



## The Writing of American Library History, 1876-1976

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THE OTHER ARTICLES in this issue of *Library Trends* are concerned with substantive elements of American librarianship, 1876 to 1976; this article examines the ways in which some American librarians and others have viewed the progress of American librarianship during the same century. Inevitably, it is also about the ways in which that development has not been viewed, if only by implication, for, as a study of the literature will indicate, much of American librarianship during the past century has been left unexamined by the historians of American libraries. A general view of the course of development may be gained from these eighteen papers, but many of the details will not be clear. There are simply too many gaps in the study of the record of American librarianship. Causes for this state of affairs there may be, but the purpose behind these remarks is not to fix blame for them. Rather, it is to examine some of the assumptions about, and to assess some of the results of, the historical study of American librarianship.<sup>1</sup>

Thirty years ago, the *Library Quarterly* published Jesse Shera's milestone paper, "The Literature of American Library History."<sup>2</sup> The present paper is a study of the history of American libraries and librarianship since then, with some consideration of the period 1930-45.

Approximately two-thirds of Shera's paper was a rather bleak review of what passed for the history of American librarianship in the years 1850-1930. Indeed, Shera was not given to praise of most works from 1930 to 1945, but he was hopeful for the future, in light of the works of Carleton Joeckel,<sup>3</sup> Gwladys Spencer,<sup>4</sup> and Sidney Ditzion.<sup>5</sup> In these and one or two other works, Shera saw the arrival of the "new

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library history," and he issued a modestly phrased prophecy that it would lead "toward a better understanding of the library in its true relation to the entirety of human life."<sup>6</sup> This was modestly phrased because he did not mention the most influential history of American librarianship yet produced in this century, his own *Foundations of the Public Library*.<sup>7</sup>

However modest his prophecy, Shera placed a large burden on subsequent historians of American librarianship. To challenge his colleagues to set forth a "better understanding of the library in its true relation to the entirety of human life" was to ask mortals to take on the powers of divinity or, at the very least, to steal fire from the gods. How have we who work at library history met that challenge?

In one aspect we may be said to be making an earnest, if not valiant, effort. Jesse Shera reviewed a century of work and dealt with not much more than a baker's dozen of European and American histories. In the thirty years since Shera's paper was published, there have been approximately 140 book-length works on the development of U.S. librarianship alone. In addition, the *Journal of Library History* has been established, a number of anthologies and *festchriften* published, and the Seminar in Library History developed. There is ground on which to take a prideful stand in respect to the development of American library history; it flourishes as never before.

The flowering has been marked by a considerable diversity. The writing of American library history has been transformed into the study of American libraries and librarianship, with major works in the following categories: education for librarianship (8), the development of professional associations (13), colonial libraries (6), college and university libraries (21), nationwide studies of public library development (5), regional studies of public library development (2), public library development in particular states (8), state library development (4), state library legislation (1), Congressional legislation for libraries (1), library architecture (3), archival and manuscript libraries (2), children's libraries and librarianship (2), school library development (4), Andrew Carnegie's philanthropy and influence (3), the development of cataloging and classification (3), the role of women in librarianship (3), historical society development (2), adult education and libraries (2), special library development (1), studies of individual public libraries (10), biographies (14), studies of endowed libraries (3), fiction in public libraries (1), the development of reference services (2), printed book catalogs in libraries (1), and others. The categorization is incomplete; some histories cannot easily be classified. Also, it is

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clear that in some of the categories of study there is developing a respectable concentration. If the trends of concentration and diversification continue, librarianship will be much enriched.

The enrichment is more easily prophesied than achieved. The historical study of American libraries and librarianship has been encumbered by a number of problems which at the least make that study dysfunctional: problems of the definition of history, of its relationship to the social sciences, of its place in education for librarianship, of its values and uses, and of the way in which history is done. Their effects are apparent in the literature, and are sources of doubt about how well we are responding to Shera's prophecy.

