
Working the Reference Desk

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ABSTRACT

THE ROLES OF REFERENCE WORKERS HAVE EVOLVED unevenly and are often unclear. This article examines the historical reasons for the reference desk and its workers in order to establish how reference work has been circumscribed, to see how it evolved, and to see if there is a defining perimeter between the tasks and duties of the paraprofessional and those of the professional.

INTRODUCTION

Terry Rodgers (1997), in her vituperative diatribe against the library profession, *The Library Paraprofessional: Notes from the Underground*, stridently claims that "the nature of library work is that any smart person can learn it" (p. 161). In railing against those who assert the professional nature of librarianship, Rodgers establishes the common denominator among library workers to be that of clerical work. Throughout her book on the paraprofessional, Rodgers makes no systematic distinction between the type of work a paraprofessional might do and that of the professional, except to say that increased responsibility and skill comes with time and experience. Rodgers believes, much as early twentieth-century librarians believed, that anyone who works within the confines of a library building is a librarian and a professional. She resents what she sees as the artificial boundary that permeates library work: those who hold the professional degree are professionals, those who do not are nonprofessionals. Others, with a more rational approach to this topic of paraprofessional versus the professional in the

library, have noted a blurring of boundary lines between these two categories of workers.¹ Within the realm of the reference desk, no one has yet completely defined what it is that a professional reference librarian does in relation to the paraprofessional and vice-versa or what expertise might be developed during the course of a master's level program in information studies or with time and experience to make the work roles sufficiently distinctive to label one professional, the other paraprofessional. This article examines the historical reasons behind the reference desk and its workers in order to establish how reference desk work has been circumscribed, to see how it evolved, and to see if there is a defining perimeter between the tasks and duties of the paraprofessional and those of the professional. The intent, then, is to clarify the boundaries that, at least in practice, have not been well-articulated.

A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE EARLY UNDERPINNINGS OF THE REFERENCE DESK

By 1876, serious thought was being given to providing some form of reader assistance. A. R. Spofford (1876), then the Librarian of Congress, was a proponent of reference works as a means of reader assistance, to save time for both the librarian and the reader. A wise selection of reference books, in Spofford's opinion, was the foremost facilitator in accommodating the reader's needs. Samuel Green (1876), librarian of the Worcester Free Public Library in Massachusetts, believed that a librarian was needed to offer assistance to the reader. The impetus behind his idea was to ensure that the collection be heavily used to show the importance and necessity of the library:

The more freely a librarian mingles with readers, and the greater the amount of assistance he renders them, the more intense does the conviction of citizens, also, become, that the library is a useful institution, and the more willing do they grow to grant money in larger and larger sums to be used in buying books and employing additional assistants. (p. 81)

Green (1876) envisioned the transaction that occurred between the librarian and the reader would be like that of shopkeeper to customer: "A librarian should be as unwilling to allow an inquirer to leave the library with his question unanswered as a shopkeeper is to have a customer go out of his store without making a purchase" (p. 79). He also believed that the reader should be received into the library with "something of the cordiality displayed by an old-time inn-keeper" (pp. 79-80). Green cautioned, however, that a reader should not become dependent on the librarian. "Give them as much assistance as they need, but try at the same time to teach them to rely upon themselves and become independent" (p. 80).

In order to increase the popularity of the library, Green realized that he needed to bring into the library those readers who had no real sense of

what a library could provide. He recognized that people would need encouragement to ask appropriate questions and to express their needs. The idea of a "hearty reception" (p. 74) came to the fore in order to make people feel at ease enough to ask questions and receive assistance. The person most capable to provide this sort of assistance, in Green's (1876) opinion, was a

cultivated woman...who heartily enjoys works of the imagination, but whose taste is educated. She must be a person with pleasant manners, and while of proper dignity, ready to unbend, and of social disposition. Instruct this assistant to consult with every person who asks for help in selecting books. This should not be her whole work; for work of this kind is best done when it has the appearance of being performed incidentally. Let the assistant, then, have some regular work, but such employment as she can at once lay aside when her aid is asked for in picking out books to read. (p. 79)

In larger libraries, Green believed it would be impossible for the "superintendent" to assist readers; however, by spending a few minutes each day with readers, he could ensure that "an air of hospitality pervades" the library. An assistant would provide most of the help. In smaller libraries, Green thought it "practicable for librarians to avail themselves of gratuitous assistance by public-spirited and educated residents. I should think there are, for instance, many cultivated and philanthropic women in the country whose services can be availed of to do work of the kind recommended" (p. 81).

Green's idea, published in *Library Journal* in 1876, in an article entitled "Personal Relations Between Librarians and Readers," has become the basis for how reference, for most of the twentieth century, has been carried out. The main criteria for providing assistance to the reader were graciousness and cultivation, and the reason for doing so was to make the library a more welcoming institution which then in turn would increase usage and justify the library's existence. The sense of nonchalance in providing service also became a model for how reference work was conducted. The work of the librarian could be interrupted at any time and for any reason with the sense that the work the librarian was doing was not important and could be set aside easily.

