



# Library Administration in Great Britain

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BY ADMINISTRATION is meant the provision and maintenance, unobtrusively, of satisfactory environments in which purposes can be fulfilled and functions carried on smoothly and efficiently. Library administration differs in no significant manner from the norm, and there is little reason to disagree with Archibald McLeish when, after the initial reorganization of the Library of Congress, he wrote: "I am even more doubtful now than I was then that the administration of a library differs essentially from the administration of any other organization in which highly developed personalities are combined in a highly complicated undertaking."<sup>1</sup> It is in the light of these assumptions that these comments are made on administrative trends in Great Britain. Perhaps readers may be reminded that surveys of this kind are greatly facilitated now that the annual *The Year's Work in Librarianship* (1928-50) has given place to quinquennial volumes. The first of these, *Five Years' Work in Librarianship 1951-1955*, edited by P. H. Sewell, the head of one of the British schools of librarianship, was published early in 1958.<sup>2</sup> This volume is an important supplement to the quarterly *Library Science Abstracts* (1950—); each is a publication of which the Library Association has reason to be proud. Another survey of library trends, say in 1955 and 1956, is provided, if less obviously, by Thomas Landau's *Encyclopedia of Librarianship*,<sup>3</sup> also published in 1958.

The fundamental problems of library administration are be-fogged in Great Britain partly at least because most library units are small ones; those who administer them are also personally involved, to greater or less extent, in the consequential daily routines. In the larger units routines are performed and incidental problems solved at appropriate levels, the residue of problems found partly or wholly insoluble at the levels at which they are encountered being "passed up." The

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better planned and integrated the unit of administration the more day-to-day problems will be solved departmentally and the fewer will call for the personal attention of the chief librarian. The essential reference is not to anything in the literature of librarianship but to *Exodus*, Chapter 18, verses 13-26.

The puzzling question of top-level involvement in routines has encouraged the librarians of some of the largest British library units to argue that there are basic differences between the administration of large and small units. The memory is cherished of innumerable meandering discussions on this topic with the late Charles Nowell, city librarian of Manchester. He taught much librarianship on the way to inevitable disagreements; he never was convincing that basic differences existed or could exist. Librarianship was, is, and must be one and indivisible. Certainly one may not be able to see the wood for the trees, or alternatively, to see the trees in the wood. This granted, it still is to be proved that a wood does not consist, necessarily and essentially, of trees; or that a sufficient number of trees in close proximity to each other do not constitute a wood.

The general approach to library administration in Great Britain continues to be empirical, partly at least because most of the present generation of senior librarians, like their predecessors, have trained by an informal system of apprenticeship. Relatively few articles on the broad issues of administration are published in the professional periodicals. The average British librarian troubles himself but little with such well-worn concepts as "line and staff" or "span of control." Yet of course he is concerned with them, and on occasion may even find himself in situations analogous with that of M. Jourdain. It is to be hoped he laughs, but British librarians still take life too seriously to laugh at themselves very much or very often. Their approach again is empirical; it is not inductive. Yet one of the essential qualities of a profession is the historical consciousness of its members; the realization that a wealth of valuable experience lies almost unlocked, ready for inspection, in the records of past generations of practicing librarians, comes slowly in Britain. A most welcome introduction to a broader view has been published recently by Raymond Irwin in the shape of his *Origins of the English Library*.<sup>4</sup> There is, however, at least as great a need for vignettes of the kind which the present author attempted in "John Pink: Portrait of a Victorian Librarian,"<sup>5</sup> and which C. B. Oldman, Simon Nowell-Smith, and another hand have published more recently in *English Libraries 1800-1850*.<sup>6</sup> The historically minded

librarian in Britain certainly faces discouragement; it is only too evident that many students sitting the Library Association's Final Examination in Organization and Administration will go to absurd lengths to avoid answering questions calling for the historical approach. Unhappily they will find it well-nigh impossible, when times are bad, to draw on

"A curious remedy for present cares,  
And yet as near a good one as I know  
Is to scan the cares of long ago."

