



Historical Research and Library Science

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EVERYBODY WHO HAS HAD a few years of high school education has had one or two courses in history. Quite a few excuse their life-long aversion to history with the assertion, "I never could remember dates," and many believe that history and dates are synonymous. Besides, history has been lampooned very frequently. Ford's remark "history is bunk" is well known, and Mark Twain's quip, originally against science, has often been redirected against history: "History is the best investment; one gets a wholesale return of conjecture out of a small number of facts." The most biting remark on history is "History is something that never happened, written by a man who wasn't there." Alas, this statement is partially right. Practically no historian was an eye-witness to the events he describes, and there can be no doubt that history has recorded a number of "facts" which never happened.

Library history provides quite a few examples to support such a statement. We all remember the famous story of the destruction of the Alexandria library by the Arabs in 640 A.D. The Arab general asked the khalif what to do with the books, and he received the answer: "If the books agree with the Koran, they need not be preserved and can be destroyed. If the books disagree with the Koran, they should not be kept and have to be destroyed." And thus the renowned Alexandria library fell a victim to the narrow-mindedness of the Arab troops. The trouble with this often repeated story is that there is no contemporary account of it whatsoever. It is first mentioned six hundred years later when the sentiment both in Egypt, which was then under the power of the Mamelukes, and in the Europe of the Crusades was decidedly anti-Arab. Doubtful, also, is the destruction of the Alexandria library by Julius Caesar. In many textbooks one finds the anecdote that Julius Caesar had to burn down the port of Alexandria, and tragically the library burned in

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this holocaust. Here, too, we have no contemporary eye-witness; the story appears for the first time several hundred years later in Plutarch.

The history of the Middle Ages is full of events which did not happen. In spite of the fact that we know very well about the participation of laymen in manuscript production, the vast majority of visitors to an exhibit of medieval manuscripts would regard every manuscript as the product of a monastic scriptorium, and more than one visitor would exclaim: "A monk must have worked all his life writing this manuscript." If the manuscript should be after 1200, the chances are ninety-nine to one that it had never come near a monastery; even as the product of a monastic scriptorium, it may have been written by a layman, as the Benedictines employed laymen in their scriptoria already in the early Middle Ages, and later monastic orders, such as the Dominicans, traditionally had hired laymen for copying their manuscripts.

For scores of years we learned about the horrible year 1000, when allegedly the whole European population was in fear that with the advent of the year 1000 the world would come to an end. To the best of our knowledge, hardly anyone in Europe at that time found in the number 1000 the cause for chiliastic fears; many centuries later a historian, trying to identify himself with the mentality around the year 1000, came to the conclusion that all of Christian mankind must have trembled, and they have trembled ever since.

The majority of us are still convinced that the Jews were the most important money-lenders and bankers of the Middle Ages. This allegation is about as true as the statement that Wall Street and the American steel industry are dominated by Jewish capital. Recent research has questioned Charlemagne's surprise when the Pope crowned him emperor and has placed this description in the same category as Washington's cherry tree.

Is there something odd about the historian? Although he is sincerely committed to the Ranke postulate "to describe things as they really happened," he can accept these mistakes which have been made in history. He can laugh—not with great satisfaction, of course, but he can accept them as an integral and necessary part of history. This leads us to the question: what does the historian do? The research work of a chemist, physicist, philosopher, or mathematician is easier to understand. If any one of these scholars finds something of importance, it will, in due course, be included in a textbook of

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chemistry, physics, and so forth, and will thus become new chemistry, new physics. But the historian does not make history.

The work of the historian is a complex intellectual activity. He collects his primary data with scientific care and precision. The vestiges of the past must be examined and authenticated, and classified by systematic methods and scrupulously weighed. All the techniques of modern science as far as applicable are put to the use of the historian. This is especially true for our four most important auxiliary sciences: paleography, diplomatics, numismatics, and sphragistics, in which scientific techniques are used in the same manner as our sister science archaeology has made use of Carbon 14.