As Green's ideas were appropriated by others, the public library became an institution whose mission was to further the education of the masses, those who "needed the influence of good books" (Eastman, 1887, p. 80). It was believed that those whose educational level was not as great as it might be would need to have a mediator to help them with what was necessary for their edification: "The librarian or assistant must often supply that live personal element which is their necessary support during their first explorations in the world of books" (Eastman, 1887, p. 80). The librarian was an educator who "creates and stimulates a desire for knowledge and who

directs its use" (p. 80). As part of the nineteenth-century evangelical spirit, the library was destined to "become an all-pervading force, stimulating public thought, molding public opinion, educating to all of the higher possibilities of human thought and action; to become a means for enriching, beautifying and making fruitful the barren places in human life" (p. 80). These ideas for the library are very much in keeping with mid-century Victorian ideology.²

Early on, then, the public library came to be seen, not as an institution for those who were part of the educated initiate, but rather an institution for the masses who would come to be improved and uplifted. Librarians, who were there to aid the public, came to see themselves as educators to carry on where school left off. The idea of making the user self-sufficient and the librarian making that self-sufficiency possible, serving as the guide, the gracious hostess to moral betterment, was touted by a number of leaders of the time. A. R. Spofford (1900), who continued to be conservative in his use of assistants, noted that: "It is enough for the librarian to act as an intelligent guidepost, to point the way; to travel the road is the business of the reader himself" (p. 204). As Rothenstein (1989) has pointed out, there were some practical justifications for the idea of teaching self-sufficiency. Given how assistance to the reader was conceived, the librarian's time was severely limited, and any extended service to a particular reader would be a disservice to other readers. The second justification was that extensive assistance would be a great disservice to the reader himself and would not be a help to the reader in self-development. The work of the reference librarian was not to supply direct answers to questions but to indicate to a reader how he might go about answering the question himself. The incipient model for assistance to the reader went something like this: an assistant would attempt to make a reader feel welcome and comfortable in the library, the assistance appearing unobtrusively so as not to intimidate the reader. The primary purpose was to direct readers to appropriate works, but not to actually do any of the work for the reader. The main mission was to educate the reader on how to use the library, not to provide the reader with appropriate information. The library became an educational institution with the role of reference librarian as educator, a role which has seldom been questioned.

The library's role, as a part of the greater educational system, was to develop a taste for better books, even for recreational reading. As Melvil Dewey (1886) noted: "Is it not true that the ideal librarian fills a pulpit where there is a service every day during all the waking hours, with a large proportion of the community frequently in the congregation? Has she not a school in which the classes graduate only with death?" (p. 24).

In a recruitment lecture delivered before the Association of Collegiate Alumnae in 1886 entitled "Librarianship as a Profession for College-Bred Women," Dewey (1886) succinctly stated many of his ideas about library work and its influence. The influence comes from the "hourly contact with

her constituency of readers, advising, helping and elevating their lives and exerting a far-reaching influence for good not to be exceeded in any profession open to women or to men" (p. 18). Appealing to the impulses of generosity and selflessness, Dewey went on to differentiate between "employment" and "profession." For Dewey, it was not so much the work but rather the spirit in which it was done:

The janitor does "library work," yet I can conceive of his doing it with so much intelligent interest in the results that he would better deserve to rank as a member of the profession than some librarians. No one questions that the best work, e.g. of the great libraries of Boston and Cambridge, has already attained to the rank of a profession, and no one claims that all the library work now being done deserves so dignified a name. We will use the words "work" and "profession" to indicate the types, though professional work is also on two planes which I will call, for want of better names, mental and moral, these again being combined in various proportions in different persons. On the mental plane I put all those who do the work from a personal ambition to make a reputation or to gain a higher salary. It is the plane of most business men, lawyers, etc. On it librarianship is the *business* conducted primarily for the comfort and advancement of the librarian. These motives are those of the great masses of laborers in all fields and ambition and mere intellectual industry often secure much excellent work of a high grade, but never of the highest . . . In the library profession, the best work will always be done on the moral plane, where the librarian puts his heart and life into his work with as distinct a consecration as a minister or missionary and enters the profession and does the work because it is his duty or privilege. It is his "vocation." The selfish considerations of reputation, or personal comfort, or emolument are all secondary. (pp. 18-19)

Dewey, appealing to purity, goodness, and selfless devotion, attempts to position librarianship as an avocation rather than as a profession. Thus he sets the stage for work which answers not to the realities of this world but to something much greater—i.e., work that was not to be sullied by thoughts of worldly gain. The most important qualification of all is to have a proper spirit, the "library spirit." Thus a janitor, in Dewey's mind, with the appropriate spirit could conceivably be a better librarian than a librarian who did not have the requisite fervency for the work.

In spite of Dewey's high-minded notions about librarianship and its professional mission, he outlined what he thought the practical qualifications were for reference assistants. They should have a full acquaintance with library materials, an ability to discriminate between sources of information, skill in adjusting the sources to the need of the reader, and the capacity to educate the reader in how to use reference books intelligently. As a means of creating this sort of an assistant, Dewey (1883) believed a course in "Bibliography" would provide instruction in the "knowledge of what reference books there are, their comparative merits in respect to given sub-

jects, and how to use them to the best advantage" (p. 285). Dewey's notion of training for librarianship was a purely practical one. Reference instruction was essentially a how-to-do-it course of technical training but based, he hoped, on a solid liberal arts education.