Definition is the principal problem; it is central to the others. The uses of history, its ascribed values, the way in which it is done, all derive from definitions of history, and such definitions are numerous in this diverse discipline. There appear to be only two fundamental definitions of history, however: one is of history as a past which is known, and needs only to be explained; the other is of history as a method of study. In the former definition it is assumed that history is a finite entity presented by the past. For example such an assumption is implicit in Felix Reichmann's remark, "But the historian does not make history."<sup>8</sup> The second definition is exactly opposed to that view, in the assumption that only the historian makes history, by writing it. This viewpoint entails a characterization of history as a "way of learning," as William Williams stated it, or as the creation of a "usable past," according to Herbert Muller.<sup>9</sup>

Among the historians of libraries and librarianship there has been a tendency to work from the first definition of history, to view events of library development as closed and finite phenomena which may accumulate in the passage of time, but which will not change. Jesse Shera himself has been most explicit in the statement of the idea: "The basic pattern was all there in New England from the Colonial Period down to the Civil War; the rest was only variations on a theme."<sup>10</sup> The prevalence of the idea is demonstrated in works written since the publication of *Foundations of the Public Library*. For example, in Mary Anders's doctoral dissertation there is the statement: "public library service in the Southeast has been studied as a social development with emphasis on the factors contributing to the movement for library services rather than on the order in which events occurred or the specific advances were made."<sup>11</sup> The order of events and advances does much to define the nature of a movement, but it can be ignored in a study in which it is assumed order is known. Similarly, the search

for "causes" of the public library's origins is much simplified if it is assumed that the history of an institution is known and needs only to be explained in the light of some interpretive theory for the causes to become clear. This is the case in R. J. Constantine's work, *The Role of Libraries in the Cultural History of Indiana*.<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, the role of the public library in the cultural history of Indiana has not been made clear. The inconclusive result of an attempt to apply theory to the historical study of libraries is more sharply demonstrated in John Boll's "Library Architecture, 1800-1875" which the author describes as "a comparison of theory and buildings with emphasis on New England college libraries." Boll's purpose was to study the effect of architectural "theory" about libraries on the planning and construction of seven academic libraries in the region. Unfortunately, there was no architectural theory:

The most striking characteristic of nineteenth century literature on library architecture is its bewildering variety of suggestions . . . no definite central thought, no central guiding line apart from the universal desire for safety. . . . The lack of an orderly, chronological development of ideas is a second characteristic. . . . Frequently, the literature implied rather than expressed new concepts and it was often vague.<sup>13</sup>

In a similar manner a large number of histories of libraries and librarianship may be judged as having failed to meet their authors' purposes. Nevertheless, they have value to other historians as sources of information which may stimulate and aid research on more precisely formulated problems in the study of the development of libraries and librarianship.

The concept of history as the reduction of what is known leads to a more serious result—what Shera called the interminable sequence of summaries of the record of particular institutions.<sup>14</sup> Such histories really result from a process of condensation, of boiling down a record in search of what may be called the essence of history. In his 1945 paper Shera called such studies factual histories, but it appears to be more appropriate to describe them as results of searches for the essential qualities of the institutions. The logic of the idea leads ultimately to works such as Cecil Roseberry's *For the Government and People of This State: A History of the New York State Library*,<sup>15</sup> a series of chronological anecdotes about the most dramatic events in the record of the New York State Library.

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The other definition of history is liberating. The concept of history as a way of learning opens opportunities for expanding one's knowledge of any subject. Rather than a search for a pattern, the historical study of a subject may be a demonstration of variations from patterns. For example, in the transfer of the New England social library from its native region to Wisconsin in the nineteenth century, a familiar model was used by those who took it there, but the varying circumstances of their lives broke the pattern, and the public library in Wisconsin became something different from what its founders and promoters intended.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, back in nineteenth century New England, a different set of circumstances was developing into a pattern of public library development different from that described in *The Foundations of the Public Library*. The industrialization of the textile industry resulted in the establishment of several factory villages which were characterized by "boarding house mills and large communities of female operatives."<sup>17</sup> Elfrieda McCauley's study illuminates another characteristic of history as a way of learning; it is one which "springs from a live concern, deals with life, serves life," for there is apparent in it her interest in the feminist movement, and her concern to demonstrate its relationship to the public library movement, and the function of the mill girls' library movement as a training ground for feminist leaders.<sup>18</sup>

