



Library Cooperation in Great Britain

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THE ORGANIZATION OF LIBRARY COOPERATION in Great Britain probably represents the most notable achievement on the part of British librarians during the past quarter of a century. R. T. Esterquest's penetrating study of the situation, as it was four years ago, did not fail to note weaknesses and omissions, but at the same time reminded us that the National Central Library and Regional Library Bureaux, covering the whole of Great Britain, provide a network of national interlending that is more highly organized than any similar system anywhere in the world. Esterquest was too kind when he reported that "In theory, any resident of Great Britain can obtain any book needed for a reasonably serious purpose on loan through the system as long as the book exists in a lending library somewhere in the British Isles"¹ (and had he included non-book material he would have been positively misleading), but he came quite close to an accurate appraisal of the system. Interlending has indeed become such a prominent feature of the British library scene that until recently most British librarians tended to regard "interlending" and "cooperation" as synonymous terms. Luxmoore Newcombe's *Library Cooperation in the British Isles*, published in 1937, dealt with little else than the system of interlending. Countless articles in periodicals have used the term in this narrow and somewhat misleading sense. This has a real significance, not perhaps readily apparent to a visitor from abroad, and some attempt to explain it may provide a useful clue to an understanding of past development and current problems.

The system of national interlending, based on the National Central Library and the Regional Library Bureaux, was created during the fifteen years from 1930 to 1945. It was in 1945 that the latest of the Bureaux, that for Scotland, was inaugurated (there were certain

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Library Cooperation in Great Britain

legal difficulties in the way of organized interlending between municipal libraries in Scotland, which were not removed until the passing of the Public Libraries Act of 1955). As late as 1924 J. M. Mitchell had reported to the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust that "In general it is fair to say that, while individual librarians in many places arrange privately for mutual loans, systematic co-operation is yet in its infancy."² This report was concerned with public libraries, but Mitchell's criticism was equally applicable to other types of libraries. Although there is evidence of discussion in professional circles of various forms of library cooperation, including subject specialization as well as interlending, from the beginning of the century, nothing had been achieved at the time of the Mitchell report.

This is not surprising in a country in which the national and older university libraries are rarely able or willing to participate in any form of cooperation, least of all interlending. A proposal to compile a union catalog of the libraries of Oxford, including the Bodleian, had been made in 1652; work was started on this, but excluding the Bodleian, in 1929!³ The public libraries, which had been provided out of purely local sources of income, were similarly parochial in their outlook. There were several legal provisions for cooperation between them, but few had attempted to take any advantage of them. Each public library, municipal or county, serving a population of more than a million or less than 5,000, operated as a self-contained unit. Most of these units were small, all were inadequately financed. It is not surprising to find that by 1924, three-quarters of a century after the passing of the first Public Libraries Act, not more than eleven per cent of the urban population were registered as users of the lending services (and in the rural areas it was very much lower). This was the situation in 1924. Yet within less than ten years the present structure of the national interlending system had been almost completed, with the previously isolationist public libraries the most active participants.

At first glance it might seem that this transformation is easily explained in that section of the *Report on Public Libraries in England and Wales*, presented by the Board of Education in 1927, which dealt with the need for cooperation between libraries.⁴ To some extent this is true, but there are one or two aspects of this decisive stage in the development of library provision in Great Britain which have received quite inadequate attention from almost all subsequent writers on the subject.

It is in the first place important to remind ourselves that the sec-

tion in the Report of 1927 concerned with library cooperation was headed "An Organised National Service." It was perhaps the greatest achievement on the part of the members of the committee responsible for the Report that they succeeded in introducing the concept of a national library service. Their greatest failure was the means by which they suggested this could be achieved. That means was to be a "national system of free co-operation," based above all else on the voluntary interlending of books between the public libraries of the country, grouped around certain regional centers, with special libraries "pooling their resources in the service of research," and a central library to act as a clearinghouse for the whole system. There was little more to it than that. This was to give the country an "organised national service." There was to be no suggestion of compulsion, no direct financial assistance from the central government, no standards of library service that could really mean anything. "Local autonomy can be left unimpaired; local responsibilities can be left on local shoulders," the Report added. And then perhaps the most striking proof of its incredible optimism: "Development in the backward areas will be best brought about by the force of example and by the pressure of public opinion." That must bring a wry smile to the face of many a backwoodsman in British librarianship today!