For the evaluation of the facts, all disciplines of the social sciences and humanities are put to good use; foremost are sociology, political science, and economics. Historians have also learned from medical history, and books like Zinsser's *Rats, Lice, and History*¹ and MacLaurin's *Mere Mortals*² and *Post Mortem*³ have given us valuable insight. Almost everybody in our generation has been deeply influenced by psychology. As the nineteenth century has been at times called the century of science, our own time may well be called the era of psychology because we all try to explain everything in psychological terminology. One of the best examples of the influence of psychology on history is Toynbee's "challenge and response" and "withdrawal and return." Darwin's evolutionary theory had a great impact on Otto Seeck,⁴ and Ratzel's book has made us conscious of the influence of geography and climate.⁵

Our general philosophical approach (*Weltanschauung*) is a determining factor in the way we contemplate past events. We may see them as the action of blind fate or as the manifestation of God's will. We may see in history a sign of continuous progress, or an up-and-down movement like the tides of the ocean. Causation for the modern historian is thus a *plurale tantum*—that is, it can be used in the plural only.

The next most important act of the historian is to recreate the past in his own mind and to communicate his vision to the audience. The process of creation is an artistic one. Zola once defined art as a piece of nature seen through a temperament; we may similarly define history as past events seen through a temperament. Although our scientific conscience will demand objectivity, our temperament will not permit us to reach such a goal. As Mommsen said: "History is neither made nor written without love and hate."

A more sophisticated definition has been given by Cohen: "History is imaginative reconstruction which is scientific in its terms and artistic in its formulation." The historian thus must have both head and heart; I shall come back to this definition later on.

Historians have never been too modest in extolling the specific virtues of their craft. This lack of modesty, incidentally, we share with most other academic disciplines. The basic idea is that the evolutionary concept is most important, and things are what they have become. Already the first scientific historian Thucydides said:

And with regard to my factual reporting of the events of the war I have made it a principle not to write down the first story that came my way, and not even to be guided by my own general impressions; either I was present myself at the events which I have described or else I heard of them from eye-witnesses whose reports I have checked with as much thoroughness as possible. Not that even so the truth was easy to discover; different eye-witnesses give different accounts of the same events, speaking out of partiality for one side or the other or else from imperfect memories. And it may well be that my history will seem less easy to read because of the absence in it of a romantic element. It will be enough for me, however, if these words of mine are judged useful by those who want to understand clearly the events which happened in the past and which (human nature being what it is) will, at some time or other and in much the same ways, be repeated in the future.⁶

Similar thoughts are repeated by practically every historian. For instance, Collingwood says: "The value of history is that it teaches us what man has done and just what man is." Benedetto Croce summarized the philosophical aspect of the evolutionary theory underlying all history: "The concept that concrete and true knowledge is always historical knowledge has the obvious consequence that the knowledge or qualification or judgment of an event cannot be separated or distinguished from the knowledge of its genesis. . . . To know (to judge) an event is to think of it in its being, and therefore in its birth and development among conditions themselves altering and developing, since its being can only lie in the course and development of life."⁷

History has long since branched out from the description of diplomatic and military events. "One by one the professions have become historical-minded. Today the history of law, the history of medicine, public health, technology, and other professions is increasingly ap-

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preciated by those devoting their lives to those fields. It is a hopeful sign. No mariner would attempt to navigate without his logbook. From the trials and errors of one's predecessors it is possible to learn much of use and to deepen one's insight and kindle one's imagination." ⁸ And Butterfield said: "By the use of history the scientist may become more conscious of the forces that are liable to affect his work, more alive to the nature of the methods he is using, more sensible to the direction in which he labors, more cognisant of the limitations under which he labours, more aware of the things which ought to be regarded with relativity." ⁹ On the facade of the Clemens Library on the Michigan campus we read the proud words: "In darkness dwells the people which knows its annals not." ¹⁰

Historians have always been anxious not to overemphasize the mere utilitarian value of history. The most important quality of our discipline lies in the growth of understanding and in the intellectual satisfaction of recognizing the developments. Already the Greeks had a very healthy distrust of the importance of the "immediately useful," and Carnovsky has admonished us that we should not condemn an investigation as devoid of value whatsoever because we cannot see at once its practical application.¹¹ Morison in his history of Harvard describes with justified pride the contribution of Harvard-trained Bostonians to the cause of the American Revolution and concludes with the following remarks: "Thus Harvard rendered her sons fit to serve their country, not by 'practical courses' on politics and government, but by a study of antique culture that broadened their mental vision, stressed *virtus* and promoted ἀρετή, the character appropriate to a republican." ¹²

