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# From Inferno to Freedom: Censorship in the Chicago Public Library, 1910–1936

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## ABSTRACT

In the first decades of the twentieth century, the Chicago Public Library employed a brand of casual candid censorship embraced by its peers. In 1910 the *Chicago Tribune* favorably reported on a so-called “Book Inferno” in the library; a metaphorical pit where works of questionable merit were hidden from immature readers. Patrons, especially juveniles, needed to convince a librarian of their honorable intentions before being granted access to works in the Inferno. By 1936, the same institution issued a forceful Intellectual Freedom statement that affirmed the right, and the obligation, of the library to provide access to books on any subject of interest to its readers, including controversial works. An examination of the treatment accorded controversial works in the Chicago Public Library in the decades preceding the 1936 Intellectual Freedom statement reveals both continuity and change in attitudes towards censorship.

Throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, what might be called “the Comstock attitude” prevailed in public libraries. Enacted in 1873 the Comstock Act prohibited the delivery of lewd materials through the mail, including materials about contraception. Librarians in this period were obliging censors, and they applied the Comstock standards to their collections. Early generations saw a moral role for the librarian as well as a cultural and educational mission. The library literature of the time helpfully supplied a variety of mechanisms by which librarians could protect the public from debasing popular works. One suggestion for curbing the public’s insatiable appetite for immoral fiction involved creating a central bureau to evaluate the vast body of literature and separate the wheat from the chaff. Others advocated waiting at least a year to determine the enduring quality of a work and therefore minimize the risk of

adding works of questionable merit to the library's collection. Librarians sought ways to balance their role as moral guardians while meeting popular demand. Hiding books on closed shelves was a common way to both provide and restrict access. Omitting risqué works from library catalogs ensured that only the most persistent and boldest patrons would discover the hidden treasures in the collection (Garrison, 1979, pp. 98–101, 211–221).

Although fading as a new generation of librarians emerged, these attitudes persisted well into the twentieth century (Geller, 1984, pp. 79–108). In 1908, American Library Association President Arthur E. Bostwick's presidential address was entitled "The Librarian as a Censor" and called for librarians to be ever vigilant against collecting low or vulgar books that might tempt impressionable readers into sin (Bostwick, 1908). Bostwick did make a distinction between immoral works that should always be excluded and indecent works with literary value by authors such as Shakespeare, which could be retained. Bostwick's presidential address was praised in a *Library Journal* editorial denouncing the "deluge of bad books now issuing from the English and American press." Criticizing those who argued that the library should supply whatever the public called for, the editorial argued that it was a legitimate function of the librarian to see that "mental poison is not distributed through the library" (Editorial, 1908, pp. 347–348).

Library historians are fortunate to be able to build upon the insights of previous scholars whose painstaking and detailed work has established the broad contours of the early debates over censorship in the library community (Garrison, 1979; Geller, 1984; Wiegand, 1989). More recent studies using accession records and other primary sources have demonstrated the value of careful, detailed assessments of local contexts, and enriched our understanding of the dynamics influencing selection decisions (Wiegand, 2011; Lear, 2009; Pawley, 2010). Local libraries responded to national trends and debates in diverse ways. Collection building at the local level was not merely a matter of receiving a list of "best books" (or a list of "banned" books) from national authority figures and uncritically responding. Rather it was a dynamic process with many factors. The librarian's personal views, local sentiments, budgetary constraints, popular demand, and politics could all impact decisions on whether, or when, a specific library opted to add controversial books. While debates in the library literature helped set the boundaries of professional practice, librarians across the country mediated with their communities to shape the collections available to users.

Looking at Chicago, the head of the Chicago Public Library from 1909–1917, Henry Legler, proudly expressed a philosophy of the librarian as moral guardian. A populist who empathized with the city's working immigrants, Legler firmly believed in the power of reading to elevate the

masses. This cultural mission was fueled in part by his concerns about the corrosive effects of modern urban life. The library was desperately needed to counter a rising tide of ignorance and vulgarity in America's rapidly growing urban areas. Legler was alarmed by the influences of low-brow culture, including the "vulgar and suggestive shows of the penny arcade" and the debasing effects of the Sunday comics (1918, p. 58). It was the duty of libraries to counter these harmful cultural influences. People could satisfy their baser instincts elsewhere; the library existed to supply works promoting cultural and moral uplift.

