
L'Heure Joyeuse: Educational and Social Reform in Post-World War I Brussels

DEBRA MITTS-SMITH

ABSTRACT

The day after the Armistice of 1918 was signed ending World War I, the Book Committee on Children's Libraries was established by a group of American women. The committee's relief efforts focused on the establishment of children's libraries in order to help with the "educational reconstruction" of Belgium and France. This article focuses on the first of these children's libraries, L'Heure Joyeuse Brand Whitlock, and the ways in which it became a site of educational and social reform.

On the day after the Armistice of 1918 was signed, the American Art War Relief Committee, headed by Mrs. Caroline Griffiths, established a new foundation, the American Book Committee on Children's Libraries. Its aim was to help the children in the areas of Belgium and France devastated by the war. For Belgium the close of the Great War brought to an end four years of German occupation marked by famine; deportation; destruction of housing, land, and industries; unemployment; and civilian, political, and military casualties. One of the worst battles of the war, Ypres in Flanders, had been fought on Belgium territory. As a newspaper article suggested, the postwar rebuilding presented Brussels with the opportunity "to inaugurate a new era of efforts aimed at school age children; encouraging the development of a literary culture which they so deeply lacked" (Mixame, 1920, p. 7). On September 24, 1920, the first children's library, known as L'Heure Joyeuse Brand Whitlock, opened in Brussels. This article focuses on its founding and the ways in which it became a site of educational and social reform.

In the spring of 1919 Lilly-Elizabeth Carter, the director of Ecole Moyenne, and Dr. René Sands, secretary of the Fondation Universitaire, attended the Child Welfare Conference in Washington, D.C. Before returning to Belgium, Carter and Sands visited New York. There they toured the New York Public Library and met with Miss Annie Carroll Moore, the supervisor of the Children's Room. As described in a report by Agnes Cowing, a librarian and member of the American Book Committee on Children's Libraries, Carter and Sands "caught a glimpse of what children's libraries had meant to the children of America, and were filled with the desire for similar libraries for the children of Belgium." Moore put Carter and Sands in contact with Griffiths and the American Book Committee on Children's Libraries, "which was then considering the idea of offering to equip a children's room as part of the contemplated restoration of the Library of Louvain." According to Cowing, Carter convinced Mrs. Griffith and the committee that if the children's library were to be established in Brussels, the capital of Belgium, and not in Louvain, the library and reading room would be more visible and "much more quickly known to those interested in the education and social welfare of Belgium."¹

Public libraries, and specifically library service to children, were not, however, entirely new to Belgium. Prior to World War I there had been several attempts to establish public libraries with reading rooms for children in Ghent, Mont-Saint Arnaud, Herstal, Forest, and Brussels (Mixame, 1920, p. 7). In Brussels a reading room open only to schoolchildren had been established in one of the schools. Here teacher-librarians guided students in their reading by introducing them to the works of the "best" writers (Mixame, 1920, p. 7). The outbreak of war in 1914 forced an end to these libraries and reading rooms, and while there had been some attempts to revive them after the war had ended, there was "no attempt to conduct a reading room or to create the so-called 'library atmosphere.'"²

The offer made by Mrs. Griffiths and her committee to the city of Brussels included furniture, an initial collection of books, and the training of the librarians according to the American model of public librarianship. In exchange for this gift, the city of Brussels agreed to provide a location for the library, to appoint a committee to oversee the running of the library, to hire and pay a trained librarian, and to fund and maintain the library.³ The city of Brussels designated three rooms on the ground floor of a building located at 16 rue de la Paille near the Grand Place as the site for the first children's library and reading room and paid to have the rooms painted and updated with electricity and heating.⁴ In order to re-create the "library atmosphere" of American libraries

the Book Committee in America had occupied itself in planning the furniture, the book shelves, low tables, chairs and benches, all designed for the comfort of children along the lines already practically tested in the children's rooms of the New York Public Library, and made by the

Library Bureau of the best oak, finished in a charming gray tone. All this was sent from America, together with pictures for the walls, and some of the books best loved by American children, that their little cousins in Belgium might see the illustrations and attractive covers, even if they could not read the strange words.⁵

The library and reading room for children were part of the Department of Public Instruction and were overseen by a patronage committee, which consisted of specialists in education, wealthy patrons, and government officials. At Mrs. Griffiths's suggestion, the library and reading room was named *L'Heure Joyeuse*, or "The Happy Hour."⁶ A patronage committee was created and included such prominent citizens as Adolphe Max, mayor of Brussels; Emile Jacquemain, superintendent of Public Instruction; Lilly-Elizabeth Carter, the director of *Ecole Moyenne C*; Dr. Sands from the *Fondation Universitaire*; and, of course, the American ambassador to Belgium, Brand Whitlock, for whom the library was named.

