Objectives and Functions
of Public Libraries

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A REVIEW of the literature of the past twenty years on the aims of the public library leads one to awareness of the truth of the adage, “There is nothing new under the sun.” Sometimes one idea is at work in a glare of light while another rests for awhile in the shade (perhaps changing costume) but the main theories, ideas, problems, and even accomplishments have altered only to a minor degree.

Shera,¹ in a recent article, discussing the value of library history and mentioning Johnson’s The Public Library—A People’s University,² says: “No one reflected that the very arguments advanced by Johnson, which then seemed so convincing, were almost identical with those employed a century earlier by Henry Barnard, Horace Mann, and others seeking to promote an incipient public library movement . . . but the popular faith in the self-education of the adult still persists, and if there has been disillusionment concerning the efficacy of ‘reading with a purpose’ and the generosity of Andrew Carnegie, faith has found restoration in the ‘American heritage’ and the benevolence of Henry Ford.”

If basic ideas in the public library field have not changed much in the last twenty years, they have at least been strong enough to survive in a world of changing forces, and mostly without benefit of Henry Ford. Twenty years ago there was a great economic depression; ten years ago civilization was locked in terrific battle; today it lives in the midst of a hot-cold war.

During these several periods alert librarians could not be accused of unawareness of what was going on. Library literature reflects a dutiful shift of attention whenever necessary. During the depression, books and articles were written on the woeful state of finances, unemployment among librarians (several went so far as to predict that, due

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to the lower birth rate, fewer children's librarians would be needed in the future), worn-out book stock, and unprecedented demand of the public for recreational reading.

Retooling for defense became the watchword in 1940, reflecting the need for acquiring technical materials to help the workingman recapture skills lost during the jobless years. Soaring costs caused continued financial worries. The employment situation shifted from an oversupply to a lack of professional and clerical workers, and the high circulation figures of the depression period came tumbling down. These trends continued through the war, and are doing so today.

The war years themselves showed the library's interest in civilian defense and various programs geared to obtaining victory. At the same time the American Library Association, looking to the future, created a Committee on Post-War Planning, which produced a set of public library standards and concluded with the volume, A National Plan for Public Library Service. "This book," Carl H. Milam said in the foreword, "can change the course of the Public Library Movement in North America. In particular, it can hasten the day when there will be no millions without good local public library service." 1

The report of the Public Library Inquiry, its seven volumes appearing in the years 1949 to 1952 under the direction of R. D. Leigh, furnished a summary of past failures and successes, gave impetus to continued planning for action, and provided some publicity for the state of libraries in the country. For instance, it stimulated such articles as "What's Wrong with Our Public Libraries." 2 Despite the furor with which it was received in some library circles, however, it did not present too much that was new; it merely placed a mirror before the public library and made clear the facts revealed in the survey.

It is curious and sometimes refreshing to look back on the last twenty years and find that some of the problems that plague the library today have been modified little, if any, during the two decades. There is always a lack of enough funds to carry out projects, as is probably true of most tax-supported institutions; and even though relief may come by consolidation into large units of service, there is little reason to believe that libraries will be affluent, even in the distant future.

During the depression there were more librarians than could be employed on curtailed budgets, but we seem to have passed from a period of too much help to too little, as have other professions. Even in the 1930's there was much discussion in regard to separating professional
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and nonprofessional tasks in order better to utilize staff energies. During the same years and continuing to the present time, more and more mechanical equipment has entered the library and been fitted to its peculiar needs. If one dared predict a trend for the future, it might be that personnel requirements would call for a higher percentage of professional librarians, with fewer and more skilled clerks operating the machines.

Certainly if the public library is to move nearer to its objectives as set down from the beginning up to the Leigh report, there will be more and more need for trained librarians, and highly specialized ones at that. Bryan in *The Public Librarian* summarizes the desirable qualifications as follows: "1) The librarian should be comparable in intellectual caliber, education, and personal qualifications with other social and educational leaders. . . . 2) He should be qualified, both in understanding and in personality to integrate the library with other community activities. . . . 3) He should have not only a broad intellectual equipment but also specialized knowledge in chosen fields." Surely the search for such personnel will tax the budget and the ingenuity of the profession for a long time to come.

