



Adult Education

GRACE T. STEVENSON

THE FUNCTION OF THE LIBRARY in the continuing education of the adult citizens of their respective countries has been the concern, to some extent, of national library associations in all of the countries of the British Commonwealth and the United States. This interest is expressed in publications, in papers and discussions at conferences, in action taken both by these associations and by their members. The associations of the various countries differ, as they properly should, as to where the emphasis should be placed in the total educational program, but the objectives are essentially the same—and so are the disagreements.

A statement of objectives is almost sure to result in a demand for a definition of adult education. Countless man hours have been expended in this fruitless intellectual exercise during the past thirty years. American librarians have too often insisted on defining adult education by categorizing it; adult education is reader's advisory services, discussion groups or film forums. Mary U. Rothrock suggests that this may be because we as librarians "find it easier to assimilate ideas which have been duly related to the [Dewey] Decimal Classification."¹

When the American Library Association took its first major step in adult education in 1924 with the appointment of the A.L.A. Commission on Libraries and Adult Education, that commission defined adult education as follows:

"To some, adult education means the teaching of reading to illiterates; to a few it means the Americanization of the foreign born; to others it signifies vocational training. But adult education goes far beyond all these. It is based on a recognition of the great truth that education is a lifelong process, and that the university graduate, as well as the man of little schooling, is in constant need of further training, inspiration and mental growth; that the training obtained in school and college is necessarily limited to fundamentals, and that the real de-

Mrs. Stevenson is Associate Executive Secretary of the American Library Association in Chicago.

Adult Education

velopment of the individual lies in the independent effort of later years. . . . It is based on that inherent urge forward which distinguishes the human spirit. It must be voluntary." ²

At the opposite end of the telescope is this definition offered in 1954: ". . . the definition of adult education which is now commonly accepted in library parlance, and which seems usually to limit the concept to group activities involving discussions, lectures, or forums." ³ The disparity between these points of view made it necessary for the A.L.A. survey of adult education to adopt an operational definition "in terms of what a library does when it is said to be providing adult education services." ⁴

That our colleagues in the British Commonwealth also wanted a definition was expressed as recently as 1948 by Edward Sydney, Borough Librarian, Leyton, England, at the Unesco Summer School who said it was "no easy term to define." ⁵ Earlier M. M. Stirling of South Africa had remarked: "Whatever our definitions of Adult Education may be, and these may differ with the individual, there is one fundamental principle on which we will all agree and that is that all such education must be voluntary and not forced." ⁶

If librarians agree on the need of a definition they still are not in agreement on the need of adult education, as they define it, as an activity of the library. For thirty years librarians have argued the merits of adult education, an argument that often appears a matter of semantics. Adult education is spoken of in terms of specific activities and education is interpreted only in the narrow sense of class-work leading to grades and degrees.

The A.L.A. Commission on the Library and Adult Education ⁷ in 1926 recommended to the A.L.A. Council the establishment of a permanent Adult Education Board and listed the needs to be served if libraries were to meet their responsibilities in adult education. Some librarians in the United States did not consider servicing these needs either possible or proper for libraries. One of the great librarians of that time, John Cotton Dana, wrote:

"we librarians have been much concerned over a new phrase, "Adult Education." I regret to say that we have been moved to worship the phrase, and to speak of it almost with bated breath. In our quasi-religious frenzy we imagine that in the world with us now a vast multitude of young men and women, limited in the formal education of the schools; but awakened now to the verities of life, yearning to become "educated," and not knowing how to go about it. . . . To do what the shibboleth "Adult Education," as we now interpret it, asks

us to do, that is, to act as guides and teachers . . . all that is quite impossible. Libraries have not now and never will have an income which will suffice to do it.”⁸

That this difference of opinion was as strong as ever nearly twenty-five years later was evidenced by Jesse H. Shera's statement,

“A quarter of a century ago librarians, . . . seized with missionary ardor upon the newly invented term, “adult education.”

Today the adult education movement, if not dead, is certainly suffering a lamentable malaise; 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. . . .

The misconceptions that underlie both the adult education movement and the Public Library Inquiry derive from the same fallacious definition of the “educational” function of the library. The concept of the library as an educational agency is a direct transfer to librarianship of nineteenth century faith in the education of the masses, a faith that had its roots in the eighteenth century Enlightenment and the belief in the idea of progress and the perfectibility of man.”⁹

The democratic government of the United States was founded on the same faith.

