

Some Remarks on the Education of the Library

Assistant : a Plea.¹

THE education of the Library Assistant is an important question, and one which deserves proportionate consideration. What is this Association as a body doing to bring up the members of the younger generation as fit and proper successors to the librarians of to-day, and what more could it do? What are individual librarians doing in the same direction, and what more could they do? These are pertinent questions, which affect the profession at large perhaps in a greater degree than one might at first suppose.

Let us consider for a moment what is the life of the average library assistant. He leaves school (where he has possibly passed the Seventh Standard, equally possibly not), at the age of thirteen or fourteen, and goes straight to the library, where, as the youngest member of the staff, he has the edifying and instructive task of, say, looking after the newsroom, cutting and labelling books, &c. Then he will possibly go on to the lending library, and, unless he is an exception to the rule, quickly become a machine to issue and take in books; a machine, too, which is constantly going out of order. Possibly he afterwards finds himself in the reference library, and, getting older and older, he is allowed merely to soak up what knowledge he can, from daily contact with readers and books. Of the accounts, cataloguing, and the inner detail of library work peculiar to the librarian, he is, as a rule, taught practically nothing. In many cases, if he shows any desire to fight his way out of the ranks of the mediocrities, he is looked on by his chief as precocious, and a nuisance to be repressed by every possible means, legitimate or otherwise.

Although I hold that the youth who wants to improve himself can always make time for private study, yet I know only too

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well that long hours in hot, often badly-ventilated libraries, make all connected with them use every opportunity of getting fresh air and outdoor exercise, and that under present circumstances Pope's line—

“ Half our knowledge we must snatch, not take,”

applies with much force to the average library assistant. But on that point I shall have more to say later.

I asked at the outset what the Library Association was doing as a body to promote the education of the assistant, and what more it could do; what the individual librarians were doing, and what more they could do. Let me take these queries separately and try to answer them.

That the Library Association has not met the wants of all engaged in library work is proved by the formation, on July 3rd, 1895, of the Library Assistants' Association, an organization which has up to now proved an undoubted success, but which, to my mind, should never have been required, except as an adjunct to, and an offspring of, the Library Association. In its first Report this Association draws attention to the great want felt by “ Library assistants in there being no classes where they might qualify for the examinations of the Library Association.”

At the Annual Meeting of the Library Association, held at Edinburgh, in 1880, the following resolution was adopted:— “ That it is desirable that the Council of this Association should consider how library assistants may best be aided in their training in the general principles of their profession.” As a result, a scheme of examination was propounded, which, after various alterations and amendments, is in existence to-day as the syllabus of the Examinations Committee. In the present syllabus the old preliminary examination is abolished, all assistants of three years' standing being examined only in professional subjects, while those of less library service than that mentioned, and others, have to produce a certificate of proficiency in general education, given by some authority recognised by the General Medical Council. On this point, if one may be allowed to criticise, I would ask why should not such a certificate be required from *all* examinees? It is so in every other profession. I recognise that for the preliminary examination to be conducted by the Library Association, and the papers set by members of that body, was an error. The examiners, with all due respect to them, were not specialists in any of the subjects, and it would have inspired more confidence, and made the examinations more

popular, had the preliminary examination been entrusted to such a body as the Society of Arts, or from the first been turned over to independent examiners. But to return. I cannot see that from three years' work in a library it is to be taken as an axiom that an assistant has consequently qualified himself in general education to such a degree as to obviate any necessity to sit any preliminary examination, his abilities being "taken as read." Would that such were the rule! There would then be no need for me to be reading this paper to-night. Is not the reverse too often the case? Is it not usual to find the average assistant, nay, the average individual, more inclined to forget what he *has* learned than to add to his store of knowledge? I would like to see a compulsory standard of education to be reached, and an entrance examination passed, before any assistant was allowed to enter the profession at all. I believe this is the case in some libraries, Bristol being one of them. It may be urged that the very small salary paid to junior assistants would prohibit this, because qualified candidates would not be forthcoming, but I fail to see why it should be so. In most of the professions several years of apprenticeship are necessary before a youth is considered to have mastered its main features; and generally a premium, more or less heavy, has to be paid. Practically no salary is forthcoming, as a rule, during this period of probation. If this is the case in other callings why should it be thought out of place in that of a librarian? It may be further urged that these other crafts hold out better inducements at the end of this period. For the moment it may be so. But, Gentlemen, I am an optimist. There is a good time coming, even for librarians. Our profession is coming more and more in evidence each year, and I venture to think that in the near future a great change for the better will take place in our prospects. We are all of us anxious to see the status of the librarian raised—a Society was recently formed, having that as one of its cardinal points. Surely if we have any aims above ourselves, and our present surroundings as they affect us individually, we shall welcome the better education of the assistant of to-day, the librarian *in embryo*, as one of the best means of ensuring this result.