Censorship seems to be a problem peculiar to the confused thinking of the era in which we are now living. But is it? A letter written by a librarian answering a complaint about a volume including obscene language found in a branch collection contained the following:

Certain books are sure to be under fire. If the Library has them, it is criticised because they are objectionable. If the Library does not have them, it is criticised for its censorship.

In dealing with this problem the Library makes a distinction between Central and branches. The branch libraries are relatively small popular collections, where all books are on open shelves to which everyone has free access. In selecting books for them a more rigid standard is observed. . . . [At the Central Library] the size of the book collection and the nature of the service require a different arrangement. There we feel freer to place books of all kinds, including some about which people may differ strongly but which they may rightly expect to find in the public library of a city. . . .

That was not the librarian of Detroit, Michigan, speaking in 1951. It was the librarian of Rochester, New York, writing in 1930. There is no indication, at least in print, that those remarks aroused a tempest in 1930.
In 1939, at the American Library Association Conference in San Francisco, a Library Bill of Rights was approved by the Council. The Bill was expanded in 1948, but the essential spirit was in the 1939 statement. The Bill of Rights has been a guide and a help to librarians. From it and within its spirit, all libraries can prepare statements geared to their own communities, which, at the same time, will give them some kind of a safeguard in those communities. It does not and cannot provide a clear distinction between book selection and censorship. With the ever-increasing mass of printed material pouring off the presses, the problem of selection itself grows greater and the conscientious librarian, sincerely wishing to present all sides of an issue and remain liberal in his viewpoint, has a hard time with his choices and his budget.

It would seem that, in the last analysis, the problems of censorship and book selection are neither new nor entirely soluble. The best hope lies in competent librarians, alert to the real needs of their own communities, courageous in their convictions, able to deal with each problem as it arises, and willing to assume responsibility for their decisions. One of the outstanding instances in which a library comes to grips with this problem appears in the 1950 statement of policy for book selection at the Enoch Pratt Free Library. The reports of the Public Library Inquiry, especially Berelson's *The Library's Public,* caused a stir even greater than Ulveling's statement on book selection policies. Actually most of the discussion revolved around another old problem, i.e., what the people want versus the educational objective of the public library. Alvin Johnson had spoken on this in 1938, and he had carried forward the basic ideas expressed by Learned several years previously. Johnson even went so far as to suggest that libraries would probably have to get out books of their own to do the right kind of a job in adult education.

To show further that the idea of relinquishing some recreational ephemera in order to assume a more educational role was not new in 1949, here are a few quotations, picked almost at random from the literature on the subject. In 1934 Samuel H. Ranck, forecasting library service twenty years ahead, said, "First of all I am a confirmed optimist, to the extent that I believe that in the long run libraries and education generally will be financed in accordance with the extent to which the public feels that it is getting service of permanent value from these institutions; in other words, the libraries of 1954 are going
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to stress more than ever the things of permanent value to society,
collectively and individually, simply because they will be obliged to in
order to get adequate financial support.”

Carl Roden,14 in 1939, describing the library of tomorrow stated,
“Standards for the book collection in the library of tomorrow will, it
is predicted, place greater emphasis upon its educational function.”
Also in 1939 A. J. Nock,15 in an article entitled “America’s Too-Public
Libraries,” said, “Still less do I see why it [the public library] should
stock the current best-sellers or any of the ephemeral stuff which our
presses turn off in quantity, and which is of no conceivable value to
anybody, except as a pastime. Aside from the book-clubs, which do
a pretty good business in that sort of literature, we have no end of
circulating libraries which furnish ephemera at a very cheap rate, not
much more than it is worth. If a person wants something to read
merely to waste his time, I cannot see why he should have it at public
expense.” And in reply H. M. Lydenberg16 said that libraries were
coming to some of the things Nock said they should be recognizing.