In England the Library Association in its “Proposals for the post-war development of the public library service” issued in 1943, stated as follows: “It is the function of the public library to provide books; the adult education it provides will be mainly in the informal study of these books by individual users of the library.” Edward Sydney said of this part of the proposal that, “It tended . . . to exclude public libraries from any and every form of informal education and stimulation . . .”¹⁰

As recently as 1947 a New Zealand librarian wrote: “The library evangelist . . . is devoted to the cause of democracy . . . And yet, in his arguments about libraries, he is extremely, even dangerously, confused about quite fundamental points. At their best, his discussion groups and social engineering have awakened in apathetic communities some conception of democratic responsibilities; . . . Let the librarian stay a librarian and give people a chance to think.”¹¹

Opposed to this European derivative of libraries and librarianship, this “pure librarianship” with, perhaps, a modicum of snobbery, an ever increasing number of libraries and librarians were convinced that the library was, or could be, an instrument of adult education. From all

Adult Education

over the United States and the British Commonwealth come statements of philosophy and definitions of functions of libraries in recognition of this.

Ernest Green in England said in 1939, "The claim of the public library to recognition as an essential partner in the public educational system rests upon its consistent and prolonged contribution to educational progress."¹² J. F. W. Bryon expresses this more strongly in 1947, "Adult education is coming to stay and either librarians will adapt themselves to the new conditions or become atrophied. Those who set themselves and their craft on a pedestal will end by being left on the shelf."¹³

Roisin Walsh, addressing the Library Association of Ireland in 1935, asks why Ireland is backward in the adult education movement and discusses the part libraries may play in the existing educational schemes.¹⁴ Half-way round the world in Australia W. G. K. Duncan was saying, "The librarian in Australia . . . has an opportunity of bringing new life and vigour into the realm of adult education."¹⁵ Thousands of miles away R. F. M. Immelman was expressing his conception of the library's role in adult education as follows, "Just as the public library was the outgrowth of the early nineteenth century adult education movement, so the regeneration of adult education is a matter of vital concern to the modern public library . . . It is only the educational basis of library service which gives it an irrefutable claim on the public purse."¹⁶

In 1941 the Minister of Education of the Canadian Province of British Columbia requested the Public Library Commission to make a general study of adult education facilities existing in the province. The Commission found the libraries very deficient in specialized service to adults, but made recommendations for better library service which would make such services possible.¹⁷ Canada, Australia and New Zealand, with their relatively new, vast and sparsely settled territories, have many unsolved library problems. The Canadian Library Association was formed too recently to have provided any substantial support for adult education, though several Canadian libraries have stressed their adult education role, particularly in the use they have made of films. In opposition to O'Reilly's opinion mentioned above, the New Zealand Library Association in 1945 issued a comprehensive and detailed statement of the adult education services which should be provided by New Zealand libraries.¹⁸

Why all this disagreement, or seeming disagreement? What are the objectives of library service, why are taxpayers in all of these countries

willing to support libraries with varying degrees of adequacy? In Great Britain and the Commonwealth public libraries were an outgrowth of the Workers Education Association movement. Their principal function was, and to some extent still is, to provide books for the tutorial classes sponsored by this organization. The public library movement in the United States received initial impetus from libraries established "in connection with lyceums, young men's associations, and civic groups, or opened to readers by private philanthropists, were conceived of as strictly educational. They were not intended for the use of the young, nor as auxiliary to regular educational institutions, but as a means by which mature men and women might pursue enlightenment and culture."¹⁹

The concept of the library as an institution for the informal education of adults was expressed more than a hundred years ago by the newly founded Boston Library. "For it has been rightly judged that, —under political, social and religious institutions like ours,—it is of paramount importance that the means of general information should be so diffused that the largest possible number of persons should be induced to read and understand questions going down to the very foundations of the social order, which are constantly presenting themselves, and which we, as a people, are constantly required to decide, and do decide, either ignorantly or wisely."²⁰

Adult education activities in libraries vary according to time and place and people. Education means literally "to lead forth" as Shera pointed out, and then went on to say ". . . the social responsibilities of the librarian remain the collecting, organizing, servicing, and administering of the graphic records of civilization and the encouragement of their most effective utilization."²¹ Adult education activities are aimed at this "most effective utilization." It began years ago with efforts to make reading easy and comfortable through the open shelf, (still not completely accepted) departmentalization, library extension, the card catalog. As these innovations were accepted new devices were developed for encouraging the reader and stimulating his interest; the readers' advisor, a multitude of services for a multitude of community groups, lectures, discussions, film forums, drama clubs, and musical programs.