Trends in British library administration must be viewed against a background in which steadily increasing demands by readers have to be satisfied in buildings which are only too often inadequate, inconvenient, and obsolescent. Gabriel Naudé reminded his first readers in 1627 that "libraries are neither built nor esteemed but for the service and benefit which we may receive from them."<sup>7</sup> This being still granted, it seems quite lamentable that so many services in Britain operate in and from buildings which have long outgrown their usefulness. Some university libraries, notably those at Oxford, Sheffield, and Birmingham, have obtained new buildings since World War II; and the National Library of Scotland and the Scottish Central Library, both in Edinburgh, and the Northern Branch of the National Library for the Blind in Manchester, have also been re-housed. The National Central Library in London and a limited number of public libraries, including examples at Liverpool, Plymouth, and Dover, have been able to replace war-damaged accommodations in whole or in part; a few, notably those of Manchester and Sheffield, have opened new branches. Yet the crying need for large new central libraries in many towns and for large modern headquarters in many counties has remained unsatisfied. The immediate postwar period, during which Local Authority building was almost entirely limited to dwelling houses and schools, has now given place to an interlude of capital restriction which insures, with equal efficiency, that libraries are not built. It may well happen, of course, that modern theories of capital expenditure will encourage the erection of new library buildings in bad rather than in good times.

No specially marked trends are observable in the activities of governing bodies. Some public library committees still appear to exercise a surprising degree of control in detail. It is probable that few committees now take such active parts in the actual selection of books, tasks which many of them in the past have performed with all the

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confident dexterity of Jorrock's pursuing foxes. This process of disengagement would represent a consummation all the more devoutly to be wished, bearing in mind that book votes have substantially increased in recent years. It is regrettably noticeable, however, that increasing book prices have tended to keep ahead of increasing book votes.

In the financial field, in general, the British librarian cannot usefully spend as much of his time as his American colleague sometimes may in raising money for his library; his scope is more severely restricted, at least partly by tradition. In librarian/governing body relationships in general, the librarian who is still uncertain whether he is best cast for the role of Pooh Bah, Grey Eminence, or a character of intermediate quality will have found better guidance and advice in K. C. Wheare's *Government by Committee*<sup>8</sup> than in any modern work on library administration that has come to notice.

It is in the public library field that the widest administrative question has been raised—the appropriate or minimum size of the unit. *The McColvin Report*<sup>9</sup> of 1942 presented the case for larger areas on grounds which bore recognizable similarities to the trends of *The General Report of the Public Library Inquiry*. The Library Association has devoted much time and thought to the question during the postwar period; its assiduity and its resulting discomfitures have been each of endearing, Balaam-like quality. Assuming now, as must be done, that *ad hoc* library areas on the McColvin pattern are phenomenally unlikely, the some—, many—, most—, or all— purpose Local Authority retains its full interest for librarians.

Local government reorganization is a subject which is handled by British governments with the degree of confident assurance normally reserved for such other matters as divorce law or sabbath observance reform. The nettle has again been reluctantly grasped, however; libraries have been singled out for special consideration and, at the time of writing, a committee under the exceptionally able and distinguished chairmanship of Sir Sydney Roberts (S.C.R. of Cambridge) is preparing its recommendations for the Minister of Education.

The Roberts Committee has "to consider the structure of the public library service in England and Wales and to advise what changes, if any, should be made in the administrative arrangements, regard being had to the relation of public libraries to other libraries." It probably has been deluged with advice of remarkably varying degrees of disinterestedness. The Library Association has prepared and published

its own *Memorandum of Evidence*.<sup>10</sup> This is, unfortunately, a manifestation of compromise rather than of leadership. Few if any are proud of it, and it is interesting much less for its own inconsiderable merits than because its compromises can hardly fail to run parallel with those which the Roberts Committee must itself inevitably consider. Faced by strong opposition to the delimiting of minimal areas by the Local Authorities in its institutional membership, and by some of the librarians who at present administer the smaller units, the Library Association has had to argue its case obliquely. Its Memorandum refers, *inter alia*, to the possibility of some small library units being assimilated by some county libraries; to the possible extension of some urban units by the inclusion of their "fringes" (i.e., by taking them over from county libraries); and to possible amalgamations and joint services. Among the firmest of other medusal recommendations are those favoring a "supra-local source of support and guidance" (perhaps the Ministry of Education). It is the librarians who are in search of the support and the Local Authorities who are least keen on the guidance.