Historians and librarians have much in common. The most obvious similarity is that both professions are based on the printed word. Historians exclude cultures for which no written documentation exists and classify them as pre-history. It is needless to emphasize that libraries would have no reason for existence without books. Both professions are interdisciplinary and global in their outlook. Further, they have in common that they are the prime target of dictatorship. Both the teaching of history and the easy access to books in libraries is contrary to the unchallenged power over mind and body which is always the goal of dictatorship. As a fourth point I refer to the "head and heart" necessary for an historian. The same quality is imperative for a librarian. Adams in his challenging article "Librarians as Enemies of Books" wrote: "Book collecting and the building-up of great

libraries is as much a matter of the heart as a matter of the head. The man who is all heart and no head would be a very bad librarian. But the man who is all head and no heart is a very dangerous librarian."¹³ The historians of librarianship, too, have never been too modest and have strongly emphasized the importance of historical studies for a fuller understanding of the library's functions and objectives. Our Hungarian colleague Varjas writes: ". . . the study of books and library history are the basis upon which the development of scientific and public libraries rests."¹⁴ And the South African Vleeschauwer states: "Library history is not merely the study of the dead past. It constitutes the actual library. If we remove library history from library science, we promote our own ignorance with regard to present library realities."¹⁵ The best synthesis of this line of thought is found in the introduction to the history of libraries in the great German *Handbuch der Bibliothekswissenschaft*:

Today we find countless monographs and papers on the subject of library history; it has assumed a higher position in teaching and training as we have realized that even contemporary questions have their historical aspect. The whole catalog problem assumes a more spiritual aspect as soon as we learn to look at it historically. The dangerous industrialization of intellectual work, literary mass production, and the process of inert masses of books in libraries all fall into place within this framework. Only through history do we understand the librarian as "homo sui generis" in both his light and dark sides. What is the meaning of library science? To what extent is scholarly criticism of libraries as run by professional librarians valid or invalid? Will special librarians and documentalists be the librarians of the future? What does comparative library science accomplish? All these questions can be answered convincingly only through the study of history. Thus the historian Karl Brandt of Göttingen has recommended to the officials in the ministries of education who generally are misinformed about library matters to take their orientation and advice from history. For the librarian in particular historical awareness is one of the most indispensable qualities for the productive practice of his profession.¹⁶

If I may add an American voice, I quote Jesse Shera: ". . . library history is the concern of every librarian, for history is not an esoteric or special branch of knowledge but a synthesis of life itself."¹⁷ Library history is not only a branch of library science, but it is also a section of general history. To make this point, I cite Adolf von Harnack's commentary on the great French librarian Leopold Delisle,

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“His work shows how the history of libraries throws light on the general history.”¹⁸ Benedetto Croce wrote a famous book with the title *History as the Story of Liberty*.¹⁹ The title is a quotation from Hegel’s *Philosophy of History*, but Croce has basically changed the connotations of the statement. For Hegel, liberty is an evolutionary process which has brilliantly culminated in the Germanic world; for Croce, however, liberty was, remains, and always will be the moral ideal of humanity. Mussolini rewarded him with his undying hate, and a fascist mob burned the private library of the great Italian philosopher. Library historians could well write a book with the title “Library History as the Story of Intellectual Freedom and Democracy” because we believe that intellectual freedom is a moral axiom of humanity.

The attitude of American librarians towards library history has not always been overly enthusiastic and sometimes not even very hospitable. J. Periam Danton contrasts regretfully the quantity of good historical studies on German university libraries with the small number of titles on American institutions. His conclusion, “. . . one would have difficulty pointing to more than a score of sound historical studies, and the number of such works on individual university libraries is even fewer,”²⁰ surely does not give a glamorous picture of American activity in this field.

If I may be permitted to psychoanalyze our profession on the basis of two phrases which are used frequently, I would come to the conclusion that we are ambivalent with regard to history. On the one hand, we have a dark suspicion that historical studies are a waste of time, mere “dates.” We do like the word “pioneer”; we share the love for this phrase with American educators, and we are all continuously pioneering in readers’ services, in technical services, in the application of machines, and so forth. The pioneer, of course, does not have the time nor the interest to look backwards; for him the past is dead and of no consequence, and his main attention is focused on the future.