The dual impulses of sympathy and fear impelled Legler to dramatically expand the library's reach. When Henry Legler was hired in 1909, the library had a single neighborhood branch library in addition to the main library downtown serving a population of over two million. His ambitious "Library Plan for the Whole City" proposed library service within walking distance for every person in the city of Chicago. By the time of his death in 1917, there were over forty branches located in neighborhoods throughout Chicago. As a result of easier access, circulation of books increased from 1.8 million to 6 million. While the library became more accessible, the contents of the shelves were carefully monitored. Legler proudly touted the library's Book Inferno that segregated questionable works and left it up to the librarian to determine whether a reader was sufficiently mature to be permitted access ("Scrutinize Face," 1910, p. 3). Legler claimed some success in changing Chicago's reading habits. Adult readers were reported to be asking more frequently for works of philosophy, history, and science over the "soggy, morbid, and light modern novel" ("Chicago Quits Reading Trash," 1911, p. 7). While acknowledging that readers of fiction remained insatiable, Legler pointed to the thousands of "strong books" used every day. Despite this reported progress, Legler was concerned about the proportion of books with "sex complications" in the library's collection, and he established a library committee to review and approve each new work of fiction before it was placed on the shelf (Coulson, 1978).

While Henry Legler's views were typical of his generation, changing literary standards presented new complications. Librarians struggled with how to treat modern novels of recognized artistic merit that dealt frankly with explicit themes. One bedeviling example was James Joyce's *Ulysses*. The American publishers of *Ulysses* were convicted in 1921 of distributing obscene material, and imports of the book into the United States were barred throughout the twenties (Brockman, 1994, p. 56). Around the same time, the *Library Journal* conducted a survey on questionable books in public libraries, most likely including *Ulysses*.<sup>1</sup> Every one of the thirty-one public libraries and six library commissions responded that they regularly restricted access to a portion of their collection, either in closed stacks, locked cases, or "reference" sections (Feipel, 1922a, 1922b). The criteria could vary and was not solely applied to fiction. St. Paul restricted

“extreme socialistic books” (Feipel, 1922b, p. 860). The *Library Journal* opined that the best response to public demand might be for libraries to cite restricted budgets. Lacking unlimited funds, libraries were justified in giving priority to wholesome books. This was selection, not censorship (Editorial, 1922).

At the same time as the *Library Journal* survey, Charles Knowles Bolton proposed a new code of ethics for librarians (1922). The code included guidelines for collection development. Librarians were urged to build collections that represented the interests of their communities, but they should do so with discretion. Librarians retained the role of missionaries and were still seen as vital forces in connecting readers with good books, but they must not go too far in mandating their personal views on users lest they lose public support. The code endorsed deference to local community standards.

Henry Legler’s successor, Carl Roden, submitted the Chicago Public Library’s response to the *Library Journal* survey. While Roden did not share Legler’s enthusiasm for either censorship or publicity—he would certainly never boast to the press about a “Book Inferno”—he did retain restrictions on access. Books in the Chicago Public Library continued to be segregated to safeguard them from immature readers. Preferring a nonconfrontational approach, Roden urged libraries to simply avoid publicizing questionable works. In Chicago the demand for such works was reduced by omitting them from the monthly bulletins announcing new acquisitions (Roden, 1922).

Regardless of their personal preferences, librarians often faced external pressure to act as censors. As head of the Chicago Public Library, Carl Roden routinely received correspondence from members of the community objecting to specific works in the collection.<sup>2</sup> More formally, in 1923 Carl Roden received a series of letters from the United States Postal Inspector inquiring about several books, including *Homely Lilla*, a modern work challenging traditional gender norms. The Inspector expressed concern in part because the book received notice in the *Chicago Tribune* as one of the titles in high demand at the library. A subsequent letter pointedly reminded Roden that the library was not exempt from postal obscenity laws especially in regard to works that might appeal to juveniles (Roden, 1918–1956, D. F. Angier to Roden, April 5 and March 20, 1923). The Illinois Vigilance Committee was established in 1908 by a group of reformist ministers and social workers seeking to counteract the dual evils of prostitution as well as bad books.<sup>3</sup> Well into the 1930s the Commission conducted undercover operations in Chicago attempting to catch bookstores selling uncensored foreign editions that were barred from the United States (Roden, 1918–1956, Roden to Robert Rae, May 22, 1933).

