Public Relations Beginnings in Britain

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"PUBLIC RELATIONS IN BRITISH LIBRARIES (like the British law code) is largely instinctive and hardly visible." It seems appropriate to begin with a quotation, an article in which so much of the thinking is borrowed from other people. The initial comment is from a letter by R. J. Collison, librarian of the British Broadcasting Company; the article as a whole stands on a framework of facts (but not necessarily opinions) taken from L. R. McColvin's *The Chance to Read.*[1] For the rest, there will be some acknowledgments in the text and others remembered though not mentioned, excepting Eric Moon, now librarian of Newfoundland, who has helped with this article in more ways than self-esteem will permit remembering.

Great Britain would fit comfortably—or at least, easily— into the state of Oregon. The territory is small, the population relatively homogenous, and the tendency to read well-established in a country which publishes close to twenty thousand titles a year. These circumstances do much to explain the principal sources of pride in the British public library service—for example, the completeness of coverage. Some kind of public library service reaches everyone in Great Britain, except the 30,000 people who live in a Welsh town called Mountain Ash and enjoy a peculiarly Welsh kind of anachronism called a miner's institute.

The total circulation of books from all British public libraries in a given year is roughly the same as in the United States, with less than a third of America's population. Moreover, the circulation of the average city library in England has risen by about a quarter since 1939, and the over-all increase is 56 per cent; in American cities, the increase over the same nine years has been about 5 per cent.

It would be foolish and invidious to suggest that the happier aspects of British librarianship are the products solely of territorial and social conditions, but certainly they have been achieved less painfully than

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they will be in America. This is particularly true of the national inter-loan scheme. Through the use of union catalogs in regional bureaus, the National Central Library, and the fast-growing National Lending Library for Science and Technology, something like half a million books a year are mailed from libraries that have them to libraries that need them for individual readers. Almost all public and many non-public libraries cooperate in this scheme, making their book collections available to people all over the country and even overseas. This will come in America; it has already been proposed,[2] but it cannot come easily.

All public libraries in England are supported by local taxation. They are administered by committees appointed from their own number by local government authorities. The local government authority is the town or county council, which is an elected body. There is at the time of writing (March 1958) no intervention and no financial aid from the national government. However, the minister of education has appointed a committee to study the service and some kind of national government support is a possible but unlikely outcome.

To American librarians, the majority of whom work inside the same kind of administrative structure, and who in general realize that the value and indeed, the existence of a library depends on public interest and support, it must seem criminally wrong that in England public relations is "hardly visible." It is, but there are extenuating circumstances.

The British have been called reserved, phlegmatic, shy, and much else more frankly disagreeable. They are people like any other and generalizations fit them no more comfortably. It is a fact however that individualism dies hard in England, and the British for this reason or through arrogance resent attempts to organize and improve them. This may be a factor in the failure of librarians there to use extensively the techniques of persuasion. If that is so, it is likely to be a temporary factor. Richard Hoggart has charted the spread of mass mediocracy in his gloomy and fascinating book *The Uses of Literacy.*[3]

A better excuse for the near-invisibility of public relations in British libraries can be found in the combination of elements produced by library staffing patterns and library education. British libraries are hopelessly understaffed. In terms of statistics, each staff member is responsible for the circulation of about twice as many books as his American counterpart. This is particularly obvious at administrative

and professional levels, where totally inadequate staffing budgets have created an artificial surplus of qualified librarians. Over forty applications were received from all over England for the branch librarianship position vacated by this writer. Since clerks and pages are not generally employed, the surplus of qualified librarians is absorbed in work which could be done as successfully by an intelligent horse. Under such pressures, the long-term advantages of a public relations program calculated to ease these conditions are easily overlooked.

Professional education in England does little more to encourage the kind of social awareness that is a prerequisite of the public relations sense. The School of Librarianship at London University provides a postgraduate course similar in intention to the standard American professional education. For the nongraduate majority, the progression is this: bookish children from the kind of high schools dedicated to the humanities, untouched by the world, eyes turned unwaveringly inward, creep chrysaloid into a predicament where people are an inescapable fact. After some months, if they have not given up, they change one night into little librarians. Before their wings are dry, they are persuaded to abandon their evenings to study.

After a year or so, they sit for the Library Association's First Professional Examination, which investigates their potential and acts as a warning. If and when they are successful in this, they are confronted with the Registration Examination. This, together with three years' approved library experience, brings the title Associate of the Library Association and election to the register of qualified librarians.