In 1927, however, and for some years to come a "national service" on these lines was precisely what most of the country's librarians wanted. It would mean no sacrifice of any part of their local independence, no abdication in any way of their long-established and almost divine right to select and reject library materials as they saw fit. The scheme was to be entirely voluntary, thus giving each library the power to decide its own interlending policy. Financial obligations would be insignificant, as the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust and the central government were to provide the bulk of the income of the National Central Library (1930) and the C.U.K.T. was in addition to give financial aid to each of the Regional Bureaux as they were established from 1929 onwards. The bureaux themselves were to be housed in one of the largest libraries in each region and many of the "hidden costs" of administering them were to be borne by the large library concerned. It was surely the hard road to a national library service which also offered many of the attractions of the primrose path! It comes as no surprise, therefore, to discover that, whatever else the national interlending service may have given us, it has not provided that "organised national service" of the 1927 report.

Library Cooperation in Great Britain

Nevertheless much was accomplished within the field of national interlending and by 1937 the whole of England and Wales was covered by nine regional schemes, with the National Central Library building up a National Union Catalogue, based on the regional union catalogs, housing in addition the London Union Catalogue and the South-Eastern Regional Library Bureau, and acting as a clearing-house for the whole system and the agency for international interlending. This was an impressive achievement and at first glance it might seem that something approaching an "Organised National Service" was being created.

It must be borne in mind, however, that participation in the various regional schemes was almost entirely confined to public libraries; in two of them, London and the South-East, there was no other type of library (and this is still the position today). Few university and college libraries were prepared to participate and, although a number of special libraries were serving as "outlier libraries of the National Central Library, most of them were outside any official scheme of interlending. The majority of the universities and colleges were willing to lend to each other and as early as 1925 a Joint Standing Committee on Library Cooperation had been founded by the Association of University Teachers to organize inter-university interlending. (In 1931 the enquiry office of this scheme was transferred from Birmingham University to the National Central Library, the staff of which have continued to operate a separate interlending scheme for the universities). Some important special libraries had been encouraged to make their stocks available nationally through the Central Library for Students (the forerunner of the National Central Library) from 1922 onwards. The Carnegie United Kingdom Trust played an important part by offering them small grants of money and by the end of 1936 more than 160 libraries were operating in this way as "outliers." It was still true to say, however, that on the eve of World War II Great Britain's national scheme of library interlending was very much a public library affair.

In 1942 L. R. McColvin published his *Public Library System of Great Britain*, devoting one of its most important sections to a study of library cooperation.⁵ This was the first serious attempt to appraise the national scheme of interlending that had grown up since 1929. McColvin's indictment of the state of public library provision in many parts of the country was in itself sufficient proof of the lack of a "national library service." His evaluation of the interlending service

left his readers in no doubt that in his opinion it had little to offer as a means of attaining such an objective. In other words, he considered the achievements of the 1927 Report's "national system of free cooperation" fifteen years after it had been proposed as the sovereign remedy for the ills of the British library world and he found them of little significance. Very much more than the voluntary interlending of bookstocks was needed. But even as a means of attaining more limited objectives the national interlending scheme appeared to McColvin to have grave deficiencies. It was slow, cumbersome, financially unsound, little used (in 1939 fewer than 55,000 books had been borrowed through the scheme) and, by attempting to serve all public libraries, however small and inadequate, far too comprehensive—at least as far as public libraries were concerned. The non-participation by the vast majority of the research libraries of the country was another serious handicap.

McColvin went further than this. He raised an important issue concerning the form of cooperation that the "national" scheme had taken; it was based solely on interlending. Nothing had been attempted in the field of the cooperative provision of materials, nationally or regionally, on a subject or any other basis. Participating libraries still continued to operate as completely self-contained units as far as selection and retention were concerned. For almost the first time the British librarian was told that cooperation should mean very much more than mere interlending. So it was that in the year following the McColvin Report the Library Association in its proposals for the post-war reorganization of the public library service made a specific reference to this need for specialization, as part of its recommendations on cooperation.⁶