Griffiths's offer contained more than books and furniture. As Mary Niles Maack (1993) shows in her study on the *L'Heure Joyeuse* that opened in Paris in 1924, these children's libraries were based on the American public library model. As such these libraries introduced a new paradigm of librarianship and library service to Belgium and France, including open stacks and direct access to books as well as a service-oriented perspective. Bruno Liesen (2003, p. 17) also suggests that the *Heures Joyeuses* in Brussels were the site of a new type of relationship between the reader and the library, a relationship defined by library service oriented toward the user. In his speech for the inauguration of the first *L'Heure Joyeuse* in Brussels, Belgian Minister of Sciences and the Arts, Jules Destrée, described the difference between the libraries in Belgium and those in America: "We have, it is true, remarkable collections in several large centers, but it suffices to say that the heads of these libraries call themselves 'Conservators' to see that the prevailing conception of these establishments is exactly opposite of the one that guides the American libraries. . . . It is not important to conserve or save these books, what is important is to have them read." Destrée preferred "volumes that are used, worn out by numerous consultations to volumes in a state of perfect preservation. The ones are living and fertile; the others are dead and sterile."⁷

Since the American model of user-centered librarianship was unknown on the Continent, the American Book Committee in cooperation with the Pratt Institute of Library Science in New York established a scholarship fund to enable a Belgian student to study the methods of American public librarianship in the United States during the 1921–22 school year.⁸ Under this joint effort, the Pratt Institute waved tuition and the Book Committee underwrote all other expenses. *L'Heure Joyeuse* Brand Whitlock, however, had opened in September 1920, and the need to train its first librarians, Adrienne Huvelle-Lève and Marguerite Pierard, was urgent. Griffiths re-

sponded by sending Agnes Cowing to Brussels, "a trained librarian of many years experience and renowned in her profession." Cowing, in addition to training Huvelle-Lève and Pierard, helped to run the library and reading room and to create its catalog.⁹

Even before the library opened L'Heure Joyeuse was promoted as breaking with the past. In July 1920 a newspaper article described L'Heure Joyeuse as "*tout un programme contenu dans un mot*," or an entire program summed up in a word. For the founders, the library's purpose was "happily to lead the child to books and to offer him, in a space especially created and furnished for him, the means of intellectual and moral development."¹⁰ The article continues, "The child henceforth abandons the street; he makes his way across the threshold of our friendly building and finds a peaceful, and to eyes accustomed only to poverty and misery, an almost luxurious place, [here he finds] the book appropriate to his age, the child's magazine, the picture book, the works which speak to his heart and soul."¹¹

Within this context the librarian's role was to guide and foster a love a books. The first annual report of L'Heure Joyeuse Brand Whitlock likened its librarians' mission to that of the American public librarian who "attract[s] children by her sweetness and serenity, by the interest which she shows them; to slowly guide their choice, to make them love the space created especially for them, always attractive, cheerful and serious at the same time, above all to make them love the books which will be their best friends throughout their lives."¹² Guiding a young person's reading took several forms, including the introduction through story hours of books of "quality" and from 1925 on, book discussions of literary and scientific texts. These discussion were often augmented by slideshows and books lists. Further, when children finished their books, the librarian, in order to determine how well they understood what they had read, quizzed them about the books, specific passages, or even particular words. And if the librarian felt that a child had not adequately understood it, she would have him or her reread certain chapters or pages. The librarian was also expected to intervene in cases where the child abandoned a book too quickly, favored a single work, or chose books beyond his or her age (Liesen, 2003, p. 18). Underlying this process was the belief that, if one was to read as an adult, then it was necessary to instill a taste for reading during childhood (Mixame, 1920, p. 7).