Study for the Registration Examination may be undertaken as a sort of hobby at evening classes or by correspondence courses, or with luck after only a year's study at one of the nine full-time library schools which have opened since the last war. In all professional examinations the Library Association, not the school, is the examining body.

Seven subjects are studied for the Registration Examination.[4] One of them is English literary history, or the literature of science or of sociology. All the rest are concerned with techniques: cataloging, classification, administrative processes, library law, reader guidance, and what have you.

The librarian is now, in theory, ready for anything the profession has to offer. In fact, he is likely to be a first assistant or branch librarian, earning between $1500 and $2000 a year, and still liable to

find himself anchored to the circulation desk or shelving books. Next, he may try for the Library Association Fellowship.

The Final or Fellowship Examination is generally required of applicants for senior positions. It covers roughly the same ground as the Registration Examination, but digs deeper.[5] The subjects involved are bibliography and book selection; library organization and administration; the literature and librarianship of a special subject; and one of a motley collection of possibilities, including work with children, advanced cataloging, and the literature, God save us all, of Wales.

Exhibit work, the production of book lists and bulletins, and being nice to readers are appearing more frequently in various interstices of the syllabus. The full-time library schools go further, transcending the syllabus to preach a sense of professional direction. But at this breaking instant the L.A. examinations are doing little more to expose British librarians to the public relations idea than the *London Times* does to introduce its readers to sex.

The British public library service may be conservatively described as one of the finest in the world; it would be perverse not to acknowledge this but complacent to overlook the fact that it remains seriously inadequate. Having suggested reasons for the retarded emergence of public relations techniques, it is necessary to show that these are sorely needed.

Standards of library service vary in England from the excellent to the appalling. The inadequacy of staffing patterns has already been mentioned, and this is reflected most clearly where relations with the public are the least satisfactory. Buildings are almost universally inadequate, and too many country towns conceal in some forgotten back street a mouldering librarian guarding a mouldering book collection in dubious tribute to Andrew Carnegie. The over-burdened national interloan scheme, described above as a source of pride, offers from another point of view a commentary on the weakness of local provision. The public will never regard a library service as satisfactory until it can provide all but the most esoteric material from stock and immediately; sooner or later librarians will have to acknowledge the justice of these demands.

Where there is poor library service there is either a poor librarian or not enough money. Moreover, poor librarians beget poor budgets and vice versa. Of the 577 independent British library systems, 167 spend less than $15,000 a year and 45 spend less than $3,000. A partial

answer is legislation to insure that areas served are big enough to support an adequate public library, and the minister of education's committee is likely to be especially concerned with this possibility.

However, irrespective of the size of the community served, so long as the extent of public library financial support is a matter for local decision, the only final solution is to show that good library service is essential.

It would be unfair to leave the impression that the evangelical necessity has been totally disregarded. It is, as Collison says, "largely instinctive" and "hardly visible" but it is not negligible.

Annual reports, book lists, bulletins, and exhibits are produced which both in quality and proportionate quantity stand comparison with the American output. Generally, in spite of circumstances and horrible examples to the contrary, library staffs are tolerably well-mannered. These are the things which are, or are becoming, "largely instinctive." On the other hand, very little attempt is made to reach people who are not library users, and virtually nothing is done on a national scale to promote public esteem for libraries and librarians.

"There's nothing sensational about sound librarianship—not a thing, indeed, that's newsworthy." This quotation from S. C. Holliday's *The Reader and the Bookish Manner*[6] is a fair summary of the British librarian's approach to his work. Where a library has progressed past this point, its librarian is ahead of his time. Such men exist, and notably W. Best Harris, librarian of Plymouth.

Plymouth is a city in western England, with a population of about a quarter of a million. For many years, it was chiefly notable for spending less on its library services than any other authority of comparable standing. During the bombing in 1941, its central library and one branch were destroyed. In an address last year to a branch of the L.A.,[7] Harris described the public relations program he devised to meet this unpromising situation when he went to Plymouth in 1946. This program is revolutionary by British standards, and embodies features which are far from commonplace in America. An example is the great stress placed on public relations work directed at members of the local Council.

In a personal interview with, or letter to, each new City Councillor, the library's facilities are put at his disposal to help in the preparation of speeches. Photographs, slides, and film-strips illustrating the work of all city departments are prepared along with descriptive notes and used extensively by city officials and politicians. Harris makes it his

business to know personally every member of the Council, and uses the constant publicity which the library receives to attract the most able Councillors onto the Library Committee.