History as a way of learning also can expand the student's knowledge beyond the confines of a discipline, a profession, or an institution, an achievement exemplified by Frank Woodford's *Parnassus on Main Street*, a centennial history of the Detroit Public Library,<sup>19</sup> and by his conclusion that "a history of a library reflects clearly the history of the community it serves."<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Joe Kraus's study of the book collections in five colonial American college libraries led him to the conclusion that the development of those collections occurred in response to changes in the colleges themselves.<sup>21</sup>

It is unfortunate for students of librarianship that there are no more than a few such studies of this development. The lack may be attributed in part to the supposed relationship between history and the social sciences. An extended discussion of that topic is not appropriate here; inquirers are directed to the incisive, humane, literate and humorous work by one of our most distinguished historians, Jacques Barzun.<sup>22</sup> Here it is sufficient to argue that history is neither a social science nor a humanity, but the study of a subject by analysis of its record. History, i.e., a written report on the record, may borrow from the ethos and methods of both, but history transcends them, as

evidenced by McCauley's observation, mentioned earlier. Nonetheless, within librarianship there is extensive belief that history is a social science.<sup>23</sup> The belief may have many sources, for historians have for the past seventy-five years or longer engaged in a running debate on the matter.<sup>24</sup> A succession of influential scholars in librarianship, from Carleton Joeckel to Jesse Shera and Leon Carnovsky, have effectively promoted the gospel of history as a social science. Be that as it may, social science concepts have pervaded the history of American libraries and librarianship. Sometimes the use of social science concepts has been severely methodological, as in Guy Garrison's *Seattle Voters and Their Public Library*, a study of voting behavior in Seattle in three public library bond referenda, 1950-56.<sup>25</sup> The methodology overpowered the study, even to the selection of sources, and led Garrison to the conclusion that although voting behavior could be predicted, it would not suffice to predict the outcome of an election. Somehow, both social science and history were losers.<sup>26</sup>

In a number of other studies, the reliance on method has not been as clear, although it is apparent that the authors were attempting to apply social science methods. For example, in Laurel Grotzinger's biography of Katharine Sharp, there is a four-page discussion of "Resources and Methods," but no discussion of a particular method; nor is the use of a method apparent in the work itself.<sup>27</sup> Conversely, a method is apparent in Ernest Erickson's *College and University Library Surveys, 1938-1952*; this was a study based on the hypothesis that the academic library survey performed by outside experts "is an effective instrument in bringing about results conducive to the growth and development" of the libraries surveyed.<sup>28</sup> An elaborate quantitative evaluation of the surveyors' recommendations and the uses to which they were put was asserted to have confirmed the hypothesis. Unfortunately for his hypothesis, however, Erickson disregarded a significant historical fact: given the social circumstances in which American higher education existed in the period 1938-52, it is likely that the libraries surveyed would have undergone substantial growth and development regardless of the surveys. The validity of the history was thus imperiled by an inappropriate application of a social science method. Moreover, what might have been a useful study was weakened seriously by a social scientist's failure to ask what E. J. Hobsbawm has called "properly historical questions,"<sup>29</sup> e.g., What happened in the academic libraries which were not surveyed? As Barzun and Hobsbawm both have taken care to point out, the findings of social scientists can be used with profit by historians, but "the prospect of

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turning social history into a backward projection of sociology" does not seem to be a useful attempt at hybridization.<sup>30</sup>