With Dewey though, this may be more of a nineteenth-century disposition, there is no real sense of differentiation between professional or non-professional. He notes the tasks of clerical work, so one might conclude that Dewey sees two categories of work: that of a clerical nature and that which is not. He does make reference to "assistant," but at this point in the development of librarianship it might simply mean someone who was not the librarian in charge of the library. It is unlikely, however, that the assistant would be categorized purely as a clerical worker. What Dewey does make clear in his writings, however, is that he sees educated women as being extremely well-suited for library work, especially that of providing assistance to readers.

In seeking examples of how early practice was carried out, by whom, and what sorts of expertise were involved, the writings on the topic are especially scant. There appears to be far more information on the "how" of assistance than on the "why." Green set forth his agenda for assisting the reader in 1876. Almost two decades later, in 1895, Mary Salome Cutler, the vice-director of the New York State Library School and a Dewey disciple, reiterated Green's notions of how reference service was to be performed: "It is sometimes said that the spirit of the library should be that of a merchant and his well-trained clerk, anxious to please their customers [Rather,] it should be. . . the fine spirit of a hostess with the daughters of the house about her greeting guests" (Wiegand, 1996, p. 207). No matter how one wishes to interpret the differences between a well-trained clerk anxious to please and the daughters of the house greeting guests, the level of expectation for performance cannot be high. There is a sense more of the importance of graciousness rather than a real need for a knowledge base and an expertise necessary for the work.

By the turn of the century, qualifications and method had been codified for reference service. Much of the basis of reader assistance, in addition to preserving the time of the "head" librarian, was for the purpose of "promoting social morality through reading" (Wiegand, 1996, p. 208), a quintessentially nineteenth-century idea. Books were instruments for moral uplift, and reference assistants of appropriate character were to raise the reading tastes of the masses. Little differentiation of tasks and duties was made or thought necessary for those who worked the reference desk.

In June 1915, the thirty-seventh annual meeting of the American Library Association met in Berkeley, California. W. W. Bishop (1915), the superintendent of the Reading Room, Library of Congress, delivered a paper entitled, "The Theory of Reference Work." He notes that "reference librarian" has become an accepted term though used rather loosely to mean

different duties in different libraries. His paper, then, sets out to look for a definition of reference work. Bishop defines, for the purposes of this discussion, reference work as “the service rendered by a librarian *in aid of* some sort of study” (p. 134) and is “an organized effort on the part of libraries in aid of the most expeditious and fruitful use of their books” (p. 138). Reference librarians are those “employees assigned to the task of assisting readers in the prosecution [pursuit] of their studies” (p. 134). Reference librarians are the interpreters of the library to the public. Bishop (1915) describes the work thusly, “to help a little, to explain, to suggest, to direct . . .” (p. 135). The major requirements for a reference librarian are: “Tact, the ability to single out the actual thing wanted in the haze of the first questions, a good memory, knowledge of catalogs and of classifications . . . and experience” (p. 137). Bishop makes a distinction between the librarian who specializes in a subject and the general reference librarian. For Bishop (1915), the general reference librarian is “the man who is compelled to be all things to all men, who, counting nothing and no one trivial, spends his days opening up to the miscellaneous public the stores of the library’s books. . . .” (p. 139). He passes on to the specialist those questions which are “interesting” (p. 139). The theory of the work of the general reference librarian, as Bishop succinctly summarizes, is “service, quiet, self-effacing, but not passive or unheeding. To make books useful, and more used—this is his aim” (p. 139). The reference librarian, as seen by Bishop, has particular skills and a particular way of dispensing those skills, yet there are other workers in the library who have areas of specialization that can be more useful to a reader’s need. The general reference librarian needs to have the skills to know when to direct the reader for further help. Bishop did not formally distinguish a professional from a paraprofessional, but he certainly indicated that there are different levels of assistance to readers.

Nomenclature for the duties of library workers was confused in this early period and meant different things to different people. It is not clear to the modern reader who exactly was doing what. There is almost no distinction between categories of workers nor in levels of training or expertise. In 1917, an American Library Association committee was appointed to consider standardization for libraries and certification for librarians. The report, published in *Library Journal* that same year, defined the term “librarian” to mean “any person regularly employed by a library to do its educational work . . .” (p. 721). Though “educational work” is not defined, it perhaps can be assumed to mean those workers who assist readers or who organize the materials of the library. But the report was not consistent in defining terminology. “Librarian” could also mean the head librarian; other library workers would be designated as “library assistants,” or “catalogers,” or “reference librarians.” “Library assistant” was often used as an all-inclusive term for almost every member of the staff except the head librarian (Ameri-

can Library Association, 1917). Historically, then, it is difficult to untangle the terminology well enough to determine who exactly was doing what. In practice, it would appear that anyone in the library who happened to be available would assist a reader in finding what he needed. No distinction was made, nor thought necessary, for who carries out a particular task. While there appeared to be a hierarchy of library workers (usually the head librarian with a variety of workers underneath him), little sense of a division of labor existed (and, given Rodgers's personal account of the library and its workers sixty years later, there is no more sense of who does what now than there was then). Indeed everyone who worked the reference desk was a librarian.

