown as parts of the same picture. In the areas of library philosophy and the relation of libraries to government and society, research work has barely begun. In the area of library history much more work has been done, but a tremendous amount remains for scholars of the future.

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