Publications of the library associations of all the British Commonwealth countries and the United States reveal that these adult education activities are more or less common in all of the countries and their validity is debated within the associations to about the same extent. The debate centers not on the educational function of the library, but

Adult Education

on what form it shall take. The librarian who defined adult education as "group activities involving discussions, lectures or forums"²² then described a standard of service for his library that was one of the best adult education programs a library could have to live up to.

The New Zealand Library Association's Consultative Committee on Adult Education recommended that a public library adult education service should provide printed materials, music scores, recordings, films, paintings and other museum materials, information services on the availability of adult education classes, meeting rooms suitable for discussion groups, lectures, hobby work, music rooms, drama productions, trained staff, and cooperation with other adult education agencies.²³ Edward Sydney describing the adult education activities of the Borough of Leyton Library mentions provision for local group meetings, and library sponsored lectures, discussion, music, literature and art groups, saying that through these activities "there is a revelation to many persons of new avenues of interest and a resultant greater discrimination and satisfaction in the use of books."²⁴ Canadian libraries have for several years cooperated with the National Film Board of Canada in making films available to their borrowers, and have sponsored film showings and film discussion groups. Australian libraries also promote the use of films in this way. There is now sufficient documentation of this type of adult service in Great Britain and the Commonwealth, but through the literature available and through conversations with British librarians it would seem that the trend, particularly in England, though less developed in the countries of the Commonwealth, is much the same as that in the United States.

In the United States, since the appointment of the A.L.A. Commission on Libraries and Adult Education in 1924, specialized services to adults have gained wider acceptance and greater strength. In the beginning the emphasis was on the readers' advisor, and A.L.A. promoted and published the very popular *Reading With a Purpose* Series. Subsequent activities through the late twenties to the late thirties included efforts to identify existing, and promote publication of, readable books; cooperation with other national adult education organizations; and establishment of standards for training for adult education work. In the middle thirties a number of libraries began cooperating with the Public Forum Program of the United States Office of Education, the beginning of real group activities for many libraries. The decreased budgets of depression years, and the restrictions of war-time brought about a decrease in A.L.A.'s support of these special services for adults.

The war was partly responsible, however, for the development of the use of audio-visual materials, particularly films, in libraries; and this, in turn, helped to promote and strengthen library work with community groups. In 1951 this work with community groups was further stimulated by the grant to A.L.A. from the Fund for Adult Education for the American Heritage Project.

This project which operates through local public libraries to establish adult community discussion groups has in three years reached 15,223 people through 764 discussion groups all over the country, from cities the size of New York to a town on the slope of the Rockies numbering 18 inhabitants. It has trained 824 voluntary community leaders.²⁵ In 1952 the Fund for Adult Education made another grant to A.L.A. to enable the association to make a survey of adult education activities in public libraries and state library extension agencies. The report of this survey, published in June 1954, provides the association with a foundation of knowledge upon which to base future plans.²⁶ In 1953 the Fund for Adult Education made another grant to A.L.A. making it possible for the association to make sub-grants to individual libraries for adult education projects which they had originated. Twenty sub-grants were made to libraries and the projects submitted are now in operation.²⁷

These projects have made it possible for many libraries which had never had adult education programs before to activate a successful program. They have provided training and experience in organization, administration, and program planning at the national, state and local levels. They have, in many cases, increased the prestige of local libraries, and, more important, they have inspired librarians to interest in adult education and confidence in undertaking it.

In June 1953 the executive secretary of A.L.A. established, as a part of the headquarters office, the Office for Adult Education for the administration of national adult education projects resulting from foundation grants. Later in the year the Fund for Adult Education made a grant to A.L.A. for the support of this office for five years. The A.L.A. Adult Education Board, which acts in an advisory capacity to A.L.A. adult education projects, will use a portion of these funds to make an intensive study of the role of libraries in the total adult education field. The board has enlisted the aid of many units within the association in carrying out this project. The office is undertaking other studies and projects which will strengthen adult education services through libraries.

If there is an emphasis on group services in libraries today it is be-

Adult Education

cause libraries are sensitive to, and a part of, the world they live in. Two great wars have made us conscious of the necessity to get along with other groups of people from the small neighborhood group to the community of nations. That emphasis is apparent in everything. In school a child's ability to get along "in the group" is rated as important as his grasp of mathematics. Group work is stressed in the church, the professional and service organizations, the government structure, and in our international relations.