Facing these and other pressures, Carl Roden responded to the *Library Journal* survey with a formula he would repeatedly use as a shield when

facing challenges to the library's collection decisions. Declaring it foolish to impose uniform standards of decency on a population as diverse as Chicago, Roden was inclined to collect edgy works. The library would acquire "novels written by reputable authors, published by respectable publishers . . . and sold by established dealers." Roden dismissed postpublication censorship as futile and unnecessary. Chicago's large and diverse population had "the taste and maturity" to appreciate works by the best authors, even if they treated "'abnormal' topics." We have felt no vocation to assume the role of Mrs. Partington,<sup>4</sup> and to employ our little broom" (Feipel, 1922a, pp. 857–858). The cosmopolitan residents of Chicago helped shape the policies of the Chicago Public Library.

Relying on publishers to screen titles before publication allowed the library to acquire works without taking responsibility for the contents. This acceptance came with an additional qualification. Books like *Ulysses* were "for the use of persons of maturity and discretion." Never fully defined, it was up to librarians to determine whether a patron's inquiry for a questionable work was motivated by perversion or made in good faith. Despite its limitations, the formulation Roden articulated in the 1922 survey privileging books by reputable publishers and sold by established dealers is significant. It would guide library policy for decades and be consistently used by Roden when responding to complaints about a book deemed offensive.<sup>5</sup> Strikingly, the 1936 Intellectual Freedom statement endorsed by the Chicago Public Library Board employs nearly the exact same language, asserting that books on any subject, "if published by reputable and well-known publishers, and sold without restrictions in bookstores, are properly admitted to the Public Library" (Chicago Public Library Board of Directors, 1936, pp. 71–72).<sup>6</sup>

While popular fiction garnered the most readers and demanded constant attention, nonfiction could prove as problematic at particular moments in history. Carl Roden faced a censorship test almost immediately after being named interim head following the death of Henry Legler in Sept. 1917. With America officially at war, the Chicago Public library withdrew from circulation "all books known or believed to contain pro-German propaganda" (Chicago Public Library Board of Directors, 1918, pp. 45–46). Novels and other noncontroversial works were not withdrawn and remained available for use, while propaganda pamphlets "on both sides" were hidden away, uncatalogued and unavailable to the public but preserved for the use of future historians. Roden would not have called this a Book Inferno, but the approach was a traditional treatment of controversial works; removing them from public view until the crisis died down. In this regard, the Chicago response was not unusual. In 1918 Carl Roden conducted an informal survey of other libraries' practices. Although none of the libraries contacted reported going so far as to withdraw all German books from circulation, the vast majority did with-

draw German books specifically dealing with the war. All libraries were in agreement that books containing pro-German propaganda should be withdrawn from circulation, although in some cases they “merely” segregated the books, supplying them only to those demonstrating good faith. Roden concluded his report to the board noting, “This Library coincides closely with that of American public libraries” (Chicago Public Library Board of Directors, 1918, pp. 45–46).

Librarians operated in an environment of intense emotion and scrutiny. Books on explosives were ordered removed from library shelves by the U.S. War Department (Chicago Public Library Board of Directors, 1918, p. 367). The federal Committee on Public Information imposed “voluntary” restrictions on the press and used all the tools of the new mass media to mobilize popular support for the war effort. The Espionage Act punished those who interfered with the war effort or provided aid to the enemy. These vague criteria, could, and were, used to stifle legitimate debate. Magazines were banned, and editors and activists were arrested for expressing opposition to the war (Geller, 1984; Wiegand, 1989). Even where legal restrictions were not imposed, local citizens and news media demanded their library remove works by disloyal authors. When the *Chicago Tribune* accused the library of spreading pro-German propaganda, Carl Roden quickly responded by removing the contested title. He assured the *Tribune* that library staff were making systematic efforts to weed out propaganda publications and encouraged readers to bring other questionable books to the library’s attention so they could be removed from the shelves (“Hun Doctrines Spread,” 1918).