It is indeed surprising in a country in which "library cooperation" has received so much attention and in which so many organized groups were at work, to find that nothing of note was attempted in the area of cooperative provision of materials before the late 1940's. The discussions that were to result in the Farmington Plan had started before McColvin published his report. It is perhaps of some significance that whereas in the United States it has been the larger research libraries that have led the way in developing schemes of cooperation, national and regional, in Great Britain it has been the less well endowed but more professionally conscious public library. This is still a significant factor in the situation today and it did not escape Esterquest's notice when he made his survey.⁷

Library Cooperation in Great Britain

The national interlending picture was completed in 1945 by the inauguration of the Scottish Regional Library Bureau. This is now an integral part of the Scottish Central Library, which in 1954 was moved from its old home in Dunfermline to new quarters in Edinburgh. Like the National Central Library in London, it derives its income from annual grants from the central government and subscriptions from participating libraries. Its position and that of the whole scheme of interlending in Scotland was greatly strengthened by the passing of the Public Libraries (Scotland) Act, 1955.⁸

In 1948 the Sub-Bureau for Glamorgan and Monmouthshire and the Bureau at Aberystwyth, covering the rest of Wales, became equivalent in status and there are in reality two regional library systems in Wales, with a joint National Executive Committee to coordinate policy between them.⁹ The whole of Great Britain is, therefore, divided into eleven regions, eight for England, two for Wales, and one for Scotland.

The public libraries of London were the first to make a move in the direction of specialization of resources. Under what is called the Metropolitan Special Collections Scheme the twenty-eight metropolitan boroughs have allocated among themselves most the Dewey classes and agreed to purchase at least the more important books and periodicals in their allotted subjects, with interlending between themselves and other libraries in the country arranged through the London Union Catalogue, housed in the National Central Library. The scheme came into being in 1948, but was not officially announced to the users of the capital's public libraries until 1953. As with the Farmington Plan, every effort was made to allocate subject areas according to existing special interests, but arbitrary allocation was unavoidable in many instances. It is of particular interest, in view of subsequent developments in the field of cooperative provision, that under this scheme no attempt was made to exclude foreign, older, or non-book materials. For these reasons, the Metropolitan scheme may be regarded not merely as the pioneer venture but also the most enlightened. Cooperative storage on a subject basis was made a part of the scheme. The metropolitan public libraries cooperate also in a number of schemes designed to insure adequate coverage and storage of fiction and drama.

The London public libraries led the way, therefore, in both subject specialization and cooperative storage and before discussing later developments in other parts of the country it may be of interest to consider why this should have been so. There are two chief reasons.

In the first place and in striking contrast to the situation in the larger provincial conurbations, there is no one public library in the metropolitan area that clearly dominates the scene—there is no Manchester or Liverpool or Birmingham. Indeed there is no large public library system in London; almost all of them are what in Great Britain would be called “medium-sized” (100,000 to 300,000 population). It follows that in any scheme of cooperation the responsibilities, financial and otherwise, are more evenly distributed than in any other regional area of a comparable population. The position is very different in Lancashire, where three of the sixty public library authorities serve one-half of the total population of approximately 5,000,000. Similar conditions are found in Scotland, the North-East, West Yorkshire, and the West Midlands.

The second circumstance favoring the development of schemes of cooperation in the London area is the close coordination between the twenty-eight metropolitan boroughs largely brought about by the existence of a Standing Joint Committee, representative of all of them. This body is advised by a number of professional groups of officials, including one for librarians. K. G. Hunt, borough librarian of Hammersmith, emphasized this aspect of cooperation in London when he wrote: “Public library co-operation in London, for many years past, has been not only co-operation between *libraries*, but co-operation between persons—co-operation between twenty-eight or so librarians who meet regularly, and are all concerned with securing the best possible library service for London as a whole.”¹⁰

Other schemes of cooperative provision, usually taking the form of subject specialization, followed rapidly. The South-Eastern Region inaugurated subject specialization in 1950; the two Welsh regions started a joint scheme in 1953; the North-Western Region introduced a scheme very similar to the South-Eastern in 1954. Cooperative purchase of outstanding publications not available in the area has been started in the Northern Region; here there is no subject allocation however. The Northern Region also operates a “Joint Reserve Stock of Fiction,” somewhat similar to the metropolitan fiction scheme. In the East Midlands Region a number of the larger libraries, including Nottingham University, cooperate in the provision of books in modern foreign languages (in 1956 the libraries in the North-Western Subject Specialization Scheme introduced a similar plan). A Scottish Fiction Reserve, to insure the systematic collection and preservation of the works of Scottish novelists, was introduced in 1954.