In these early writings about reference service, there is little recognition about where the reference transaction takes place or how the interaction is handled between librarian and reader. There is a sense though that the librarian is a guide to what the library contains or an interpreter of how the library works. The librarian sits and waits for the reader to seek guidance and instruction rather than taking some sort of proactive stance. The reader encounters an anonymous person at the desk, just like she would at the railroad station or at a local merchant. It might appear then from these early writings that no one thought the provision of reader's assistance would be something that would require a major commitment on the part of the library. Green's idea for bringing in a gratuitous, though educated, workforce suggests that the role of a reader's assistant was seen as marginal for the work of the library.

THE WILLIAMSON REPORT

Until Charles Williamson's report, *Training for Library Service: A Report Prepared for the Carnegie Corporation of New York*, appeared in 1923, no one had classified the roles of various workers within libraries. Williamson wrote: "Much of the necessary work in a library is peculiar to libraries, yet it is distinctly of clerical grade. Those who do this work, however, have not been called clerks but have been placed with all other library workers in one vocational group of 'librarians'" (p. [5]). In his report, Williamson divided library workers into two distinct groups—"professional" and "clerical." For both groups of workers, Williamson noted that "efficiency requires careful attention to a large amount of detail" (p. [5]). Yet, he asserted, these routine operations have obscured the real nature of professional library work:

Library administrators appear to be making little or no effort to keep these two types of work distinct; or, if they do recognize such grades of work, they assume that the clerical worker will in the course of time, and solely by continued experience in clerical work, develop capacity for the higher or professional grades. Occasionally, this has occurred in the case of exceptional individuals; but the assumption that the difference between the clerical and professional worker is length of

experience only is unfortunate, and has much to do with the low state of library service and the absurdly low salaries offered for even important positions of professional character. (pp. 4-5)

Like Dewey, Williamson also divided library work into two categories—clerical and library work. The difference between Dewey and Williamson, however, is that Williamson did not believe that one could move from clerical work after considerable experience working in the library to professional level work.

In the early 1920s, only two library schools required the completion of a bachelor's degree for admission, the University of Illinois Library School and the New York State Library School. Since Dewey's time at least, the bachelor's degree had been recommended as a basis for reference work but, without some division of labor between those who held the degree and those who did not, there was little incentive to procure the liberal arts degree before attending library school. Williamson's report attempts to be a catalyst for some standardization in the qualifications necessary for work beyond that of a clerical nature, and he appears to have been quite farsighted in what was needed to advance librarianship as a profession. Yet it is not clear, even now, how to divide the work at the reference desk so that the boundaries are clearly delineated.

Williamson (1923) published in his report a course description for reference work in an attempt to define the scope and content of the curricula of library schools. This course description summarizes the knowledge base thought necessary at the time:

A study of the standard works of reference, general and special encyclopedias, dictionaries, annuals, indexes to periodicals, ready reference manuals of every kind, special bibliographies, and the more important newspapers and periodicals. Works of similar scope are compared, and the limitations of each pointed out. Lists of questions made up from practical experience are given, and the method of finding the answers discussed in the class. Problems in selection of reference books, especially for the small library, are assigned and talked over. The aim of this course is not only to promote familiarity with a considerable number of well-known reference works, but also to give the student some idea of the method of handling books, to familiarize him with the use of indexes, table of contents, and varying forms of arrangement, and finally to suggest some method of comparison and evaluation. (p. 14)

If compared to the course description Dewey outlined in the 1880s, this one shows that, if nothing else, in the passing of thirty years, little has evolved. As Williamson (1923) found, library school curricula is excessively conservative and conforming to custom and tradition:

No school has ever attempted or is not prepared to disregard what has been done in the past and make a thorough, scientific analysis of

what training for professional library work should be and build its curriculum upon its findings, instead of following tradition and imitating others. (p. 25)

TEXTBOOKS

One way to determine early practice, the recognized knowledge base of the time, qualifications for reference work, and a sense of who does what is through the examination of textbooks. Essentially textbooks are a codification of accepted and approved practice. The first major textbook to appear on reference work was published by the American Library Association in 1930, based on a survey of the practice of reference work in libraries. *Reference Work: A Textbook for Students of Library Work and Librarians* by James I. Wyer (1930), attempted to codify the theory and objectives of reference. In chapter 15, "The Reference Librarian," Wyer discusses the reference librarian; educational qualifications; personal qualifications; staff qualifications; and the importance of reference work." Wyer also provides a description of "a composite picture of the ideal reference librarian" (p. 229). By the 1930s, few reference librarians had graduate degrees, a few more had received a college education, but the primary degree for most reference librarians was a high school diploma. Wyer notes: "The chief reproach to library reference work is that in too many cases the librarian scarcely knows what the inquirer is talking about, inevitably shows it, and quite as inevitably the inquirer deems it futile to continue the relation" (p. 230).

The ideal educational qualifications for reference work, suggests Wyer, especially in large libraries, is a liberal education, a graduate degree in a subject area, and library training. Requiring eight years of post-secondary education, Wyer notes, the "salaries are too small to warrant it" (p. 231). Though Wyer was willing to recognize that some equivalent education might be obtained through experience, he was a major proponent of formal library education. As he noted: "The reference librarian of a large public library affirms that 'ten years of varied life and travel are better reference training than a year of library school.' They ought to be; it takes ten times as long to get them" (p. 231). In spite of much opposition to library school, it was seen by some as an efficient and effective means to condense the time and experience required by offering that experience in a pithy package but was not seen as a different sort of experience, just a shorter one.