British public libraries have been for a century the least centrally supervised of Local Authority services; many librarians have thought and many feel now that the strait jacket of local financing needs unlacing. This feeling has grown with the self-imposed restrictions on Local Authority expenditure, restrictions which have been encouraged by government admonitions. It is perhaps ironically characteristic of postwar Britain that the welcome for the expanded services of the welfare state has not been accompanied, as yet, by any logical understanding or acceptance of the full financial implications.

The procurator of libraries in Augustan Rome is believed to have been the worst paid of the procurators, and the discrepancy has continued through the centuries; the salaries of librarians and their staffs have always tended, with rare and happy exceptions, to be low. Substantial but insufficient improvements have been effected in Britain since World War II, not a few of them being due to untiring, unpublicized effort by the secretary and senior staff of the Library Association. University librarians now have a much better expectation of professional status than ever before; special librarians are relatively much better placed; and very considerable advances have been made in the libraries of government departments. In public libraries any further upward trends are now framed fairly rigidly by nationally negotiated and locally adopted salary scales. These scales have re-

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sulted unfortunately in public libraries in a serious promotion bottleneck at the level of the lowest professional grade (A.P.T. 1), whose minimum compares favorably and its maximum most unfavorably with the comparable scale for school teachers. Public librarians who in the past have been able to give devoted and unflagging attention to the improvement of their salaries and those of their staffs—librarians are seldom as professionally usefully employed as when seeking to increase their own salaries—now find their never easy tasks almost incredibly difficult.

Restrictions on Local Authority expenditures have also caused much stubborn resistance to larger library staffs, despite increased circulation and reference performance; this resistance has, in its turn, encouraged work-study, more standardized processes, and the adoption of labor-saving devices. Some librarians have always been "work-study conscious;" it must be admitted that trends in sharp contrast have also been noticeable. Sometimes, as in the monastic library, "administrative arrangements and procedures struck deep root in tradition and the idea of vested official rights became dominant."<sup>11</sup> The old-time librarian of Frankfurt who, as Lord Acton once reminded his readers, "raised drudgery to a fine art," has never been entirely deprived of British disciples.

There is considerable scope for job analysis in nearly all British libraries; the ubiquity of the small unit must inevitably blur progress. Over a wider field the O and M (Organization and Methods) investigations have not been without influence on library administration. The best known investigations have been undertaken by the Treasury, by the Metropolitan Boroughs, and by specializing commercial firms called in to advise by other firms and by Local Authorities. The investigations have provided specially favorable environments in libraries for the introduction of new or developed charging systems; including photo-charging, first used, of course, at Gary, Indiana, nearly twenty years ago, and token charging, introduced by The Westminster Public Libraries in 1954. The token system, which controls the number of books issued to a reader but does not identify them, has been adopted also by a few other libraries but, understandably, mostly for controlling the circulation of fiction. Many libraries still remain faithful to their traditional methods and public libraries mostly to their well-tried Browne system. The Newark system has never found many advocates in Britain. The most interesting standardizing process, on the other hand, has been introduced, as it were indirectly, through the establishment

in 1950 of *The British National Bibliography*. The B.N.B. organization, a major development of which British librarianship can be proud, now issues printed catalog cards. More and more libraries will undoubtedly take advantage of the standardizing of cataloging and classifying procedures thus made possible, economical, and easy.

Administrative progress there has certainly been, but always, as Doctor Johnson helpfully reminded us in his life of Milton, "the speed of the horseman must be limited by the power of his horse." What of the training of staffs?

Up to the outbreak of the second World War, the only school of librarianship was at University College in London. This pioneer and now wholly post-graduate school has continued to enhance its always high reputation, and the recent designation of its popular director, Raymond Irwin—president of the Library Association in 1958—as the first British Professor of Library Studies gave immense pleasure to all. Since 1945 schools have been established in colleges of commerce and technology at Birmingham, Brighton, Leeds, Loughborough, Manchester, Newcastle, and Glasgow, and in two places at London. These are non-university schools; and although the recent upgrading of some of their parent institutions may bring other changes in its wake, they prepare their students not for their own degrees or diplomas but for the examinations of the Library Association. The students, who include an increasing number of graduates, are mostly on one year's grant-aided or unpaid leave from their employing libraries, and they prepare mostly for the "Registration" examination. This is not a "final"; and it would be controversial to describe it as an "intermediate," since the student who has passed it faces no further examination barrier prior to acceptance as a chartered librarian.

