

Introduction

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MOST WRITINGS ON LIBRARIES and librarianship focus on the library world and bring in the rest of the world almost incidentally, as a bow to "background." But libraries can be neither understood nor their directions charted without serious consideration of the sociocultural milieu that molds them. Though they have a life and an influence of their own, in a large social sense libraries have not been primary institutions; they tend to be reflexive rather than initiative, part of the superstructure rather than the infrastructure.

This role can be observed variously. For example, the basic responsibility of libraries has been to collect, document and organize records of human thought and behavior, records whose existence has in turn been determined by, among other things, intellectual and esthetic modes, individual sensibilities, political and commercial exigencies, and technological possibilities. The changing technology and the different theories of library management and operations seem to be largely the history of the adaptation of ideas and techniques first developed for nonlibrary uses. The scope and quality of library use are related to social trends and cultural values; libraries, conceived either to serve direct educational functions or to support education and research in supra-agencies, have been creatures of educational, intellectual and scientific currents. The institutional structures of libraries, their governance and their place in the political process, cannot be discussed without considering political theory, public policy and patterns of governance in other institutions. Funding sources and alloca-

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tion of resources have been in substantial part a result of value judgments of the wider society, its attitudes toward private philanthropy and public responsibility, as well as the vicissitudes of national and local economics and politics. Libraries share also in the problems generated by unequal distribution of wealth and power in a society where such attributes as income, sex, race, ethnic origin, religion and age, among others, determine status and condition. Further, the profession of librarianship suffers from ambivalence and ambiguities related to cultural concepts of the value of books and information and, more recently, to skepticism about professionalism generally.

In our conviction that this wider approach to libraries, especially in a time of centennial stock-taking, is both valid and important, we planned this issue on "Libraries and Society: Past, Present and Prospective Research and Thought."¹ We wanted to gather together a group of thoughtful, scholarly, intellectually stimulating essays which would take as their starting point one or another of the societal elements that seemed to us to be crucial to libraries and would look at the latter within that broader context, not merely as "background" but as a vital part of the foreground. There was the hope that the exploration of research and thought about libraries and librarianship in relation to society and culture would help to build a stronger intellectual foundation for the library profession and contribute toward a general understanding of social institutions. Although for practical reasons the main focus was to be on the United States, the approaches would be various and the range interdisciplinary. The result would be a critical survey and interpretation of what has been learned and theorized in a serious way about libraries and society, together with a projection of directions for the future.

We knew that to achieve this would not be easy, not only because of the inevitable problems of finding authors with the time and inclination to write such articles (resulting in the elimination of several interesting topics), but because the task would be difficult for the willing and very able authors who did agree to contribute. Serious thinking and research by librarians on many of the themes we chose is not plentiful, and sociologists, historians and other nonlibrarians have, with very few exceptions, not been really interested in libraries or librarianship, however important librarians may think the profession is to society and however indispensable libraries have been to scholars. Our authors had therefore in many cases to work as much, or more, with their own thoughts and experiences as with those of others.

The ensuing collection is a perhaps kaleidescopic but, in our view,

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very interesting and provocative mixture of the thinking of a group of knowledgeable, thoughtful and sophisticated librarians and information scientists on subjects close both to their hearts and to their professional interests. As a number of them commented, this was an opportunity to "say something," to go beyond summaries of the literature to speak their individual pieces on important questions. It was a chance to articulate ideas that they had been mulling over, to see where their years of professional work and study were leading them and could lead the profession. If there are common threads running through the articles, they seem to us to be a readiness to question some of the basic assumptions and truisms in librarianship, a willingness to accept and adapt to basic change, and an awareness of complexity. The authors thus respond not only to the workings of their own lively minds, but to the diverse challenges presented by the realities of our time.

The variegated originality of these articles is aptly characterized in a passage from Jackson Bate's recently published biography of Samuel Johnson. Speaking of the difficulty of neatly labeling or bracketing Johnson as a literary critic, Bate writes (with quotations from Johnson) :

No one of his time was more aware that in the arts and humanities — as distinct from works "raised upon principles demonstrative and scientific" — difference in opinion is inevitable simply because so many different considerations have to be taken into account, and that "as a question becomes more complicated and involved, and extends to a greater number of relations, disagreement of opinion will always be multiplied, not because we are irrational, but because we are finite beings, furnished with different kinds of knowledge, exerting different degrees of attention, one discovering consequences which escape another, none taking in the whole concatenation of causes and effects . . . each comparing what he observes with a different criterion, and each referring it to a different purpose." As a result, Johnson — in his formal critical writing if not in his conversation — never forgets that "he who differs from us, does not always contradict us."²

References

1. For the initial conception of the theme of this issue, the editors are indebted to Francis Miksa.
2. Bate, W. Jackson. *Samuel Johnson*. New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977, p. 532.

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