It may be argued that the social sciences have greatly influenced the history of libraries and librarianship as a result of the functions assigned to history in programs of education for librarianship. As most library school catalogs indicate, history has a distinctly secondary place in the various curricula; it appears to be used to indoctrinate students in professionalism, to convince them that they have made worthy career selections, and to assert the "success" of libraries and librarianship.<sup>31</sup> There is also a tendency among library educators to argue the function of history as a device for instilling administrative skill in librarians, namely, Peter Conmy's remark about history as "an invaluable aid in the solution of problems," or Jesse Shera's comment: "Finally, the administrative knowledge of the librarian must reflect an historical awareness."<sup>32</sup> Such propositions are plausible, but it may also be said that they reduce history to what might be called a *Sittenpredigtgeschichte*. The didacticism of such beliefs has created an intellectual attitude about the values of history which makes it easy for the certitudes of social science to prevail. Both concepts of history presuppose a definition of history as a reduction of what is known. The very idea promotes the use of history as a vehicle for the proof of doubtful hypotheses; for example, Herbert Searcy states in his "Parochial Libraries in the American Colonies": "The purpose of this study is to demonstrate that Dr. Thomas Bray's . . . libraries . . . were a successful educational venture of the Church."<sup>33</sup> In his major conclusion Searcy asserted the success of Bray's work, but nowhere in the work did he define success in any meaningful terms. Moreover, as Searcy and other historians of Bray's work have made clear, the church was not much involved in the effort to establish parish libraries in the colonies, because most of the support for doing so came from the Bishop of London and Bray's friends. Furthermore, the effort never was more than haphazardly organized. The hypothesis is *historicist* rather than *historical*, i.e., it is based in an excessive respect for the goals and achievements of our predecessors.

A similar criticism could be made about a number of other works, such as Kenneth Peterson's *The University of California Library at Berkeley, 1900-1945*<sup>34</sup> which is a summary of development, to the conclusion that strong and determined leaders produce a distinguished institution; or John Abbott's "Raymond Cazallis Davis and the University of Michigan General Library, 1877-1905," a chronicle of a university librarian running to stay in place during a period of

tremendous change in American academic life—always short of funds, space and time—but about whom Abbott concluded, “The library profession would enjoy more prestige today if more librarians . . . had followed his lead.”<sup>35</sup> The literature would have agreeably less material of this sort if library school faculties were less inclined to tolerate history as a celebration of the past, and more inclined to see it as the study of librarianship based on the record of its development.

The fault is not solely with faculties; to all but casual observers it should be apparent that the history of libraries and librarianship is lightly regarded within the profession. One indication is that it seems that histories of libraries are usually written to celebrate significant anniversaries of the institution or the virtues of the founders; such is the case with Josiah Quincy’s *The History of the Boston Athenaeum, with Biographical Notices of Its Deceased Founders*, Walter Whitehill’s *The Boston Public Library, A Centennial History*, and C.H. Cramer’s *Open Shelves and Open Minds*, a centennial history of the Cleveland Public Library. These volumes are the fruits of a literary tradition which is ancient in historiography—deservedly so, as works of literature—but one which has not contributed much to the use of history as a serious intellectual endeavor in the study of librarianship. If institutions and the people closely associated with them are to be seen principally as objects of veneration, there is no reason for any serious inquiry into the development of the institutions.

That such an attitude has been prevalent in library schools has been noted frequently, by Peter Conmy, Felix Reichmann, and Jesse Shera, to demonstrate the continuity of the belief.<sup>36</sup> There is also abundant, albeit indirect, evidence about the defensiveness in the statements about history to be found in the prefaces to many doctoral dissertations on the history of libraries and librarianship. For instance, in Frank McGowan’s *The Association of Research Libraries, 1932-1962*, there is the statement: “This study is essentially a history, with side trips to examine a few interesting questions.”<sup>37</sup> Those few interesting questions have to do with the nature of one of the most powerful associations in American librarianship, and this significant work needs no such defense.

Lucy Maddox’s dissertation, “Trends and Issues in American Librarianship as Reflected in the Papers and Proceedings of the American Library Association, 1876-1885,”<sup>38</sup> offers yet another kind of evidence for the casual attitude in the profession toward history. The trends and issues with which Maddox concerned herself virtually cover the scope of librarianship. Although her observations are

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stimulative to thought about the early development of organized American librarianship, the work is based on the assumption that one scholar can know enough about all aspects of that decade.