Certain personal qualifications, in addition to appropriate education, were deemed necessary for the successful reference librarian. Wyer (1930) listed twenty-seven qualifications based on a survey of "more than a score" of chief librarians and reference librarians of representative libraries asked to name the most important qualifications sought in reference librarians. The top ten character traits are: intelligence, accuracy, judgment, professional knowledge, dependability, courtesy, resourcefulness, tact, alertness, and interest in work (pp. 235-38). In sum, the ideal reference librarian "must

love Books, Folks, Order" (p. 238). Under each trait in the survey results are succinctly stated "trait actions." Whether professional knowledge can be considered a trait in the same way that intelligence is a trait is open to debate. In any case, the trait actions listed under "professional knowledge" are to know and recognize subjects and where to look for information, cultivate a wider knowledge of literature of the community, know library resources, appreciate the various uses to which different books may be put, and have a specialized knowledge of one or two subjects and know several foreign languages (p. 235).

Wyer (1930) describes three levels of reference service: conservative, moderate, and liberal. In conservative service, the librarian does not find answers to questions but organizes reference materials effectively and teaches patrons to help themselves (pp. 6-7). The moderate level of reference service provides fact-finding or searching for answers to questions, where the librarians are "at hand to produce books, to help, explain, and suggest, and sometimes merely to listen" (p. 9). For both of these levels, the library's obligation to train the public in the use of its collections is paramount. The third level, the liberal, suggests that the librarian answer each question the reader poses by doing whatever is necessary to satisfy the questioner's need. Wyer does not suggest that different grades of expertise might be necessary for these levels; instead, he urges that librarians aspire to the liberal level of reference work.

The general course of study described by Wyer defines reference books, their types and how to study them, reference materials by groups and characteristics, how to acquire and organize reference materials, and the coordination of interlibrary cooperation in reference work. Part two explains how reference questions are handled in "a detailed, step-by-step account" (p. 95).

In meeting the public, Wyer (1930) straddles the line between the concept of clerk and that of the hostess; the necessary qualities are very like "those possessed by the ideal railway ticket seller or hotel clerk, with the very considerable additional imputation of omniscience" (p. 97). The librarian should exemplify patience and courtesy, be open minded, should always preserve the self-respect of the reader, and not be patronizing. The "hostess" manner is suggested, sliding imperceptibly into the real business of the meeting. Tradition appears to be holding fast some forty years after Mary Salome Cutler's reiteration of how reference work should be carried out. The tradition is not one of expertise so much as it is of graciousness.

Other skills and methods suggested by Wyer for the successful handling of reference questions are mind-reading ("The chief art of the reference librarian is the knack of divining what the inquirer really wants. . ." [p. 100]); cross examination skills, for the purposes of elucidating the question and the amount of material needed, the levels of materials,

and when the material is needed; knowing how to approach a question, whether through subject, biographically, bibliographically, time, language, nationality or form; to ascertain how much of the work a reader can do for himself and to try to put the reader "on his own" as much as one can (p. 105); weighing the evidence, which sources are reliable ("a reference librarian has as much need as a historian or a lawyer for a course in the credibility of evidence" [p. 109]); fitting the material to the reader ("Irrelevant material should never be offered, and if the reference librarian after mind-reading and cross-examination is still unable to recognize it as such, he would appear to have missed his calling" [p. 109]); knowing when to stop looking for information and when to follow through with a reader and to record the reference work done. Certainly mind-reading skills are not something that one pursues at the graduate level.

In examining the philosophical aspects of the provision of reference services, Wyer (1930) notes: "The library is indeed willing, desirous even, to receive these questions and is ready actually to handle them if no one else can; but it runs directly counter to a wholesome principle of self-help, and to the theory that an important part of reference work is teaching the public to serve itself. . ." (pp. 117-18). In light of these theories, not surprisingly, he includes a chapter on "Training the Public."

Wyer is creating a tension between expertise and the principle of self-help. While the purpose of the librarian is to answer questions, this is also something that a reader can do for himself with some informal instruction. As Roma Harris (1992) writes in her book *Librarianship: The Erosion of a Woman's Profession*, "the nature of the service offered in librarianship differs from that seen in other professions in that it is much more centered on the client's need and less focused on the librarian's role as the expert" (p. xiii). However, no matter how the profession is centered, without expertise, the librarian cannot satisfy the client's need. Without expertise, assistance to the reader falls into the realm of the railroad clerk who also instructs concerning which train to catch and when.

In 1944, another reference textbook was published by the American Library Association. The text, *Introduction to Reference Work* by Margaret Hutchins (1944), an assistant professor at the School of Library Service, Columbia University, was not a revision of Wyer's text but an "attempt to interpret the essence of reference work in its universal aspects, it deals more with the principles and methods of reference work in general than with routines and practices of individual libraries or even types of libraries" (p. v). Her text covers the various definitions of reference work, reference questions, the reference interview, techniques and methods for answering reference questions, types of reference questions, selection principles for reference books, various types of materials appropriate to reference, the organization of reference materials, administration of reference service, and other functions of a reference librarian.