While today this type of guidance may seem intrusive and controlling, as both Maack (1993, pp. 272-77) and Liesen (2003, p. 17) suggest, in contrast with the prevailing authoritarian pedagogical methods of the time, these libraries imposed very few restrictions on the children. Further, even though the librarians advised, questioned, and even tested the children on their reading, the children nevertheless had direct access to the books and could choose the books they wanted to read (Liesen, 2003, p. 17). Older children also chose the topics for and led some of the book discussions. This reflects not only a certain amount of freedom on the part of the children but also a

validation of their interests. And while reports by Huvelle-Lève and Carter show that the librarians were concerned with teaching young people the proper handling of books and how to behave in the library, it was not until 1939 that signs were posted in the vestibule to remind young readers “not to turn the pages brusquely,” “to have clean hands,” and “not to disturb fellow readers by talking, playing games, or walking too loudly.”¹³

According to Cowing, the initial collection of books included “approximately 1000 French books, 250 English books, and 100 Flemish [books].”¹⁴ While the number of books in Flemish was small, the inclusion of Flemish books was nevertheless significant. Since its creation as an independent state in 1830 and the constitution’s recognition of French as its sole official language, language had been a politically divisive issue in Belgium. At the beginning of World War I linguistic differences were put aside as the French and Flemish united in their opposition to the Germans. This changed in 1916, when the Germans permitted the opening of a Flemish university in Ghent. On March 21, 1917, the German Governor General von Bissing, using the linguistic borders as the political lines of demarcation, decreed the administrative separation of Belgium into Flanders and Wallonie. At the end of the war, Albert, King of the Belgians, guaranteed the creation of a Flemish university and spoke in favor of equal status for the two languages. This was not well received by the French speaking Walloons. So at a time when linguistic and cultural differences were once again threatening to divide the country, the inclusion of Flemish books in a predominately French-speaking city was significant. Not surprisingly, however, Huvelle-Lève commented in her report from April 21, 1921, that works in French were the most popular.¹⁵

“The books had been chosen by Mlle. Carter who was familiar with French and English children’s literature, and who knew from her long experience as a teacher, those which were desirable and interesting to boys and girls.”¹⁶ Huvelle-Lève listed some of the most popular books as including fairy tales by Hans Christian Anderson, Perrault, and Grimms; *Don Quichotte*; *Mille et Une Nuits*; *Robinson Crusoe*; *Les Misérables*; and the works of the Countess of Segur, Jules Vernes, and Alphonse Daudet. Favorite nonfiction titles included histories of the war such as *Toute La Guerre en Images* and *L’agression allemande et la Belgique héroïque*.¹⁷

Given the small number of volumes as well as the inexperience of the staff and readers, L’Heure Joyeuse initially functioned as a reading room and not as a circulating library. As Cowing reported to the Book Committee in May 1921:

The books are not lent for home use, partly because the collection is still too small, and partly because the administrative problems involved in a circulating library seem too complex to impose upon an inexperienced librarian and an untrained public. At the end of another year, it is hoped that the book collection may have reached the required

proportions for circulation, that the children may have become more accustomed to the free use of books, and that the librarian may have solved the more immediate problems of administration of a children's reading-room, and may be ready to establish the circulation of books upon a firm professional basis.¹⁸

Despite dire predictions that the library would have books and furniture but no readers [*le Belge ne lit pas*, "the Belgian doesn't read"], young people came. Even though the L'Heure Joyeuse opened while many students were still on vacation from school, young people from surrounding and distant quarters as well as the suburbs visited. Carter reported that young people from distant quarters often expressed the desire for a similar library in their neighborhood.¹⁹ She also reported that while the older students from the school that shared the building at 16 rue de la Paille were at first indignant at the thought that they should frequent a library and reading room advertised as being for "children," they quickly "submitted to its charm and returned with their friends."²⁰

Intended for school age children, L'Heure Joyeuse's hours of operation were scheduled around the school day, from 10 to 12:30 and then in the afternoon from 2:30 to 6:00. During the first year, the average number of children who visited the library daily was thirty-six, rising to as many as seventy-three in the winter months.²¹ As Carter noted, "Rapidly the reading room was filled and by the beginning of October, there were not enough seats and the children had to sit on the floor."²²