Despite such reservations, there is a positive point to be made about doctoral study in the history of libraries and librarianship in the United States. It has resulted in the production of sixty-six works—almost one-half of the approximately 140 works consulted in research for this paper.<sup>39</sup> In comparison, regular departments of history have been the source of only a handful of studies, most notably at the University of Pennsylvania during the 1950s, where two dissertations were written. Nearly all the sixty-six works have merit, and in spite of the deficiencies noted earlier, it may be said that those doctoral studies have accounted for nearly all the significant histories of American libraries and librarianship.

It is necessary to enter a caveat here against any ideas about a “new history” of libraries and librarianship, if the phrase is taken to mean approximately what was meant by “the new history” of the 1930s, or the “new urban history” which has received so much attention from academic historians. In the doctoral histories, and others, there is too great a range of style, content, point of view, and substance to support any notions about “a new library history.” Given the diversity in American librarianship and its historians, the result could not be otherwise. For that matter, if the histories of libraries are to be considered as a group, Warner’s remark about the “new urban history” could be applied to library history: “The usual shelf of urban history books looks like a line of disconnected local histories.”<sup>40</sup> Whether the histories are of academic or public libraries, there are not enough of them to permit the development of a coherent synthesis.

A limited synthesis may have begun to develop from the histories of public libraries. It is not generally accepted, and indeed is the source of rising controversy among historians of public libraries, which might be called the “Harris-Dain debate,” which also includes Elaine Fain and Dee Garrison.<sup>41</sup> The “debate” is about the purpose of the public library; to be more precise, it is about the purposes of nineteenth-century promoters of the public library, with special reference to those who played leading roles in the establishment and early development of the Boston Public Library. Harris has argued that its founders’ purposes were conservative if not reactionary, in that their principal concern was maintenance of their control over society, and that the library was established as an instrument to that end. Phyllis

Dain's wide-ranging response is not precisely a rebuttal but rather a set of questions about the admittedly speculative nature of Harris' work; she charges Harris more with sins of omission than those of commission. Garrison was brought into the controversy by Harris and Fain, through Harris's contention that Garrison's dissertation, "Cultural Missionaries: A Study of American Public Library Leaders, 1876-1910," although not a study of institutional development, tends to support his thesis. Elaine Fain's criticism of Harris/Garrison is more difficult to summarize, but it seems fair to say that she dislikes the self-conscious revisionism of Harris and Garrison's scorn for the passivity of American librarians.

In some important respects, the "debate" may have come to appear to revolve around semantical shadows—the arrogant elitism of George Ticknor and the male chauvinism of Justin Winsor. It can be argued that the personality traits of individuals contribute importantly to the development of institutions in which they play leading roles. In this case, however, it does not seem relevant to worry about Ticknor's arrogance or Winsor's chauvinism. Both terms have come to be used as slogans or labels which serve to mask deeper issues, and there does not appear to be evidence which directly relates those matters to the purposes for which the two men advocated the establishment of public libraries.

As for the conservative purpose behind the promotion of public libraries, the weight of evidence seems to be amassing on the side of Harris and Garrison. This author's study indicates clearly enough that in Wisconsin the promoters of the public library strived to maintain their control over society or, at the very least, to use the public library as an instrument for indoctrinating immigrants to Wisconsin into the culture and customs of the Yankees who controlled the movement; they said so. There is also some evidence for such a conclusion regarding the promoters of library associations in Baltimore, 1840-60, although the study of library associations in that city remains incomplete. Finally, Ray Held's *The Rise of the Public Library in California*<sup>42</sup> allows one to infer that if he had sought evidence on that point he would have found it.

Until more evidence is available, it would be better to suspend the debate, especially as the principal contestants have digressed from their concern over the purposes of public library promoters into sterile arguments about the purposes of the debaters themselves. Nevertheless, the controversy does lead to some considerations about the relationship between "library history" and other history. Harris's

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statement of his revisionism is self-consciously deliberate, and derived from his study of other historians' works (especially those of the younger "revisionist" historians, whose numbers are substantial). Also, Dee Garrison is a "regular" historian, one of the few such in the United States who is concerned with libraries and librarians. Harris desires to have his work considered part of the mainstream of the new "new history." Garrison, on the other hand, is a historian of women in the United States; their roles and functions in American librarianship offer her a convenient and intriguing focus for a study of women in the society at large. Their purposes in history are divergent, and this accounts in part for their divergent contributions to the debate. It is this condition which offers entry into the larger question about the history of librarianship *vis-à-vis* "history."