Of course, wars exert extraordinary pressures that may not reflect normal policies or practices. As a German–American holding an interim appointment, Carl Roden was in no position to resist calls to restrict pro-German materials regardless of his personal philosophies. A peacetime episode with more direct relevance to the development of the 1936 Intellectual Freedom statement occurred a decade after World War I. In the 1927 mayoral campaign, Republican William Hale “Big Bill” Thompson promised to drive British influence out of America. The newly elected mayor fired the first salvo in his anti-British campaign at the Chicago public schools. The Superintendent of Schools, William McAndrew, faced a school board hearing on sixteen counts of distributing propaganda and insubordination (Thompson, 1980; “King George Defied,” 1927). Among the charges were that McAndrew had endorsed teacher’s courses at the University of Chicago that assigned pro-British history textbooks. One work described the Boston Tea Party as an act of vandalism and claimed that the Founding Fathers were a “radical minority” motivated by selfish financial interests rather than patriotism<sup>7</sup> (“Heroes of ’76,” 1927). McAndrew was charged with conspiring with University of Chicago professors to “destroy the love of America in the hearts of school children by encour-

aging teachers to attend special classes at the University where teachers' minds were molded to pro-British ideals" (Fairman, 1927, p. 1627). These and other charges were formally brought before the eleven members of the Chicago school board, which included six Thompson appointees. The other five appointees were urged to resign with the warning that "those who stand for American ideals are going to run Chicago's schools" ("King George Defied," 1927, p. 6).

While the allegations appear ludicrous, Thompson's campaign had clever political motivations. By stoking anti-British sentiment, Thompson could appeal to demographically significant elements of the Chicago population such as the Irish and the Germans, who had no reason to love England.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, Thompson was considering a run for the 1928 Republican nomination on an isolationist platform. Thompson created the America First Foundation to advance his candidacy. In addition to advocating for internal improvements and opposing the League of Nations and other foreign entanglements, the America First Foundation was created to promote patriotism and teach students about the Constitution and American ideals. Britain was a convenient target for the America-Firsters. The British government had incurred massive debts during the First World War, with America its largest creditor. With its postwar economy stagnant, British representatives loudly urged Congress to forgive Europe's substantial unpaid war debts. This was not a popular idea in the United States, and Thompson saw an opportunity to score political points locally and nationally by attacking the ungrateful British. Thompson's critics charged that the campaign had more pragmatic motives. The school system received significant city tax revenues. Wresting control of the school board would allow Thompson to use these funds to reward his political allies. The *Chicago Daily News* opined that "it is notorious that the plan to oust Mr. McAndrew is an essential part of the larger plan to open up the Chicago public school system to exploitation" ("King George Defied," 1927, p. 7).

The library became an unwilling participant in this ongoing political circus on October 20, 1927, when a former judge from Seattle testified at the McAndrew school board trial. Alleging an insidious British plot to undermine America, Frederick Baumann named the American Library Association as a coconspirator in the campaign to distribute British propaganda. The next day Mayor Thompson asked the Library Board to scrutinize the U.S. history books in the library: "I would like to have you make a careful inventory of Chicago's Public Library to determine if there are pro-British propaganda books in the library. Please get a report of the Librarian" (Chicago Public Library Board of Directors, 1927, p. 408). While the letter is brief and unremarkable in tone, in the context of the ongoing McAndrew trial, no one could mistake the implied threat. Those who defied the mayor's America First campaign risked dismissal and possible criminal charges. The board promptly referred the

matter to a subcommittee, where they may have hoped the matter could be handled quietly. The Chicago press, however, quickly caught wind of the situation. The publicity loving mayor was happy to fan the flames, telling reporters he would toss un-American library books into the furnace and replace them with books by authors loyal to America, not England ("Mayor Orders Library," 1927; "Thompson Orders," 1927).<sup>9</sup> The mayor's ally on the Library Board, Urbine J. "Sport" Herrmann, lent his support, vowing to "hunt them out and when I find them I'll burn them up on the lake shore in Grant Park" ("I'll Burn the Books," 1927, p. 1).

Meanwhile, the library's head, Carl Roden, was just concluding a three-month European tour including a stop in England of all places. Worse, Roden had recently been elected president of the American Library Association. Thompson's supporters had assailed the ALA at the McAndrew trial as a propaganda instrument. They alleged that the ALA was recommending pro-British books through a series of adult reading pamphlets called "Reading with a Purpose." Returning in the middle of the crisis, Roden was immediately sought out by the Chicago press for an opinion. While not enthusiastically endorsing the mayor's action, Roden promised his aid to the board in purging the library of unpatriotic texts ("Roden Begins Check," 1927). Roden did venture that physical destruction might be going too far. Rather than a bonfire, Roden suggested the classic compromise he had employed successfully for years when facing challenges. He offered to remove the objectionable books from circulation rather than burning them. This approach was seconded by a pro-Thompson newspaper that urged that political treatises be treated the same as immoral works, noting that "the library retains many books which deal with the psychological and physiological problems of sex. . . . But it does not lend these books out freely. It surrounds their circulation with restrictions." The newspaper proposed that the same approach could be taken for harmful works of nonfiction, "the reading of which might well distort half-formed ideas of certain minds" ("What the Library is Doing," 1927).