But I am wandering somewhat from my point and must apologise for the digression.

The Examinations Committee, as far as I can gather, gave no help or hints as to methods of study for those who wished to possess its certificate, other than by prescribing a number of

text-books. They would appear to have remained content with formulating their scheme of subjects of which they were prepared to test the candidates' knowledge (or want of it). Little good seems to have resulted from these examinations. Few candidates appear to have presented themselves, and we but seldom come across the fortunate possessor of a certificate. This fact led to a Committee being formed to report on the examination scheme, which they did to the Annual Meeting, held at Nottingham, in 1891, as follows:—"The Committee, as managing librarians, believe that if their assistants could be induced to 'read up and be examined in several subjects of the proposed curriculum, even if they should not proceed further, it would be of decided value to them and to the work in which they were engaged." The Committee also acknowledged the comparatively little time, with due regard to their health, which library assistants could give to study.

Then came the Summer School of the Association, originating in the fertile brain of Mr. Ogle, the first secretary of that Committee. And here let me say that when I was asked to write this paper I had no connection with the Summer School Committee, either as its secretary or as a member. Therefore I can speak of its work without any charge of egotism being brought against me. The first session was held in 1893, and from then until now the results of the efforts of the Committee have been such that it may fairly claim to be one of the most successful, as well as important, which the Library Association possesses. The Summer School has now become a feature of the Library Association, and is playing a most important part in the education of the assistant. Last session its lectures were mainly devoted to the first section of the Examinations Committee's syllabus. The Committee is already busy forwarding the work of the ensuing session. Lectures have been arranged on English literature, especially of the last hundred years; French literature, especially of the last hundred years; subject-catalogues; the Public Libraries Acts; library administration, maintenance, and executive work; fittings and appliances; binding, and aids to readers. A preliminary prospectus has been issued, containing an account of the lectures to be given, and giving a list of text-books recommended for study. Advertisements have been inserted in the *Athenæum*, announcing that this prospectus may be had on application, and a letter has been sent to every Library Committee, established under the Acts, or

represented in the Association, asking co-operation in the work of the Committee by the purchase of such of the text-books as were not already in the library, or accessible for the use of the assistants. By this means every library of any importance in the United Kingdom is already aware of the main features of next year's session, and it is to be hoped that assistants are already getting to work on a course of systematic reading.

This, then, is what the Library Association has done and is doing for the education of the assistant. But it is not too much to expect greater things. Up to now the aim of the Association has, rightly, been mainly devoted to the professional side of the question. It is of course natural that, in proportion to his general knowledge, will it be easy or difficult for the assistant to grapple with professional problems. Is it not possible for this Association to lend its influence to enable the assistant to acquire a more extended knowledge of subjects outside those purely technical? The librarian, to be of much service to his readers, requires to be a man of good all-round knowledge. It is only since commencing this paper that I have read Miss James's admirable discourse, entitled, "A Plan for providing Technical Instruction for Library Students and Assistants," delivered at the Paris meeting, in 1892. In that paper the writer made some most excellent suggestions, which, however, for all I know to the contrary (unless they helped in the formation of the Summer School Committee), have led to no results. One of her suggestions has forestalled what I intended to be my next paragraph. As I cannot put my idea into better form, I have taken the liberty of quoting her words:—"That the Library Association make known its willingness to assist genuine aspirants as far as possible, and, in addition to the stimulus already provided by the examinations, arrange for a course or courses of theoretical and practical lectures, in the winter session, on technical and intellectual matters bearing on library management, &c. That where lectures already exist on subjects in any way useful to the library student, the Library Association procure special terms as to fees for their students." To formulate any definite scheme would be out of the province of this paper, but if the Council would take the matter up in earnest I am confident that they would find their efforts gladly seconded by the hearty co-operation of librarians. The Association has accomplished much, but more remains to be done.

And this brings me to the second portion of my remarks.