Among historians there is a great deal of ferment about their discipline, and some portion of it concerns the integration of history.<sup>43</sup> Historians, whatever differences they exhibit, are enormously attracted by the ideal of the unity of knowledge. The attraction stems in part from a related concept of the cumulative nature of knowledge, although that idea is under challenge.<sup>44</sup> It is also likely that ideas about the unity of knowledge are derived in some degree from an ancient idea about the unitary nature of society. The unitary society has been overwhelmed by industrialization and urbanization, as has the unity of knowledge, for knowledge is a function of society.<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, the power of the idea is demonstrated in the debates among "hyphenate-historians" about the relationship between history and other branches of knowledge.<sup>46</sup> One very interesting quality of the papers cited (and many others as well) is the undercurrent of concern about the relationships between the hyphenate-historians and the disciplines or professions to which they are attached. In all cases, apparently, there are tensions between historians of an activity and those directly involved in its practice. Librarianship is not exempt from this condition.

There appears to prevail a notion that the historian of librarianship is involved in librarianship as an outsider, even as a voyeur looking in on something which is not quite his business. Perhaps this interpretation should not be stated so boldly, but librarians' attitudes about the history of their profession do appear to spring from some such idea of history. If the historian writes to celebrate the victories and virtues of librarianship, his work is accepted as providing a useful background for neophytes in the profession, but if he writes in a desire to apply scholarly inquiry to the ideas, events, institutions and

people of librarianship, then the work is too often dismissed as "mere history," remote from the real problems of librarianship. Such an attitude reflects a severe misunderstanding of history. The subject of historical inquiry into a profession is the profession itself, but the work which results may not integrate the subject. Barzun has pointed out that the integrity of any subject comes not from its forms and ideas, but from the problems to which the forms and ideas are offered as answers.<sup>47</sup> The function of the historical study of a subject is to analyze the workings of those forms and ideas.

The historian analyzes some part of the subject, by studying its record, and adds to our store of knowledge about it. To that analysis the historian brings a set of knowledge and speculations, partly derived from the subject itself, partly from other subjects. Such knowledge is applied not to the record, but to the historian's ideas about the record. Other knowledge may inform the historian's thought about the record, but it may not be used to transform the record. It is this prohibition which prevents the metamorphosis of history into a science, for in the sciences the subject of study is not the record of an event, but the event itself.<sup>48</sup> An example from the Harris/Dain debate may clarify the point. In her "Rejoinder," Garrison observed, with reference to nineteenth-century librarians, that: "The knotty problem of Democracy vs. Culture was never clearly resolved."<sup>49</sup> The statement is true enough, but unhistorical. The record of nineteenth-century librarianship does not disclose that librarians perceived such a problem; rather, it indicates that they thought of their culture as democratic. It is our knowledge of a conflict between the claims of a culture and the principles of democracy which may enable us also to see that our predecessors' forms and ideas may not be appropriate to the problems we perceive.

It is necessary to discount the idea of history as a science. For nearly one-half century, librarians have been admonished to use history as an instrument to gain an understanding of the sociological beginnings of the library movement,<sup>50</sup> to develop wisdom,<sup>51</sup> to prevent mistakes,<sup>52</sup> to solve practical problems,<sup>53</sup> and to find new purposes for the library.<sup>54</sup> All of these are worthy objectives, and it is perhaps our misfortune that history cannot bear the burden placed upon it by such earnest testaments of faith. Librarians who understand their profession and its functions may be able to achieve those goals; history, as the study of the profession's record, may assist in the development of the necessary understanding, but only in the minds of librarians who are free from the past.

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We will be free from the past when we understand that in history—the study of the record from the past—we serve our purposes, not the past. The writing of American library history, 1876-1976, is evidence of how far we have come, and of how far we must go in the service of those purposes.

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