Elsewhere, hostile reaction poured in from all sides. Clarence Darrow called the censorship attempt "probably the most infinitely stupid thing ever suggested" ("Darrow Calls Library," 1927), while the *New York World* characterized the anti-British campaign as a "fantastic spectacle . . . which lies outside the pale of rationale thought" (Editorial, 1927). Roden's proposed compromise was mocked almost as viciously as the mayor's campaign. The *Chicago Tribune* decried the idea "that the pro-British books be put in a cage and read by mature historians under the eye of a guard" ("Suit to Quench Library Torch," 1927, p. 1), while the *Chicago Post* satirically suggested putting the word "poison" on book covers to warn readers of the terrible dangers of the ideas inside ("Incineration or Segregation?," 1927). The *New York World* described Roden's performance as "spineless" and "particularly timid and uninspiring" (Editorial,

1927). The heroes in the press accounts were two local attorneys who sued to stop the book bonfires, noting that the city code declared it a felony to harm library books (“Attacks Mayor’s Book Bonfire Idea,” 1927).

Isolated and facing legal challenges, Mayor Thompson abruptly changed tactics. Days after asking the library to scrutinize its book shelves, Thompson declared himself a passionate defender of free speech. He publicly disavowed any intention of ever burning books (“Mayor Denies Book Fire Order,” 1927). Switching targets, Thompson sent a second letter to the Library Board, this time reviving the charge from the McAndrew trial that the American Library Association was distributing pro-British, un-American propaganda. The object of Thompson’s ire was a twenty-page pamphlet, “The Europe of Our Day,” sold in the Chicago Public Library. Part of the ALA Reading with a Purpose series, the pamphlet was intended to guide adult learners to the best books on a particular topic. Thompson objected to several texts recommended in the “The Europe of Our Day” pamphlet, works Thompson described as “biased and unfair and in instances most insulting in their comments on America and American policies” (Chicago Public Library Board of Directors, 1927, p. 410). One objectionable book described the Boston tea partiers as a “mob” and another accused American colonists of conducting a “reign of terror” against loyalists. Thompson had more contemporary concerns as well. He objected to the inclusion of the book *England* by Dean William Ralph Inge, which portrayed England’s economy as so shattered that it could never pay its debts to America. Thompson also faulted the annotations supplied by Gibbons that argued that the United States should cease pursuing postwar loan repayments and appeared to endorse the League of Nations. Thompson’s letter concluded by claiming he had no official concern over library books, but he felt compelled to intervene when librarians used services like the Reading with a Purpose pamphlets to endorse un-American books (Chicago Public Library Board of Directors, 1927, pp. 410–411).

Perhaps emboldened by the overwhelming media support, the Chicago Library Board was more assertive in its response to this second attack. The board immediately sent a forceful letter signed by all the members, including “Sport” Herrmann, who less than a week earlier had famously promised to ferret out and burn the traitorous histories on the shores of Lake Michigan. The letter expressed a fundamental disagreement with the mayor. Endorsing the ALA pamphlets, the board declared that they would keep the contested books even if the mayor’s accusations were accurate (which they disputed). The board went further, asserting its unqualified right to acquire controversial books so that “library patrons may be acquainted with every shade of opinion. . . . This exchange and freedom of thought we consider the primary function of a library and in keeping with the ideal of a free press. Any other course would lead to

an arbitrary censorship as detrimental to American political liberty as to American academic thought" (Chicago Public Library Board of Directors, 1927, pp. 411–412). Despite the robust resistance, the mayor refused to drop the issue. Thompson expressed amazement at the board's "evasive" and "misleading" response and pointedly called on the Library Board to resign (Chicago Public Library Board of Directors, 1927, p. 413–418). When this suggestion was ignored, the mayor announced to the press that he was considering criminal indictments charging the library was violating the law by selling the ALA pamphlets ("Library Chiefs Defy Mayor's Ax," 1927). If this was intended to intimidate the board into compliance, it did not work. Supported by editorials in the city's major newspapers ("Chicago's Library is Safe," 1927; "The Reply of the Library Trustees," 1927), the board ignored the threats. Rebuffed, and likely sensing a losing political battle, Mayor Thompson soon lost interest. No legal action was initiated against the board, and the matter faded from the press almost as quickly as it had appeared.