Library Cooperation in Great Britain

There can be no doubt that these post-war developments in other areas of cooperation have greatly strengthened the regional resources in several parts of the country. "Regional self-sufficiency" is now spoken of as a desirable and attainable objective. Considerable pressure is being brought to bear by the National Central Library on all the regional committees to inaugurate schemes of cooperative provision, at least as far as current British publications are concerned. It has indeed been announced "that 1 January 1958 shall be the date at which the National Union Catalogue (compiled at the [National Central] Library from duplicate entries of the regional union catalogues) will cease to record British books recorded in the British National Bibliography. It is hoped that by the beginning of 1958 the regional library systems will be self-sufficient as far as current material recorded in the B.N.B. is concerned."¹¹ This decision has come as something of a bombshell to the more complacent regional committees. The National Central Library, in this as in some other matters, is being unreasonably optimistic in its hopes of all-round regional self-sufficiency in B.N.B. material by the end of 1957. To understand why this decision has been made it is necessary to go back a little way in order to examine what has become known as the Vollans Report, published in 1952.

In December, 1951, R. F. Vollans, deputy city librarian of Westminster, submitted to a "Joint Working Party of the Executive Committee of the National Central Library and the National Committee on Regional Library Co-operation" his report, entitled *Library Cooperation in Great Britain*, which had been commissioned by the Joint Working Party shortly after it was appointed in 1949. This report is the most detailed study of British library cooperation that has ever been attempted and is essential reading for anyone who wishes to study the subject in any detail. It was subsidized by the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust and published by the Library Association. The recommendations submitted by Vollans are too numerous and in many cases too detailed to be considered here, but of particular interest were his figures showing the somewhat staggering costs of interlending, particularly when the transaction had to go through the National Central Library to one of the other regions or an outlier library,¹² and his survey of recent developments in subject specialization and other forms of "coverage."¹³ The Vollans Report was continually discussed at meetings and conferences of all kinds throughout 1952 and 1953 and eventually in June, 1954, the

National Central Library and the National Committee on Regional Library Cooperation issued a joint set of twenty-one proposals for the future reorganization of the national interlending service.¹⁴ Almost all that has happened since has had its origin in these recommendations. Their most significant points were: a plea for much greater cooperation on the part of university and special libraries; regional self-sufficiency in current British books; up-to-date union catalogs in all regions (the Yorkshire Region has never had a union catalog and in some of the other regions the machinery has broken down); regional schemes of cooperative storage (but nowhere as yet has anything been attempted on the lines of the Midwest Inter-Library Center); the urgent necessity for better provision of periodicals (deliberately excluded from most schemes of cooperative purchase and not adequately provided in any); more liberal lending of "reference library" stocks by the larger library. The recommendations were almost certainly too conservative, but in Esterquest's words they were "to the point and possible of attainment within the not-too-distant future."¹⁵ Maybe he will be proved right, but more than three years after their publication, their attainment is still a long way off.

New problems have arisen since 1954. In the North-Western Region, the two large city libraries of Liverpool and Manchester, announced their intention towards the end of 1956 to withdraw from the regional scheme of Subject Specialization and they have since done so.¹⁶ This is the first real protest made by the larger libraries against what a number of them have come to regard as too heavy a burden (the advantageous situation in London in this respect has already been noted). Costs have been rising steeply and the annual dues now represent more than a purely nominal sum as in pre-war days. The National Central Library is anxious to develop some of its more specialized bibliographical services at the expense of the national interlending service, at least as far as the ordinary run of recent publications is concerned, and this policy is resented by many of the smaller libraries. Most of these small public libraries are in the scheme, and have been ever since the beginning over twenty years ago, not for what they can put into it but for what they can get out of it. This is the sort of thing that has rarely been uttered in the more polite professional circles. The recent action on the part of Liverpool and Manchester suggest that both the times and the manners are changing and what they have done has not gone unnoticed by the other large city libraries.