L'Heure Joyeuse represented not only a new paradigm of librarianship and libraries but also the site of social reform and innovation. The readers registered at L'Heure Joyeuse Brand Whitlock represented twenty-two boys' schools and twenty girls' schools. During the first year there were more boys than girls registered.²³ Within the context of segregated educational institutions, L'Heure Joyeuse broke with the traditional educational model by providing a space in which boys and girls could interact freely. The only restriction aside from age (boys from age six to fifteen and to girls from age six to eighteen) was the requirement that the young person knew how to read. As Carter stated, "we were obliged, to our great regret, but in the interest of the readers, and so as to create the true atmosphere of a reading room to deny admittance to children who did not yet know how to read."²⁴

With neither subscription fees nor scholastic or religious affiliations, L'Heure Joyeuse Brand Whitlock also had the potential to be a place where young people from different socioeconomic classes could mix. While the annual report describes the young people who frequented L'Heure Joyeuse as coming from the surrounding neighborhood and schools,²⁵ Carter's notes, on which the annual report was clearly based, provide more information on who these children were: "Many of these children belong to the poorest part of the population of Brussels; we have a contingent of the most unfortunate . . . [who] in the most dangerously cold weather arrive

scarcely clothed." She emphasized further that "We have very few middle class children; we do not regret this; we believe that it is essential to serve above all the poorest children. We receive them indiscriminately; those who come from free schools or from official schools." The marked increase in attendance during that first winter seems to confirm Carter's impressions that part of L'Heure Joyeuse's appeal could be found in the shelter it offered from the cold, dark days of winter: "During winter days, the place, well-heated and lit, was crowded."²⁶

The annual report as well as Carter's and Huvelle-Lève's reports on the library stressed that the young people who came to L'Heure Joyeuse were enchanted by both the space and the books. Carter noted that as the news spread "that at L'Heure Joyeuse, one could look at beautiful books and images . . . [children] caressed the books. Often with dirty tiny hands they would choose one; an instant later they would put it back where it belonged and chose another one, then another, putting each back in the place they found it; they played at keeping house."²⁷

Each of these young ones went through the same stage and experienced, at the beginning, enchantment. Then, each one felt solicited by all the books all at once; by the bright colorful pictures, by the importance and the weight of the book. He takes a book, replaces it to take another; after a few moments he makes his choice and is absorbed in his reading. Since then readers who wish to find the same book the next day ask the librarian to put it in her drawer so that it will not be taken by another child.²⁸

These rather poetic descriptions, while lacking objectivity, reflect the goals of the library's founders and librarians. L'Heure Joyeuse provided not only an opportunity for a new relationship between library and user: it was a place where a specific type of reading was promoted in the hopes of developing readers who were engaged with their texts. Underlying this desire to develop engaged readers was the belief that one would only read as an adult if the taste for reading was instilled and cultivated during childhood (Mixame, 1920, p. 7). As early as April 1921 Huvelle-Lève reported the library's success in developing serious readers but also pointed out that not all the children who came to the library developed this habit: "Many of the readers diligently frequent the library and continue reading a book until they finish it; the capricious readers are becoming less numerous, and many have improved since the opening of the reading room."²⁹

Notes and reports from the librarian also reflect a concern for fostering and improving the young people's reading tastes. There is an emphasis on children not only becoming readers absorbed in their books but also on becoming more discerning in their taste. Adrienne Huvelle-Lève reported in April 1921 that even though the favorite books remained the same as in the beginning, there was a general, if slow, improvement in taste.³⁰ The method used by the librarians to interest young people in books and to

expand and improve their taste in literature was the *L'heure du conte*, or story hour. Thursday afternoons was the typical time reserved for this American import. The first annual report mentions that the first book presented during the first story time, *La Vie d'Abraham Lincoln* by the American ambassador Brand Whitlock, was a great success. Other titles from the first year's story hours included *La Vie et l'œuvre de Rubens*, *Les beaux voyages*, *Les Animaux vivants de la Terre*, *La Bibliothèque des merveilles*, and *La Collection des grands hommes, des grands artistes*. Fairy tales, especially *Hamelin, le joueur de flûte* (The Pied Piper of Hamelin) and the adventures of Nils Holgerson (the travels of a mischievous boy turned into a dwarf), proved to be popular with the younger children.³¹