More conventional public relations tactics used in Plymouth include exhibits in local factories and the headquarters of social, professional, and political groups, talks to these groups, and book lists devoted to their special subjects. Conversely, such organizations are encouraged to visit the Central Library for talks on its use. Harris has spoken on the B.B.C. twenty-four times in five years, which must be the British record for that medium, and a western regional television program has been devoted to the work of the library. It is understood that Plymouth's relations with the press have reached a point where local journalists present themselves at the librarian's office for a weekly conference.

Since 1946, Plymouth has built a superb new central library, and its annual expenditure on libraries has risen from $36,000 to $240,000. In a letter, Harris says: "I attribute this story of increase entirely to Public Relations."

While it is certain that no other British public library has developed a public relations program along such classic lines or (Liverpool perhaps excepted) with such effect, Plymouth is not alone. Many public libraries are experimenting with some aspects of public relations work, as, for example, in the field of special services to business and industry. Several of the major industrial cities provide such services and the L.A. is organizing a number of cooperative schemes, beginning with one to be based on Newcastle, in which public and nonpublic libraries will offer a joint information service to these special publics. A similar project, CICRIS, is already functioning in West London.

Children form another special public which is, rather remarkably, receiving special attention. In theory, children have for a long time been recognized as "the readers of the future," but they do not pay taxes and in England, seldom bully librarians or threaten Council members. It is possibly for this reason that, with so much to do and so little to do it with, work with children has been neglected by library administrators, and work with teen-agers as such ignored. A common arrangement is for a single qualified but underpaid children's librarian to supervise the central library's junior collection and to guide by remote control the junior assistants placed in charge of branch collections. In general, it has been in spite of administrative disinterest that a tradition has begun to grow of story-hours, children's book weeks,

library visits by and to school classes, and related forms of collaboration with teacher-librarians. Moreover, the children's librarians have come to exert more influence than any other members of the profession on publishers, authors, educators and, through P.T.A.'s and similar groups, society at large.

This achievement can be explained only in terms of the extraordinary devotion of those who work with children, but a contributing factor has been suggested by Joan Butler, organizer of work with young people in Hertfordshire County. Miss Butler points out in a letter that, while there is no shortage of authorities on adult literature, children's librarians are virtually the only people qualified to assess the literary and other merits of juvenile books, a fact which is recognized by the book trade, the press, and the public. The value placed by authors and publishers on the Library Association's Carnegie and Kate Greenaway awards is an obvious example of the book trade's general concern with the professional judgment of children's librarians.

It was noted above that the over-all circulation of British public libraries has increased by 56 per cent since 1939, but by only 26 per cent in city libraries. Before considering nonpublic libraries, some comment should be made on the rural library service, the rapid growth of which explains these statistics. The county libraries which serve the rural areas were not established until 1920. To the usual geographic problems of this kind of library provision was added the historical disadvantage of late development, and until about ten years ago, the county libraries deserved their reputation as poor relations of the municipal systems. Acknowledging exceptions, this is no longer true, and it is an interesting possibility that the growth and vitality of the county libraries can be attributed to a kind of unconscious public relations process. Miss Butler, already quoted on a different theme, says this: "The counties . . . were given few staff and fewer buildings and were told to introduce books into the villages of the country through the schools, church groups, clubs, Women's Institutes and other such organisations with the active help and co-operation of the local people . . . these early planners planned more wisely than they knew or than a later generation is always prepared to give them credit for, for the seed of infinite growth was in that instruction to serve the community through those organisations which were an accepted part of its life or which had been formed by the people themselves." [8] "Instinctive" or merely accidental, this blueprint for a library service also describes a public relations process.

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Very little has appeared in print about public relations in nonpublic libraries. The comments that follow are therefore based for the most part on correspondence with librarians in the nonpublic fields. Nothing emerged more clearly from this correspondence than the inadvisability of generalizations.

The librarian of the Bodleian Library pointed out that his library's academic reputation attracts scholars from all over the world. "The problem is . . . to make sure that its working space is not filled up by those not qualified to use it. . . ." On the other hand, an organization called the Friends of the Bodleian has been in existence for over thirty years, and there are already six hundred members of a more recent group, Bodley's American Friends. The primarily economic value of such bodies, obvious to American librarians, has still not been recognized in British public libraries.