Library Cooperation in Great Britain

Considerable attention has been given since the publication of the 1954 recommendations to the place of the non-public library in the scheme of things. Although more than 200 special libraries now cooperate as outlier libraries of the National Central Library and almost all the university libraries participate in their own scheme of inter-lending, there are comparatively few non-public libraries in the regional systems and even fewer in the various schemes of cooperative provision. With reservations, the National Central Library has supported Vollans in his recommendation that there should be much greater participation by non-public libraries at regional level. Little progress has been made in this direction and R. H. Hill, librarian of the National Central Library, and his deputy, S. P. L. Filon, have made it clear that this is no simple matter.¹⁷ It must be remembered that the National Central Library's system of outliers represents but a part of the contribution made by the special libraries to national cooperation. About 300 of them participate in the "supplementary loans" scheme administered by the Science Museum Library; many of them cooperate under the auspices of the six subject groups of Aslib; they are active in the local schemes of cooperation between public libraries and industry, of which those based on Sheffield and the West London area are the most active; the various subject area schemes in London—law, philosophy and theology, medicine—are mainly supported by special libraries.¹⁸

A notable indication of an increasing awareness on the part of the major research libraries has been seen in the founding of SCONUL (Standing Conference of National and University Libraries). This body has become closely identified with the work of the Sub-Committee on Background Material of the Joint Standing Committee on Library Co-operation, which is collaborating with the National Central Library on the recording of the holdings of pre-1800 publications in about sixty large libraries of all types. A number of these libraries have assumed responsibility for coverage of certain pre-1800 periods and this is indeed the one national scheme of cooperative provision that is in operation.

National coverage has however received much attention. One of the most significant recommendations of the Conference on Scientific Information, called by the Royal Society in 1948, was concerned with the need for "extending access to a greater proportion of the world's literature" and "co-operation between libraries with the object of reducing undesirable duplication."¹⁹ Early in 1949 a Sub-Committee

on the Co-operative Provision of Books, Periodicals and Related Material in Libraries was set up by the Library Research Committee of the Library Association, with its terms of reference based largely on the recommendations of the Royal Society's Conference. At an early stage, however, it was decided not to confine attention to the fields of science and technology but to attempt to consider the whole field of knowledge. An "interim report" was issued before the end of 1949, putting forward a national plan for cooperative provision, involving the participation of many libraries of almost all types.²⁰ Esterquest found that to most British librarians the plan "was somewhat staggering in its scope."²¹ Certainly it met with a granite-like indifference. Even an attempt at pilot projects in the fields of engineering and the fine arts had to be abandoned owing to lack of support from the libraries concerned. A second "interim report" appeared four years later.²² This recommended a piecemeal approach to the problem on a subject basis and at the same time considered the situation that was developing as a result of the various "coverage" schemes then being initiated at regional, local, and subject levels. In 1957 the Sub-Committee issued its Final Report.²³ Although Part II, described as a statement of policy, contains much that is of interest, the report as a whole must be regarded as a confession of failure after forty-one meetings of the Sub-Committee over a period of nearly nine years.

The "statement of policy" in the Final Report welcomes the proposal to set up a National Science Lending Library, as recommended by the Advisory Council on Scientific Policy in its Eighth Annual Report (1954-55) and Ninth Annual Report (1955-56). In point of fact the central government, through its Department of Scientific and Industrial Research, had given its blessing to a National Lending Library for Science and Technology before the Final Report of the Sub-Committee was issued.²⁴ The location and precise functions of this new library have yet to be decided but D. J. Urquhart, who has been placed in charge of the initial planning, has left the library world in no doubt at all as to the government's intentions. Great Britain is soon to have a completely new lending library in the fields of science and technology; and material, mainly foreign periodicals, is already being brought together in the temporary headquarters in London.²⁵ Much has still to be worked out, not the least is the relationship between the National Lending Library for Science and Technology and the national interlending system, with its various subject specialization schemes. The position of the Science Museum Library will also have

Library Cooperation in Great Britain

to be reviewed. The possible establishment of other national lending libraries notably in the fields of medicine and the social sciences is now receiving attention.

Library cooperation in Great Britain would seem, therefore, to have reached a critical stage. Much of the old "national system of free cooperation" will have to go. Its achievements have not been negligible, but as a means of attaining the objective of an "organised national service" it has proved itself quite inadequate. The old order is already yielding place to new in science and technology. This may soon happen in other fields. If it does the whole library scene in Great Britain will be transformed.

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J. CLEMENT HARRISON

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