It is easy in hindsight to scoff at Thompson's antics, and the episode is largely forgotten today.<sup>10</sup> Yet the threat was very real. Thompson did eventually succeed in ousting McAndrew as Chicago School Superintendent ("Board Outs McAndrew as School Rebel," 1927, p. 1). The members of the Library Board showed considerable courage in defying the mayor and asserting the library's right to make available controversial materials free of political influence. It is likely that the intense public scrutiny strengthened the board's resolve. The spectacle of book burnings generated national and international attention and dominated headlines in Chicago's newspapers for weeks. Had the incident been less public, it is easy to imagine Carl Roden quietly negotiating a compromise involving temporarily restricting access to a handful of objectionable titles and waiting for the mercurial mayor to lose interest. This approach had worked in the past. Instead, Roden's suggestion that the controversial books be segregated was roundly rejected. Roden found himself criticized in the editorial pages of *Publisher's Weekly*, *Library Journal*, and newspapers across the country. Both the profession and the reading public denounced the plan, and instead of the traditional compromise, what emerged was an official statement supporting the library's independence and an endorsement of intellectual freedom.

The response to the Thompson challenge reflected a critical change in the landscape in the nineteen twenties. Popular opinion had shifted in the years between WWI and the 1927 Thompson incident. Librarians, intellectuals, authors, and publishers were increasingly vocal in denouncing censorship. Advocates of intellectual freedom were on the offensive, while those urging censorship played defense. Mary Rothrock answered the question "Should the Librarian be a Censor?" with a resounding "No," while Helen Haines chastised librarians for their obsessive monitoring of the reading habits of fellow citizens. Declaring censorship a waste of time

and a practice impossible to implement fairly, Haines argued against the continued use of restricted shelves (Geller, 1984, pp. 127–246). These sentiments helped lay the groundwork for the 1927 Chicago Public Library statement that defended the modern library from political influence and declared the institution an impartial collector of both sides of controversial issues. As an official policy document, this was a significant voice in support of similar sentiments expressed by individuals<sup>4</sup> in library journals and at professional meetings. The compromise initially proposed by Carl Roden was no longer publically acceptable.

Of course, censorship did not disappear with the issuing of a single statement. A version of the book *Inferno* was retained in the Chicago Public Library for decades, and individual librarians could, and did, deny access. Shortly before the Thompson incident, a public library patron wrote the *Chicago Tribune* complaining that he could not obtain any works on Voltaire. The librarian denying the request whispered to the patron that Voltaire was banned because he was an “atheist” and “heathen” (“Voice of the People,” 1927, p. 10). This episode may have been the result of miscommunication—Carl Roden noted that the library had four French and two English editions of Voltaire (Roden, 1918–1956, Roden to Henry Justin Smith, May 25, 1927)—but it reveals how individual librarians could, and did, prevent patrons from pursuing works of interest. Even after the Thompson incident, Carl Roden remained amenable to censorship challenges. In 1937 he quickly agreed to withdraw the book *To My Father*, noting that “it is not an important contribution to current literature and although we have had no other criticisms there seems to be no reason why the book should continue on our shelves” (Roden, 1918–1956, Roden to Margaret Claffey, July 20, 1937). Decades of censorship and habits of thought could not be abandoned overnight.

In looking at the Chicago Public Library, I have explored some of the events and factors that preceded, and helped shape, the library’s 1936 Intellectual Freedom statement. While groundbreaking, that document was not created from scratch. Its origin can be traced, in part, to responses made to prior censorship challenges. The 1922 philosophy espoused by Roden privileging reputable publishers and distributors is repeated almost verbatim fourteen years later. This formulation showed the role of community standards. Chicago’s readers demanded access to the latest works, even if they were edgy. Roden repeatedly expressed concern that the library not be branded a “censor” and resisted removing objectionable works on the grounds that more people in Chicago would be offended by such actions than would be appeased.