Nor would it be recognized by the librarian of London University's Institute of Education, D. J. Foskett. "The public library . . . has to convince people that its existence is necessary. . . . The situation is different from that in America, where the salesman is the national hero, and, if you have only ideas to sell instead of objects, you sometimes call your salesmen public relations officers . . . the university and special library does not really have to do much to advertise itself, since it is established to provide something that people want." However, Foskett goes on to mention as fairly common practice the routing of fugitive material to its pursuers, the related technique of abstracting, the use of exhibits, and introductory tours of the library.

This last idea is developed in a letter from B. S. Page of the University of Leeds' Brotherton Library. "We invite all new students to come to the library. . . . They hear a talk about the facilities available, they are given a tour of the building, and they take away a leaflet with which they can refresh their memory. . . . Bibliographical seminars are held for postgraduate students in certain fields." Page also refers to the university library's obligations to local professional men and to the world of scholarship generally, and describes the special facilities and publications with which his library attempts to meet these obligations. If, as Page suggests, all these activities are fairly typical of modern university library practice in England, there is little cause for concern. Judging by the correspondence received however, Page is more modest than accurate in this opinion. It seems probable that internal public relations through introductory tours are the only common form, and by no means universal.

Recent developments in British school libraries, as in the county libraries, owe a great deal to studies fostered by the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust, which led in the middle 1930's to the establishment of specialized professional associations and part-time training for teacher-librarians. Fresh impetus was provided in the 1944 Education Act, and, by 1950, the Ministry of Education recognized that "The library should be the centre of the intellectual life of the school, available at all times for reference, for study and for private reading." [9]

Private institutions excepted, schools and their libraries are provided by county authorities rather than by individual municipalities. The libraries are generally supervised by teachers, but in some cases by professional librarians. School and public librarians obviously have much to offer each other, and it is in the development of cooperation between them that public relations most usefully serves school librarians. This is widely recognized, and implicit in the various forms of collaboration already mentioned in terms of public library work with children. Again, most of what has already been said about the influence of children's librarians on publishing standards applies equally to school librarians, whose expanding budgets provide an important market not only for text books but for entertainment and background reading. How much the increased use of school libraries is attributable to increased provision and a changing educational philosophy, and how much to internal public relations, the present writer is not qualified to judge. However, it seems clear that where internal public relations are practiced, it is a matter of personal decision on the part of the librarian, rather than a developed policy of the county education authority. It seems relevant here to quote the case of the London County Council, which three years ago raised its annual grant to school libraries from an average $42,000 to $390,000. S. Richards, the Council's press officer, attributes this remarkable increase not to a public relations program, but to a general realization on the part of Council members, taxpayers, and teachers that books are important. In his letter he adds, however, "that the democratic method of local government administration . . . could (and in my personal view undoubtedly should) itself be regarded as a piece of public relations machinery."

The status of the public relations idea in British special libraries varies as wildly as it does in the public libraries and is complicated by differences in the organizational structure and terms of reference

of individual special libraries. The subject demands a separate article; this writer has not sufficient space, knowledge, nor to be frank, interest in the field, to justify an attempt.

Two kinds of government library can be distinguished. The British Museum, the National Libraries of Scotland and Wales, the Science Library, and the Patent Office are in approximately the position of the Bodleian—the problem is not how to attract readers to them, but how to impose reasonable limits on their use. (This is in itself a public relations problem, though it may not be recognized as such by the guardians of these institutions.) The government libraries attached to individual ministries are a different case, existing almost entirely for the benefit of government officials. According to K. A. Mallaber, librarian of the Board of Trade, internal public relations are practiced in such libraries. He specifically refers to the circulation of bibliographies, recent additions lists and guides to the service, and to introductory and refresher courses on library use. In these courses, individual attention is given to those officials who constitute a cadet corps and will eventually form an administrative elite. Mallaber adds that good library service is the most effective form of public relations, a truism which bears repeating.

Preceding articles in this issue examine various aspects of American library public relations in sequence; this essay has attempted to provide a microcosmic view of British practice in the same sequence. Perseverance in this policy brings it unwillingly to a consideration of the position of the L.A., a body which it is hard to view as anything but the villain of this particular piece.