Every schoolboy finds his friends' mothers' cakes better than those baked at home. Some British librarians express preference for the "internal" examinations of the American schools just as some Americans, it is whispered, cast longing eyes on the all-but-single national standard. The controversy cannot be discussed here, and there can be no more than reference to one aspect of the teaching. It appears that in their teaching of administration the British schools are studying overseas practice, and particularly American and Scandinavian practice, to such good and happy effect that the old empirical approach is seriously threatened.

Most members of library staffs, notably public library staffs, are still recruited from the ranks of school-leavers rather than of university

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graduates. Napoleon's tiresome wisecrack about private soldiers and field marshals' batons could still be justifiably inscribed over the door of nearly every non-university staff room in Britain. The postwar revolution in higher education has, however, seriously restricted the supply of suitable school-leavers. In contrast with the practice of numerous other countries, the preference has been to allow the cost of a university education to remain relatively high and to meet the situation by vastly increasing the scope, variety, and amounts of government and Local Authority grants to undergraduates. Many of the most promising of the school-leavers who before the war might have considered librarianship as a career, can now proceed much more easily to universities; librarianship, by and large, is not yet prepared to recruit them in adequate numbers three years later. It is especially ironical that the Local Authorities who now provide so many of the grants for undergraduates should have done so little to insure that at least their library departments recruit a reasonable share of the graduates. One of the incidental results of changes in university entrance may also have considerable influence on the proportional representation of the sexes on library staffs.

Statistics made available by the University Grants Committee show that only 25 per cent of undergraduates are women. There is a variety of reasons for this state of unbalance; an obvious consequence is that it is now much easier for libraries to recruit girl rather than boy school-leavers of suitable quality. Although there were still some all-male staffs even as late as the thirties, most had by then already recruited some women; in 1958 the trend is distinctly toward feminization. Of the Library Association's current personal membership of 10,500, seven thousand are women. As far as non- and sub-professional duties are concerned, librarianship is now primarily an occupation for women. The feminizing trend is, as yet, less marked in professional posts. Men certainly still hold most of the more senior posts, but in 1958 one-half of the 4,707 chartered librarians (i.e. professionally qualified) are women; assuming that the preponderance of women in recent lists of new chartered librarians continues, then the future can be forecast accurately enough without the aid of astrology.

Library administration is relevant not only in the context of the individual unit, but concerning such units as they work together. It would be difficult to visualize a calling where the members are, in general, any more willing—nay eager—to help each other. This predictable helpfulness has done much to provide the essential psycho-

logical basis for the British system of cooperation. The present is a period of transition during which inter-lending is being very substantially underwritten by stock-planning. A variety of schemes have been and are being built up, regionally and nationally, among libraries of various kinds and units of various sizes. The stock specialization scheme of the Metropolitan Boroughs is singled out, not only on account of its own merits, but also because the development of planned cooperation between the public libraries of London has been one of the most remarkable library events since the war. The *Vollans Report*<sup>12</sup> should be cited as the most important single document in this administratively important field of cooperation: its influence has already assumed the character of a chain reaction. Very sensibly, special attention has been given to the heavy cost of inter-lending. There probably has been error in comparing too readily the cost per book borrowed by one library from another with the average cost of loans to readers from a single unit, instead of with marginal costs, i.e., with the costs of providing and lending the books which the single unit is just prepared to acquire and circulate locally. But a study by national agencies completed in 1954 has expressed the view that "in view of the necessarily high cost of inter-library lending and at the risk of re-stating the obvious, we desire to affirm that the most effective contribution which the individual library can make to the success of library cooperation is to improve its own book-stock and its services to its own readers."<sup>13</sup> In addition, it is a noticeable current trend that many more libraries, including some of the smaller units, are now extending their coverage to include materials other than books, manuscripts, pamphlets, and periodicals, such as, discs, tapes, films, and filmstrips.

In brief, British administrative trends seem full of interest. There is much to learn, notably from American librarianship, and the increasing internationalizing of the profession can be anticipated with pleasure. Perhaps the greatest single weakness of the professional outlook in Britain is that those representing it are still excessively "public library minded"—witness this present contribution. But they are aware of this weakness; the remedies lie in their own hands.

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