Hutchins (1944) understands reference work to include direct assistance to people in search of information and various other activities which are designed to make information as accessible to the reader as possible (p. 10). She describes those who actually do reference work as follows:

In libraries with small professional staffs, for example, public libraries in rural communities, branches of city libraries, special libraries, and school libraries, there is likely to be no reference department or reference librarian, and the reference work is done by any qualified member of the staff (p. 12).

Anyone on the staff will answer any question to the best of his ability and need not consider whether it is a reference question or a research question or a readers advisory question or—just a question. (p. 19)

In Hutchins's opinion, the best qualifications for reference librarianship are inborn traits and practical experience:

There is no doubt that, given equal native qualifications, the reference librarian without library school training who has had several years' experience in a library can render better service in that library than the recent, inexperienced graduate of a library school or even one with a brief experience in some other library. In no occupation does one learn more on the job than in reference work. It is equally true, however, that a beginner in library work will be better able to do reference work if he has had the benefit of a course in reference materials. (p. 161)

Reiterating Wyer's traits, Hutchins (1944) adds her own favorite characteristics:

To good memory and imagination should be added a group of qualities often found together: thoroughness, orderliness, persistency and observation. . . (p. 32). Finally, the efficient handling of reference questions calls for judgment . . . (p. 33) the first requirement of a reference assistant is ability to get the most out of the available reference materials. This skill partly comes from native endowments and partly from experience, whether directed by instruction or gained by experimentation in practice. (p. 160)

Hutchins essentially states that the best librarian is the one with the most experience. But what of expertise? What sort of expertise does the librarian need to serve the user in the best possible fashion? What does it mean to "get the most out of the available reference materials?" How does one best serve the reader?

Twenty-five years after Hutchins's *Introduction to Reference Work*, McGraw-Hill published the first edition of William Katz's (1969) two volume *Introduction to Reference Work*. Volume one covered information sources and volume two, reference services. Katz covers much the same ground as Wyer and Hutchins, with additional sections on the history of reference services,

search strategy, nonbook materials, and evaluation of the reference collection, and specifically addresses a variety of different settings for reference service. For Katz (1969), the successful reference librarian is the one who satisfactorily answers questions. He, too, suggests appropriate qualities for the reference librarian: "During reference services, the librarian must virtually give himself over to the other's point of view, vanish as an individual . . . a good librarian must be a good human being . . . approachable . . . willing and anxious to help" (p. 15).

It is not clear how an invisible librarian came to be seen as desirable for reference service, but perhaps Katz's idea about this is in line with Harris's idea that service is focused on the client's need and not on the expertise of the librarian. However, the moment a person vanishes, she can no longer have expertise or much to offer a reader. Certainly nothing in the previous textbooks has indicated that the librarian should be nothing more than a conduit to the provision of information.

In staffing matters, Katz mandates professionals to staff the reference desk at all times. He reports that in the late 1960s, only 50 percent of reference librarians in small libraries had formal library school training; however, almost 100 percent of reference librarians in large libraries did have such training (p. 21). Based on research undertaken in the 1960s, Katz (1969) concludes that, since "the answering of reference questions can be easily learned on the job" (p. 21):

Subject skills needed for answering research-type questions, skills in administration in its broadest sense, and an understanding of the uses of knowledge should be delegated to the professionally trained librarian. This means a careful consideration of personnel practices, and a broader interpretation of the qualifications and duties of the trained reference librarian. (p. 22)

Given the lack of professionally trained librarians and the increased use of the collections in the 1960s, it is natural for Katz's textbook to question whether a trained reference librarian should bother with directional questions when she could be working on research-oriented questions and managing the reference department. The answer for many was to create a desk near the catalog to field those directional questions. Unfortunately, Katz offers no further discussion on this topic.

Nine years later, the third edition of Katz's (1978) work was published. Online databases were making their way into libraries. These databases were difficult to use without rigorous training, and the reader had to rely upon the librarian. This dependence in turn increased the user's awareness of the librarian's expertise: "The computer search can turn the reference librarian from a clerk into an intellectual involved with informational problems of importance" (p. 226). However, the staffing issues Katz alluded to in the first edition were not reconsidered in the third.

The seventh edition of Katz (1997) mentions the paraprofessional at the reference desk in a discussion of the evaluation of services, and he believes an experienced reference librarian would want an evaluative answer to: "What is the role of paraprofessionals in providing reference service and what are the limits, if any, between the professional and the nonprofessional? (There is a measured difference between the professional and the nonprofessional. Much depends on personality, education, and attitude between the two)" (p. 255). Katz does not answer the question, merely poses it. By posing the question, however, there is some sense that the appropriateness of the professional librarian at the reference desk might be in question. Thus Katz, in less than twenty years, moves away from his earlier mandate that the professional staffs the reference desk at all times to questioning the paraprofessional's role in the provision of information service.