The language of the 1927 board endorsement of the role of the library in collecting controversial works also appears in 1936. Beyond the content it is reasonable to assume that the scars of the Thompson affair influenced debates over issuing the 1936 Intellectual Freedom statement. While the Thompson episode may be an obscure piece of local history to-

day, it lingered in the lives of those most closely involved. A *Time* magazine profile of Roden on the occasion of his fiftieth anniversary concluded by mentioning the affair and credited Roden with a heroic defense of the library's books against incineration ("Librarian's Jubilee," 1936, p. 40). Doubtless this reflected the perception Roden wished to convey, although more contemporary accounts were far less flattering.<sup>11</sup> Roden bitterly complained about his press treatment in the Thompson affair. When the challenge over Polish and Russian books arrived on his desk in 1936, it is not difficult to imagine Roden harkening back to the earlier debacle and resolving not to once again be the target of ridicule. Roden and members of the Chicago Public Library Board had seen firsthand that public sentiment would not support a campaign to remove library books based on their intellectual content. Those who sought to carry out such a campaign would become the target of scorn and mockery from Chicago's raucous press.

Examining these prior experiences reveals how the library was shaped by both local and national events. Politics, community sentiment, and personalities created a fluid dynamic. In some cases, such as WWI, external factors proved decisive. Conversely, the attempt by Mayor Thompson to influence the library backfired. Responding to public sentiment, and resenting the political interference, the board explicitly endorsed intellectual freedom, something that likely would not have happened absent the mayor's aggression. Chicago's relatively tolerant attitude permitted Carl Roden to resist calls to ban books such as *Ulysses*. Chicago's unique local circumstances further our understanding of the larger historical picture of censorship in American libraries.

## NOTES

1. Unfortunately, survey respondents were urged not to include discussion of specific titles for fear of spurring even greater public demand for the salacious works in question.
2. In addition to his correspondence, the Carl Roden Papers at the Chicago Public library includes a separate folder labeled Book Selection Controversy (Roden Topical Files, Box 10, Folder 2).
3. Roden demonstrates remarkable consistency of views in his responses regarding access to controversial works. He often agrees to remove a book from the collection if it is "unimportant" even if only a single person objects. He does, however, defend books deemed important, usually by citing an external authority such as a book review or inclusion on a recognized list of best books. In later letters Roden references offending more readers by withdrawing such a work than keeping it and indicates that literary standards have changed.
3. Broader censorship efforts in United States history are covered in Geller (1984) and Boyer (2002).
4. The English anecdotal character Mrs. Partington was invented after the defeat of the 1831 reform bill in the British Parliament. Mrs. Partington compared Parliament's efforts to stop reform to attempting to halt the tides of the Atlantic Ocean with her mop. Mrs. Partington and her mop/broom were used to describe a person involved in a futile endeavor.
5. Versions of this formulation appear in the Roden Papers Topical Files on Censorship as well as individual correspondence, including an October 1939 inquiry from Mrs. A. D. Jones about the *Grapes of Wrath*, and a Dec. 7, 1949, letter from Leonora Greene, a student at the Columbia School for Library Service, asking how libraries handle censorship.

6. The 1936 Intellectual Freedom statement is reproduced and discussed in Latham (2009).
7. The quotes came from Arthur Schlesinger's book *New Viewpoints of American History* (1922). *The Causes of the War of Independence* (1922) by Claude H. Van Tyne was also criticized for calling the revolutionaries narrow-minded provincial politicians pursuing their own petty interests.
8. Chicagoans listing England as a country of origin in 1920 included 26,438 Foreign Born and 60,998 White Foreign Stock. The term "white foreign stock" included the foreign born as well as those with at least one foreign born parent. For Ireland the numbers were 56,786 Foreign Born and 199,956 White Foreign Stock. For Germany, there were 112,288 Foreign Born and 421,442 White Foreign Stock. See Chicago Department of Development and Planning (1976).
9. The Chicago Public Library maintains a forty-three-page scrapbook of newspaper clippings devoted to the Thompson incident that provides a day-by-day record of events as represented in the press. Citations to this are noted in the References with the article title and date, then *Thompson News Clippings Scrapbook*. Clippings from newspapers outside Chicago (Boston, NY, London) are included in a separate section. The scrapbook is stamped "Received by library Dec. 8, 1928."
10. The matter has received some scholarly attention, including several paragraphs in Geller (1984). The episode receives a fuller treatment in Thompson (1980).
11. In private correspondence Roden bitterly complained about his portrayal in the press, which he blamed for sensationalizing the incident. He speculated about an orchestrated campaign to paint him in an unflattering light, possibly to pave the way for a Thompson ally to be named as Head Librarian. See Roden, 1918–1956, Roden to Dr. R. R. Bowker, November 12, 1927.

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