Some outstanding American librarians have been rather unhappy about this negative American attitude. I surely do not want to give the impression that in my opinion all outstanding American librarians have been interested in history; that would be very foolish indeed. Neither do I believe that in order to be an outstanding American librarian one has to be historically inclined; that would be rather narrow-minded. But the fact remains that a great number of our important colleagues did show a vital interest in history. Pargellis²¹

calls us an unhistorically-minded group, and Pierce Butler²² states with deep regret that we are so intent on getting things done that we dislike any interruption for theoretical discussion.

We are still basically influenced by the philosophy of the eighteenth century enlightenment. We believe in continuous progress and advancement, and, thus, knowledge of the "primitive past" is hardly worthwhile. Last year an American educator, addressing a group of young students, assured them that the advancement that had been made within the last twenty years was greater than whatever mankind had achieved from the beginning of the world up to 1940. If we believe that this advancement will go on at the same speed as in the last twenty years, I really shudder to contemplate the glorious position mankind will have in 1980. I am especially frightened with regard to communications. I found out that it is quite easy to fly from New York to Urbana; but there is no public transportation at all from Urbana to Allerton House. If this progress continues, then in 1980 I will have no difficulty in flying from New York to the moon, or maybe to other places in outer space, but will I be able to get to Chicago?

Foreign librarians have regretfully noticed the "insular" attitude of American librarians toward all achievements outside the United States and outside our present generation. Practically all of our foreign colleagues describe our operations with great respect and are interested in emulating many of our practices. But they cannot fail to see a certain over-emphasis on technique and efficiency and our concern with the present and the future rather than with the past.

There is, however, also a positive side to this picture. The second of our favorite phrases is "to start a tradition." The word tradition has a certain fascination for us; we are rather proud of it and would like to have more of it. Tradition, however, is only understandable if we accept historical continuity.

A small but very vocal group among American librarians has spoken out loudly and vigorously for the importance of library history. The American Library History Round Table, for instance, has successfully kept up the interest in historical studies in our group.²³ Pierce Butler hammered into his devoted students, and emphasized in numerous articles, his fundamental belief that the librarian needs an explicit theoretical understanding of his cultural motivations.²⁴ Carleton B. Joeckel wrote in his *The Government of the American Public Library*, a book which comes pretty close to an immortal classic in

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American library literature, that without sympathetic appreciation of the stages through which the public library has progressed, it is difficult to understand its present position.²⁵ Among the great number of devoted pupils of Butler, I quote Jesse Shera: “. . . librarianship, unfortunately, has been little given to professional introspection. . . . Excessive attention to technology is especially dangerous to the librarian.”²⁶

The number of important library histories is small indeed, but the quality is very high. The new development starts with Arnold Borden's essay in the *Library Quarterly* of 1931, “The Sociological Beginnings of the Library Movement.” Borden clearly sets forth the program of the new trend: “. . . the library needs to be studied in the light of sociology, economics, and other branches of human knowledge.”²⁷ Gwladys Spencer's book on the Chicago Public Library²⁸ is America's greatest contribution to the field of library history. In breadth of vision, thoroughness of study, and in scholarly interpretation, it has remained unsurpassed so far and must be regarded as one of the outstanding publications in librarianship, not only from an American point of view, but also in the global aspect of our profession.

Sidney Ditzion in his social history of the American public library movement takes a similar broad sociological and economic viewpoint.²⁹ He, too, finds multiple motivation for the rise of the public library: cultural competition, both national and international, cultural nationalism, urban-industrial complex, humanitarian ideas, principles of equality, and so forth. Shera in his *Foundations of the Public Library* gives exact details of the New England background: geology, population, agriculture, industry, commerce, cultural ties, and so forth. He writes, “. . . any serious investigation of the library as a cultural phenomenon must be prefaced with . . . a brief description of those elements which are most prominent in the general social pattern.”³⁰

In conclusion I would like to make very sure not to have given the impression that I consider historical studies to be the most important field of scholarly activity. No discipline can claim much importance—not theology, nor philosophy, nor history nor the exact sciences; they all mirror only one aspect of the totality of life, and they all are equally necessary to give us the picture of the whole. Neither do I believe that history is the most important scholarly activity of a successful librarian. American libraries have many functions and objectives, and they do need men and women of a variety

of aptitudes and intellectual preparations. But among those, history has its significant place. We could not run our libraries if every staff member were especially devoted to historical studies; however, if American libraries were to have not *one* staff member interested in history, we would have a poorer intellectual profession indeed, and we would be giving less efficient service.

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