Over and over again statements made in association meetings or in association journals reveal that librarians regard libraries as educational institutions. "Theoretically every librarian is supposed to be interested in adult education; he himself runs what is virtually an adult education organisation."²⁸ "To-day the public library is the only continuous adult education agency provided by law. The place of the public library in the modern community and its hopes for future development depend on the effectiveness of its activities in the field of adult education."²⁹

What form those activities are to take would seem to be the decision of the local librarian in relation to his own resources of buildings, materials and staff. The librarian in New South Wales may think his community is better served by more adequate book service to the tutorial classes; in Leyton, England, it may be music clubs the people need; in South Africa better book collections; in the Canadian prairies film discussion groups. As a community institution, supported by community funds, a library is obliged to be completely informed on that community and to devise a program that will best serve its people. Whether this be a new building, a different shelf arrangement, a readers' advisor, a film and recordings collection, or a discussion group should be a decision based entirely on the community's needs.

The trustees of the Boston Public Library set forth the need for public libraries a century ago. Many years later one of the best known and most loved of adult educators, Father J. J. (Jimmy) Tompkins of Nova Scotia, said, in speaking of librarians, "They have no degrees to offer, no compulsory education laws. They have no hold upon their students, other than their ability to arouse and direct interest, but they are the key people in adult education."³⁰

References

1. Wilson, L. R.: *The Role of the Library in Adult Education*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1937, p. 16.

2. American Library Association. *Libraries and Adult Education*. [A report of a study made by A.L.A.] Chicago, Macmillan, 1926, p. 13.
3. Hamill, H. L.: Boon or Booby Trap? *A.L.A. Bulletin*, 48:211, April 1954.
4. Smith, Helen L.: *Adult Education Activities in Public Libraries*. Chicago, American Library Association, 1954, p. 1.
5. Thomsen, Carl, *et al.*: *Adult Education Activities for Public Libraries*. Unesco, 1950, p. 24.
6. Stirling, M. M.: Libraries and Adult Education. *South African Libraries*, 3: 111, Jan. 1936.
7. American Library Association, *op. cit.*, p. 105.
8. Dana, J. C.: Thoughts on the Library and Adult Education. *Library Journal*, 53:945, Nov. 15, 1928.
9. Shera, J. H.: On the Value of Library History. *Library Quarterly*, 22:240-251, July 1952.
10. Thomsen, *op. cit.*, pp. 29-30.
11. O'Reilly, R. N.: Library Evangelism and the Educational Functions of the Public Library. *Library Quarterly*, 17:27, Jan. 1947.
12. Green, Ernest: Adult Education and the Public Library. *Library Association Record*, 41:320, June 1939.
13. Bryon, J. F. W.: Shelving the Issue. *Library Association Record*, 49:122, May, 1947.
14. Walsh, Roisin: Adult Education. *Leabharlann*, 5:9-11, Jan. 1935.
15. Duncan, W. G. K.: Librarian's Contribution to Adult Education. *Australian Institute of Librarians*, [Proceedings], 2:87, 1939.
16. Immelman, R. F. M.: Reader's Advisory Service, Adult Education and the American Public Library. *South African Libraries*, 7:42, July 1939.
17. British Columbia Library Commission. *Libraries in British Columbia, 1940, a reconsideration of library survey of 1927-28*. Victoria, B.C., 1941.
18. New Zealand Library Association: Consultative Committee on Adult Education, (Written Submission of Evidence by the Council), *New Zealand Libraries*, 8:118-124, August 1945.
19. Johnson, Alvin: *The Public Library—A People's University*. New York, American Association for Adult Education, 1938, p. 22.
20. Boston Public Library. *Annual Report of the Trustees*. 1852, p. 15.
21. Shera, *op. cit.*, p. 247.
22. Hamill, *op. cit.*, p. 211.
23. New Zealand Library Association, *op. cit.*
24. Smith, Edward: Adult Education and the Library. *Library Association Record*, 48:275-279, Nov. 1946.
25. American Library Association: *American Heritage Project Annual Reports*, 1951-52, 1952-53, 1953-54.
26. Smith, Helen L., *op. cit.*
27. Stevenson, Grace T.: Adult Education Plans, *Library Journal*, 79:161-166, Feb. 1, 1938.
28. M., H. L.: Provision of Books for Adult Education. *Library World*, 37:76, Oct. 1934.
29. Immelman, *op. cit.*, p. 42.
30. Tompkins, J. J., as quoted in Corbett, E. A.: Library and Adult Education. *Ontario Library Review*, 22:8, Feb. 1938.