What are the librarians individually doing, and what more can they do for the education of their assistants? The best of schemes would fall flat unless the librarians were prepared to do their best to make it a success. Possibly the majority of chiefs do take a real and personal interest in the welfare of their assistants, but there is an undoubted minority which does not, or only in a half-hearted sort of way, and it is to this minority I would more especially speak. Their assistants are not human beings, with aims and aspirations as genuine as their own, to be treated as kindly and as considerately as circumstances allow, but automatons, out of whom as much work as possible is to be ground, with no thought of their future. At the best their attitude is one of apathetic indifference. This was strongly exemplified when the Library Assistants' Association was formed. "Sitting on the fence" was the order of the day, many librarians ignoring appeals for aid, advice and assistance in the initial work, some leaving the secretary's letters unacknowledged and unanswered. Now, however, that this organization has successfully surmounted the many obstacles placed in the way of its progress, the case is somewhat different, for in its first Report (to which reference has already been made) thanks are offered to the Library Association for sympathy shown and practical support given.

I know that it is as great an evil to pamper assistants and make too much fuss of them as is the reverse, but there is a happy medium in all things. Many librarians are fully alive to their responsibilities in this matter. Amongst other instances which occur to me of what is being done, I would mention three, each working on different lines. There are more, I am glad to say. The staff of the Kensington Libraries was, in December 1894, formed into a society under the name of "The Kensington Book-fellows." The Chief Librarian is the president, and the papers are devoted to technical and literary subjects. A reading class in connection with the Summer School is also in course of formation. The social side of the question is not forgotten, for concerts and conversaciones are given under the recognition of the Commissioners.

In the thirty-fourth report of the Cardiff Public Libraries Committee, Mr. Ballinger is to be congratulated on the following paragraph, which speaks for itself, and requires no comment from me:—"The librarian, with the cordial sanction of the Committee, has formed the library staff into an association for the study and

discussion of questions relating to practical librarianship, with a view to increasing the interest taken by the staff in the work of the library. Regular classes for instruction in librarianship are held at stated intervals, and meetings for discussion will be held once a quarter. It is hoped that this will be the means of training up a more efficient staff of assistants, and of qualifying the assistants to take more important positions in other libraries." I have also received an interesting letter from Mr. Ballinger, which he has given me permission to read to-night. He says:—"We have an instruction class once a month at which some subject carefully selected beforehand is lectured upon either by myself or my deputy, Mr. Shepherd. We choose such subjects as 'Bookbinding,' 'Classification,' 'A Librarian's Books of Reference,' 'Shelf Arrangement,' and so on. The lecture usually lasts one hour; a blackboard is used, and we also illustrate with anything likely to help—for instance, in the lecture on book-binding we had the chief binders' appliances and samples of materials. The day after the lecture I set a paper of nine questions on the subject of the instruction, and give fourteen days for working it. The assistants may refer to as many books as they like before answering the questions, but I have made a suggestion that no books shall be consulted within twenty-four hours of writing the reply to each question. This the assistants honourably accept, and mere cram is avoided. The results, so far, have been very encouraging, and in some cases excellent. In addition to the monthly lectures, the assistants are going to hold quarterly meetings, at which I am *not* to be present, unless specially invited. For the first quarterly meeting every assistant is writing a *short* essay on 'A Librarian's Care of his Books.' These will all be read at the meeting and discussed. This meeting will be held in about a week's time. In addition to the above I have had some gymnastic appliances fixed in the basement, to enable the staff to get a few minutes' exercise, say at tea time, or whenever they stay in to meals; some of them come a little earlier each morning in order to get a few minutes tumbling about. Laughable as the idea may seem at first, it is a fine thing for young fellows who are shut up so much."

The formation of classes for courses of study is not confined to Cardiff. Seven or eight years ago this was begun at the Newcastle-upon-Tyne Public Libraries, on the initiative of, and carried on by, two of the senior assistants, one of whom is now addressing you. Time and energy were devoted to teaching the

younger members of the staff, many of whom bear witness to-day of the good done them by the classes, which were educational, not technical. Latin, French, and shorthand, I remember, were three of the principal subjects. But, to use a vulgar phrase, they have gone one better than that now. Arguing that the libraries were allied educational institutions, and that they helped the schools and colleges in many ways, the Committee last year approached the governing bodies of several of these in Newcastle with the request that they would throw open their classes free to the staff of the libraries. Permission was willingly and courteously granted. The result will be seen from a quotation from a letter just received from the sub-librarian, himself a student and prize-winner at last year's session of the Summer School. He says:—"The bodies granting permission were the Council of the Durham College of Science, the Council of the Rutherford College, and the School Board. I daresay that other schools and classes would have been thrown open to us had we applied. You are already familiar with the character of the classes at the Durham College of Science and the Rutherford College. Evening classes are held in Science and Art in the three higher board schools, and our assistants attend whichever they find most convenient. Assistants are practically free in their choice of subjects and schools, and as yet there has been no difficulty in meeting their wishes. As a rule they attend two classes a week, one on their half-holiday, and another on some other evening. The subjects now studied are shorthand, typewriting, French, German, Italian, Spanish, and English literature. We do not make it compulsory on assistants to attend classes, but one who neglects such opportunities without reason does not enhance his prospects of promotion. I am glad to say that the assistants are availing themselves of their privileges as cordially this winter as when offered for the first time last year, and that during both sessions every assistant has attended some class or other. There is also a development of interest in their work, and a growing desire to make themselves acquainted with the technics of their profession. I may add that this outside literary training is about to be supplemented by a course of lectures on technical library work."