One of the most recent texts, *Reference and Information Services: An Introduction* edited by Richard E. Bopp and Linda C. Smith (1995), a librarian and a library educator respectively, devotes a single page to "The Use of Nonprofessional Staff in Reference Service" in a book of over 600 pages. Bopp, writing in a section entitled "Some Current Trends and Issues," suggests that: "Nonprofessionals can help professional reference staff fend off burnout by staffing the reference desk or by handling ready reference and directional questions at a separate information desk" (p. 23). Bopp cautions that "a carefully designed training program for them is necessary if they are to provide accurate and effective service" (p. 23). He continues:

When carefully trained and properly supported, nonprofessionals working in a busy reference setting can allow the professional staff to focus on those questions requiring an in-depth reference interview or extensive experience and knowledge of reference resources. Librarians can spend more time on those questions that truly require the level of training, knowledge, and skills that only professionals can offer. (pp. 21-22)

It is not clear from this whether the professional will still serve at the reference desk with the paraprofessional or will have another venue for work of more depth. If the paraprofessional works side by side with the professional, would he eventually acquire the same extensive knowledge and experience, especially of reference sources, as the professional? When experience appears to be an important factor in creating a knowledge base consisting primarily of reference resources, then how does one distinguish between a professional and a nonprofessional at the reference desk? We might also ask, Is an apprenticeship at the reference desk the best way to be knowledgeable about the resources and the provision of information services? What are the minimum qualifications for working the reference desk?

In their text, Bopp and Smith include chapters on the history of reference services, philosophy, the reference interview, search strategies, elec-

tronic reference services, instruction, staff development, evaluation of services, management, and services to special groups. These issues comprise approximately one-half of the book. The second section is on sources and their use. In the chapter entitled, "Reference Staff Training and Development," written by Beth S. Woodard (in Bopp & Smith, 1995), some clearly stated changes have come about that differ from nineteenth-century views. Woodard begins her chapter with several bold nontraditional statements:

Efficient reference librarians are made, not born. Merely working with library users and reference sources on a daily basis does not ensure that reference librarians will acquire a thorough knowledge of a wide variety of sources, nor that they will understand the users' requests accurately. While some people have natural abilities in working with others and good instincts regarding how to approach reference questions, both asking appropriate questions and listening for what is not expressed, all reference librarians need nurturing and training to expand and complement these innate abilities. (Bopp & Smith, 1995, p. 185)

Unlike her early twentieth-century counterparts, Woodard does not see reference librarianship as a calling. Instead, she believes that, with appropriate training, a reference librarian will emerge. Still, when she refers to "all reference librarians," does she mean those who have had the benefit of library education or perhaps someone who just happened to fall into the job? A statement which might indicate that she is making no differentiation here is one that follows in the chapter in a section entitled "Paraprofessionals": "Because most paraprofessionals do not have the benefit of a library school education, they will need guidance in the process of approaching a reference question" (Woodard in Bopp & Smith, 1995, p. 192). The implication here is that paraprofessionals without library school education are working in the library and at the reference desk. What distinguishes, then, a paraprofessional from a professional? Certainly it cannot be a library school education. Is it experience or merely economic realities that allows for exploitation of workers? If the paraprofessional without a library school education is guided through the process of approaching a reference question, is that equivalent to a library school whose education curriculum may only include two or three hours on approaching a reference question?

THE HISTORICAL LEGACY

As we can see from this overview of reference textbooks, in the first 100 years of reference service, no real distinction had been made between the type of work the "professional" and "paraprofessional" did at the reference desk. Concurrently, a tradition had been set that reference desk work was best learned on the job, although those with a library school education would have an advantage over those with no library school education at all.

Conceived more or less as a directional occupation by early architects of the profession, the real work and decision-making was left to the user. Consider the comparisons throughout the early literature of reference assistants to that of railroad or merchants' clerks or hostess, and soon it becomes quite evident why library workers are faced with the current dilemma so angrily expressed by Rodgers. If indeed the reference worker is a "railroad clerk" directing folk to the proper schedule and platform, then it follows that graduate education is not a criterion for working the reference desk, and the lack of a degree should not be a stumbling block for working there. It also follows, then, that the professional should not serve at the reference desk but should rely on well-trained paraprofessionals to make appropriate judgments concerning the needs of the reader.

One hesitation that many reference librarians have in leaving reference desk duties solely to the paraprofessional is that the reader will not be well served. The paraprofessional may not have the appropriate judgment to refer the reader to a professional librarian for further help or may not be able to distinguish a complex question from a simple one. However, if Harris is correct in her assessment of the client-centered focus of this profession, should it not then be left to the reader to judge his or her own needs and to decide what level of help he or she needs?

With a railroad clerk mentality, a professional librarian has no opportunity to build a clientele base with clients who can rely on her to know their information needs and interests. Just as the railroad clerk serves the traveler who may never return to that particular station again, a library user is usually conceived as someone who is just passing through the library. The reference librarian has no responsibility to the user to know that the information needs have been met, much like the railroad clerk who has no responsibility for ensuring that the traveler makes her train. This mentality is firmly rooted in the early tradition of edification through reading. There are many works available that can raise the reading taste of the user, but to satisfy an information need to which consequences are attached requires an expertise that is not discussed in these texts. In fact, Green (1876), in his personal assistance treatise, expressly forbids answering questions which might have consequences to the user:

There are obvious limits to the assistance which a librarian can undertake to render. Common-sense will dictate them. Thus no librarian would take the responsibility of recommending books to give directions for the treatment of disease. Nor would give legal advice nor undertake to instruct applicants in regard to the practical manipulations of the workshop or laboratory. (p. 78)

As long as there are no consequences for the work of the reference librarian, the status of the work remains low. When there is a client base which places demand on the expertise of a librarian, then the status of the work becomes high and far more difficult than that of the railroad clerk.