The L.A. was founded in 1877 and received its Royal Charter in 1898. It provides for the examination and registration of qualified librarians, it "holds meetings and conferences, collects and publishes information on library services, maintains an information bureau and library, organizes research into various fields of library study, and generally affords machinery for united action when this is desirable and for the exchange of ideas." [10] Regional interests are represented on the L.A. Council by the branches, as: London and Home Counties Branch, Northern Branch, Welsh Branch, etc. Different kinds of libraries are represented on the Council by the sections, as: Youth Section, County Libraries Section, Reference and Special Libraries Section. There is at present no sectional representation of municipal public libraries. The largest and most influential section is the Association of Assistant Librarians,

which represents a kind of librarian rather than a kind of library, and is regarded by some as an unfortunate example of cross-classification.

Among its officers, the L.A. enjoys the services of a publications officer, an education officer, and a librarian and information officer. None of these men is or could be considered a public relations practitioner. This is a pity, since for the majority of its members the L.A. lacks charm, and for the outside world it lacks a voice.

The Association of Assistant Librarians represents the younger and/or livelier members of the profession. Through its meetings and its literature it has, for the past five years or so, persistently campaigned against the parent body's public nonrelations. In 1956, it submitted to the L.A. Council a memorandum written by Eric Moon, its secretary at that time, on the need for a public relations officer. The body of the memorandum was concerned with illustrations of the L.A.'s "superbly inadequate" communication with members, and its nearly complete disregard of the outside world. Indeed, the deliberations of the Council have seemed on occasion, such as immediately before an annual general meeting, to have been wrapped in a Gothic twilight, from which emerges, as it were, a manifesto nailed flapping to the church door at midnight. This is not satisfactory, and the L.A.'s external public relations are worse. There is unhappily not space here to quote all the inefficacies listed in Moon's memorandum, but two examples will serve.

Some years ago, F. Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* [11] roused parents to the dangers of "horror-comics." Educators, psychologists, and parents publicly stated and repeated that the provision of good reading was the surest defense. The L.A. maintained a dignified silence.

In 1955, a large-scale newspaper strike sent people back to books; library membership and use soared. The present writer, finding the L.A. puzzled and inert in the face of media interest in this phenomenon, suggested a modest public relations program to exploit the situation. The answer was that "this kind of opportunism was not considered desirable."

The L.A. still does not have a public relations officer, but the Association of Assistant Librarians' memorandum precipitated a L.A. subcommittee for what might be called passive public relations. That is, it is supposed to meet criticism but has no authority to institute an active campaign. To the difficulties inherent in a committee approach

to the problem is added the fact that this particular committee has hardly ever met. So far it has accomplished nothing whatsoever. A more positive development was the institution of the monthly *Liaison,* under Moon's editorship, as an enclosure of the *Library Association Record* to carry professional news. There is already some discussion of publishing the Association's official announcements in a fortnightly "Liaison" and relegating the *Record* to the position of a scholarly quarterly.

The L.A.'s familiar ostrich position is both vulnerable and inelegant, and the A.A.L. has not been alone in its attacks or in its more constructive suggestions for improvement. Some of the most valuable national-level public relations projects have been instigated and, in most cases, carried through by the London and Home Counties Branch under its secretary, Norman Tomlinson, librarian of Gillingham. Most public librarians are members of the National Association of Local Government Officers, and Tomlinson has been active in promoting the union's interest in librarians and vice versa. He, moreover, is having increasing success in persuading publishers to reprint unavailable but important books, by measuring and guaranteeing their potential market with library purchasers. Finally, the London and Home Counties Branch has suggested that the L.A.'s Annual Conference should be made the occasion of a National Library Week. It is understood that this project is under consideration for a first attempt next year.

Distressing as it is that this kind of development is never initiated by the L.A. Council itself, the activity of some of its branches and sections seems to offer grounds for optimism. Moreover, the lack of any clear distinction between professional and clerical duties is under attack; the eventual separation of these functions will give librarians more time for librarianship and a gradual increase in the status of the profession. Finally, the full-time library schools are providing, virtually in spite of the L.A.'s obsession with technique, the raw materials for a philosophy of librarianship.

Any significant change in professional direction emerges first as a *fait accompli* in the work of a few individuals. Professional discussion becomes obsessed with it. It is opposed by an old guard but, where there is enlightened teaching, it is absorbed as an article of faith by the student body. As this group achieves maturity and authority, the idea passes from discussion into general practice. The public relations idea in British librarianship is already developing past discussion, and it is difficult to see how the process could be reversed. It will

change the face of library work in England as completely as did that other American import, open access, fifty years ago.

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