It is an interesting and instructive sequel to note that Mr. Keogh won the MacAlister prize for the best report on last year's Summer School, and that another member of the same staff has just carried off Mr. Ogle's monthly prize in his excellent *Library Assistants' Corner of THE LIBRARY.*

Why cannot the examples I have quoted from Kensington, Cardiff, and Newcastle be followed elsewhere? It would require some little sacrifice of time, and entail a certain amount of trouble on the part of the librarian, it is true, and perhaps we find a potent factor opposing the wished-for progress in this fact. One may be told, and I *have* been told, that there was nothing of this sort of thing when the present librarians were assistants, and what was good enough for them should be good enough for their assistants. Gentlemen, two blacks never made a white yet! All the more reason to turn over a new leaf now, so that in the future we may be praised and not blamed. Let me remind you of an oft-quoted maxim of Bacon's, "I hold every man a debtor to his profession; from the which as men, of course, do seek to receive countenance and profit, so ought they of duty to endeavour themselves, by way of amends, to be a help and ornament thereunto." What was good enough ten or twenty years ago is *not* good enough for to-day, at least not if we wish to see our profession rise to its proper level. *Tempora mutantur nos, et mutantur in illis.* The remembrance of our own trials and difficulties as assistants, and to many of us they were real enough, instead of making us determine that our assistants shall be no better off than we were, should rather constrain us to endeavour to make their lot easier than was our own, knowing that, with the progress of education and the advancement of our craft, more will be required of librarians in the future than has been the case in the past.

We can help on the cause of the education of the assistant ourselves individually to a great extent. Is it asking too much that in every library, great or small, each assistant should be granted a night off a week in addition to his half-day, if he devotes it to attending a class for self-improvement? It is becoming more common now than it used to be to give the concession of this extra evening, but no one could grumble if it were an understood thing that this privilege would be forfeited unless a class was attended during the dark evenings. This would apply especially to small libraries, but in the larger ones it would take but little trouble to follow the example of the libraries already mentioned, in addition.

One other thing, and this is my last point, that librarians can do, without much trouble to themselves in this matter, is to bring the Summer School to the notice of their Committees, and

to give their assistants opportunities to attend the course of lectures given each session. It is a fact to be deplored that at the recent session most of the students were from the provinces, assistants from London libraries, who, one would have thought, would have been allowed to flock in crowds, were conspicuous by their absence. The Committee this year has issued a preliminary prospectus, with list of text-books, as I have already stated, more than six months before the session will start. I shall be pleased to send a copy to any librarian who has not yet seen one. It will take little or no persuasion for him to induce his Committee to purchase those of the text-books recommended which are not to be found on the shelves. And I would ask librarians also to urge upon their assistants, even if they are not going to attend the course next year, or even sit at the Association's examination, to study these works for their own improvement, and for the good of the library in which they are serving. If librarians would further aid their assistants by personally taking an interest in, and superintending these studies, the good done would be materially enhanced. And then, when the Summer School comes round again, I would ask for a little more sacrifice of time so as to let as many assistants away as possible, in order that their previous studies may be, so to speak, "rubbed in"; remembering also that the school itself will do but little good unless diligently prepared for previously. I was pleased to hear from Mr. Ogle, the other day, that the Mersey District Association had passed on a resolution to the North-Western branch of the Association asking Committees to give facilities to assistants to attend the Summer School.

I have endeavoured, I fear but feebly, to plead the cause of the education of the assistant, both in general as well as professional subjects, and I ask your kind indulgence for the many defects and shortcomings of my paper. It is a subject which I have very much at heart, for I am convinced that we have a distinct duty to posterity, and that posterity must purge its debt to us by in turn doing as much for those who are to follow as I wish this generation would do for its successors.

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