The public library that promoted and supported reading, literature, books, and the creation of a literary culture was perceived to have an important role in the development of a nation. Three days before the inauguration of the first L'Heure Joyeuse, Mrs. Griffith and the patronage committee received a letter from W. N. L. Carlton, the American Library Association European delegate. In it he suggests that the experience with public libraries in America shows that these institutions have a valuable social and cultural role:

The invisible, but certain influences, which emanate from these pleasing gardens of literature and art, engender in the still malleable spirit of youth an understanding and enduring love for Truth and Beauty; they stimulate generous actions, encourage elevated intentions, and they ennoble the character of those who, children today, are destined to become the citizens and patriots of tomorrow.³²

As such, L'Heure Joyeuse represented an avenue for the education and development of Belgian citizens through literature and the arts.

At the same time, buried amid the praise are indications that not everything was quite so idyllic and that the young people were not always devoted to reading. In a letter to Jacquemain, the director of Public Instruction, Carter's report that the children were not too absorbed in their reading to run to the window to watch a group of street musicians suggests that perhaps the young readers were easily distracted and not always quite so engaged with their books. Further, although rules regarding behavior were not posted until 1939, it is clear that part of the librarian's duties involved teaching children how to handle books and behave. As early as October 1920 there is a request for a sink to be installed in the vestibule so that the children could wash their hands for hygienic reasons and to protect the books. It was not only the behavior of the children in the library, however, that caused problems. Those kept out due to the lack of space often retaliated by banging on the door, throwing rocks against the shutters, and making noise in the street.³³ Another problem faced by the staff included the disappearance of items. Certain books disappeared regularly, including picture books and the first volume of Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, which

was taken three times. Some of these books were eventually returned by teachers who "found them in the hands of their students."³⁴

Despite these problems, L'Heure Joyeuse Brand Whitlock served as a model for other Belgian public library initiatives. Its open stacks and emphasis on the user were extremely influential. Dignitaries and those interested in setting up public libraries and reading rooms in other regions such as Messines, Frameries, Mons, and Anvers often visited the library or contacted the staff for advice. In addition, the L'Heure Joyeuse became a means by which to promote awareness of and knowledge about children's books to parents, authors, editors, and artists.³⁵ By providing young people with books appropriate to their age and interests along with story hours and discussion groups, L'Heure Joyeuse aimed to foster a love of reading and books in young people. It was also a site for other educational and social innovations. Although it was administratively part of the Department of Public Education, it was not affiliated with a particular school. Further, with no subscription fees, it was open to young people from all religious, socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds, giving them access not only to books and ideas but to each other. By attempting to bring social classes, genders, and linguistically and culturally diverse groups together, these libraries can also perhaps be seen as a force for social change. And for some, L'Heure Joyeuse was a respite from the realities of poverty. Over the next thirty years, the success of this children's library and reading room would be reflected by the opening of seven more L'Heure Joyeuse libraries in Brussels.³⁶

NOTES

1. Previous three quotations from Agnes Cowing, Report to the American Book Committee, May 27, 1921, HJP, carton 519.
2. *Ibid.*
3. Œuvre des Salles de Lecture pour enfants à Bruxelles, Minutes, July 7, 1920, HJP, carton 517. (Unless otherwise noted, all translations are the author's.)
4. Note relative à la 1ère Bibliothèque, salle de lectures pour enfants, Annual Report, 1920, HJP, carton 517.
5. Agnes Cowing, Report to the American Book Committee, May 27, 1921, HJP, carton 519.
6. Œuvre des Salles de Lecture pour enfants à Bruxelles, Minutes, July 7, 1920, HJP, carton 517.
7. Previous two quotations from Jules Destrée, Speech, September 24, 1920, HJP, carton 517.
8. Agnes Cowing, Report to the American Book Committee, May 27, 1921, HJP, carton 519.
9. Caroline Griffiths to Emile Jacquemain, February 8, 1921, HJP, carton 517.
10. Emile Jacquemain to Monsieur le Directeur, September 21, 1920, HJP, carton 517.
11. Untitled typed document, July 23, 1920, HJP, carton 519.
12. Note relative à la 1ère Bibliothèque, salle de lectures pour enfants, Annual Report, 1920, HJP, carton 517.
13. Liesen (2003, p. 17); and Adrienne Huvelle-Leve, Notes, April 21, 1921, HJP, carton 519.
14. Agnes Cowing, Report to the American Book Committee, May 27, 1921, HJP, carton 519.