Libraries in general seem not to have traveled very far along this
path by the time the Berelson report was published. Certainly it high-
lighted the problem and, if it did nothing else, led to discussion among
the rank and file of librarians as to what the educational ends of the
library should be. Still, to a great number of people working in public
libraries today, the one purpose is to give “the people what they want.”
On the surface this might seem to be the most noble aim of all, but
unfortunately it is usually interpreted to mean the ephemera which
Nock and many librarians decry. There is no indication that the
Berelson report will bring a change of policy in many libraries, or
even that this could be achieved by a study to ascertain what the
library can best do to help its community. Nevertheless the shock has
been healthy, and if repeated enough times will certainly have some
effect. Here again, however, as in the problems of censorship and book
selection, it will take more well-trained librarians, specialists in many
fields, to swing the library into full action in the adult education area,
which includes worth-while recreational reading.

During the last twenty years, many public libraries have definitely
expanded beyond the idea that books alone were the medium with
which they were concerned. Audio-visual materials, recordings, and
other communication and educational media have become a part of
today’s library collections, and this by no means is confined to the
larger cities. Yet, in themselves, such items are of little use unless well chosen and well used by librarians trained to select and handle them. In the end, they only make the problem of book selection—or materials selection—more difficult. Microfilm, microcards, and whatever other devices the future may hold, do and will enrich the library's collection, saving it cost and space. Yet even they will not produce a basic change, at least for a long time to come. H. M. Lydenberg, after describing various mechanical devices which may be possible in the future, writes, "Back of the book is the spirit of the man with the message, the spirit of the reader hungry to see or hear it. That spirit has been with us long enough to make us sure that no matter whether we know what books will look like three hundred years from now, no matter whether we know how they will be shelved or read or used, we are sure that books in some form will play as important a part in the intellectual and cultural life of the community then as they do now, as they have done for the past three hundred years. And the librarian will play as important and as responsible a part in their interpretation as he has for the past three hundred years."

Thus, some of the problems that have plagued libraries during the long past will probably continue to worry them in the long future. Primarily they seem to center in finance, book or material selection, and adequate personnel—the basic needs of any library. To a great extent the two last mentioned are dependent upon the first. This does not reduce all library problems to dollars and cents, but it does indicate the great need for stronger financial foundations. As regards advance, the situation is not hopeless. Stronger public libraries, built through expansion of areas of service and consolidation of small units, offer a partial solution. True expansion of a new idea and unifying of entrenched community ideas are slow processes, not alone in the case of libraries. Nevertheless, too much progress has been made by the public library to lead one to believe that there will be retreat in the foreseeable future; but even if it moves forward rapidly, the problems of finance, selection, and personnel will still exist and be written about. They can present a challenge for a long time to come.

If the problems of the public library and the search for its proper functions have changed little in the past, what of its over-all objectives? Have they altered, as so much in the world at large has moved, from old ways to new?

In the summary volume of the Public Library Inquiry, The Public
Setting this current statement of public library objectives alongside the librarian’s historic faith reveals a strong family resemblance between the two. The individual and social values which derive from a reading of books is central to both. But in the newer statement of objectives there are significant extensions of the traditional definition of purpose. The public library’s function is explicitly broadened to include other materials of communication, including non-print materials. Perhaps more important, the faith in the mere presence of a community book collection as a power to change people’s ideas, attitudes, and tastes is now transformed into a positive program for libraries to guide, stimulate, and promote public use of public library materials for educational ends.\(^{19}\)

From the time of Melvil Dewey to the publication of the Leigh report, purposes have been stated and elaborated over and over again. Though many of the public libraries that dot the land have stumbled only slightly in the right direction, certainly the future will find a greater acceptance of the true functions of the tax-supported public library. Expansion and strengthening of service, whether begun with aid from the federal government or at the grass roots, constitute too strong a movement to be completely stopped. The public library is moving forward, though it still has a long way to go.

If trends seem to have altered little through the years, this does not mean that the library is a static institution. The explanation is simply that the original objectives were so large and distant that they call for dynamic action over an extended period.

Arthur Bostwick\(^{20}\) said something two decades ago which stands unchallenged today and can furnish an excellent credo for the future. “The library in a changing world is . . . , and will continue to be, a changing library, but no matter what happens to it, it will continue to be a collection of books and other forms of recorded thought, which it makes available in the highest possible degree not only to those who
desire to use it, but to those who need it and have not yet become awakened to that need."

References

19. Ibid., p. 19.