15. Adrienne Huvelle-Leve, Notes, April 21, 1921, HJP, carton 519.
16. Agnes Cowing, Report to the American Book Committee, May 27, 1921, HJP, carton 519.
17. Adrienne Huvelle-Leve, Notes, April 21, 1921, HJP, carton 519.
18. Agnes Cowing, Report to the American Book Committee, May 27, 1921, HJP, carton 519.
19. "Que nous voudrions avons une salle de lecture semblable dans notre quartier!" Lily-Elizabeth Carter Notes, April 26, 1921, HJP, carton 517.
20. Quotes in this paragraph from Lilly-Elizabeth Carter, Notes, April 26, 1921, HJP, carton 517.
21. Adrienne Huvelle-Leve, Notes, April 21, 1921, HJP, carton 519.
22. Lilly-Elizabeth Carter, Notes, April 26, 1921, HJP, carton 517.
23. Note relative à la 1ere Bibliothèque, Annual Report, 1920, HJP, carton 517.
24. Lilly-Elizabeth Carter, Notes, April 26, 1921, HJP, carton 517.
25. Note relative à la 1ere Bibliothèque, Annual Report, 1920, HJP, carton 517.
26. Previous three quotes from Lilly-Elizabeth Carter, Notes, April 26, 1921, HJP, carton 517.
27. Lilly-Elizabeth Carter, Notes, April 26, 1921, HJP, carton 517.
28. Note relative à la 1ere Bibliothèque, salle de lectures pour enfants, Annual Report, 1920, HJP, carton 517.
29. Adrienne Huvelle-Leve, Notes, April 1921, HJP, carton 519.
30. Ibid.
31. Note relative à la 1ere Bibliothèque, salle de lectures pour enfants, Annual Report, 1920, HJP, carton 517.
32. W. N. L. Carlton, ALA European Delegate, to Mrs. John L. Griffiths, September 20, 1920, HJP, carton 517 (translated from the French).
33. Lilly-Elizabeth Carter to Emile Jacquain, October 4, 1920, HJP, carton 517.
34. Lilly-Elizabeth Carter, Notes, April 26, 1921, HJP, carton 517.
35. Note relative à la 1ere Bibliothèque, salle de lectures pour enfant, Annual Report, 1920, HJP, carton 517.
36. My preliminary research on the first L'Heure Joyeuse has raised questions and helped to focus my interests in these libraries. Further research will focus on the young readers, the books they read, and the acts of reading that were promoted and encouraged in these libraries.

ARCHIVAL SOURCES

L'Heure Joyeuse Papers, Archives de la Ville, Brussels, Belgium. L'Instruction Publique (IP) de la Ville de Bruxelles, Series II, cartons 517 and 519. Cited as HJP.

REFERENCES

- Liesen, Bruno. (2003, March–April) Les 'Heures Joyeuses' de la Ville de Bruxelles (1920–1978). *Lectures* 130, 17.
- Maack, Mary Niles. (1993). L'Heure Joyeuse, the first children's library in France: It's contribution to a new paradigm for public libraries. *Library Quarterly* 63, 257–281.
- Mixame. (1920, July 21). Bibliothèques pour Enfants: Une oeuvre intéressant [Notes about the first library, reading room for children]. *L'Indépendance Belge*, 7.

Debra Mitts-Smith is a Ph.D. student in library and information science at the University of Illinois. She holds a B.A. in history and German, an M.A. in French, and an M.L.I.S.. She has taught French and has worked as a medical librarian and a youth services librarian. Her dissertation topic is on the visual image of the wolf in children's books. Debra is currently teaching at Dominican University.