Basing even a single component of the "profession" on the principle of self-help dilutes the profession. When the most important element of the work is to teach the public to serve itself, then any knowledge base that reference librarianship might have is naturally diluted. When the authority of a profession depends upon knowledge and competence and that knowledge and competence can easily be imparted to anyone, then authority is expropriated. Wiegand (1986) has suggested that "the authority of librarianship [is located] primarily in the collections which libraries house" (p. 271). The library, then, as an institution, as a collection of objects, has had authority, but the people working there do not necessarily have it. As collections begin to spill out of libraries and can no longer be contained within four walls, what then?

A major shift from our nineteenth-century roots to something more representative of the information revolution that we are currently experiencing needs to take place. Librarians can no longer remain wedded to the idea of reading as moral uplift and libraries as places in which to evangelize for the betterment of the masses. No longer can authority be based on a collection. Even "rich people" who can afford all the information objects they need, require someone to help locate, organize, manipulate, filter, and present that information.

What we must realize is that people do not need "experts" to select a book for pleasure-reading, bookstore personnel have managed to do that very well without professional credentials; people do not need "experts" to point them to an appropriate shelf to look for information for themselves; people do not need "experts" to help them find answers to simple routine questions. People do need experts to answer difficult questions or to create paths for them, as would be the case in working with faculty, for a particular research project, and to apprise them of the materials that might be available to them both within the institution and outside.

The information revolution has provided new challenges that do indeed demand a level of expertise that cannot be easily acquired either through casual instruction or years of clerical desk experience. In a society driven by information, where more and more importance is placed on the strategic use of information, where information has a value beyond moral uplift, where information is more than reading, we need quite simply experts in information. As information becomes deinstitutionalized, the professional role becomes one of consultant—i.e., an expert to guide the reader through the maze of information. Librarians can no longer afford to be experts in "reference books" but must have instead a sense of both the greater information landscape and how it is navigated for the purposes of retrieving the appropriate information for a well-defined need. Such a perspective cannot be learned simply through practice, though it certainly can be augmented over time; instead each information manager

must possess a clear sense of the landscape before navigation even begins. Thus the well-educated (not trained) professional has an acquired sense of the “cultural, economic, and societal systems and contexts in which information is created, distributed, organized, and used” (University of California at Berkeley, 1996). Knowledge of information systems, of the information context, and of the policies which create information will be the important knowledge base for the information consultant, not reference sources. This is not knowledge that can be acquired through working at the reference desk.

Thus an information professional can serve as an information consultant, advising, training, and guiding clients on appropriate information sources. In addition, the information consultant can “act as an agent on behalf of the client: gathering, evaluating, analyzing, synthesizing, summarizing information for a client” (University of California at Berkeley, 1996).

The sorts of problems that can be considered based on the model of the reference desk are simple at best. Simple questions required little time to answer overall. Much of reference culture revolves around ready reference—something that is easily looked up or referred to rather than those complex information problems that require filtering, analysis, and synthesis. Reference culture has been to match the question to the source, certainly that is how most reference courses are taught—a question is given and an answer is sought. Every question, its source; every source its answer. There is a sense of simplicity here which does not recognize that information needs can be complex. The reference environment reinforces the user’s need as quick and easy. The reference desk at most institutions provides no privacy to the user, has a sense of impatience and impersonality. There is no means by which a librarian can know the client.

The reference desk or its equivalent is still necessary in the institution of the library. Users do need someone who can answer questions about the system of that particular library, who can help them use sources, can guide them in searching the library catalog, and who can help find answers to simple questions. That area of assistance to the user is best left to a well-trained assistant just as the early pioneers of library work envisioned. Since the early 1990s, a number of librarians have begun to see the role for reference librarians as being much larger than what the reference desk will contain. And, as their ideas evolve and are put into practice, distinct delineations between the paraprofessional and the professional will become clearer in practice. Library education will also need to address the change and move the emphasis of their reference courses from sources to the broader information landscape. When library education is transformed, then people like Terry Rodgers (1997) will no longer be able to say, after they have been through a master’s level

program, that the basis for all library work is clerical. And yes, "any smart person can learn it," but they need the broad vision and grounding that only appropriate graduate education can provide. A smart person can learn almost anything they might wish, but learning it on the job is not the basis for solid professional work.

NOTES

- ¹A number of writers have been interested in the paraprofessional's role in the library. See Coleen Parmer's (1988) bibliography, Paraprofessionals in the literature: A selective bibliography. *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, 28(4), 249-251 and the more recent article by Peggy Johnson (1996). Managing changing roles: Professional and paraprofessional staff in libraries. *Journal of Library Administration*, 22(2/3), 79-99.
- ²The writings by Samuel Rothenstein on the history of reference augment my history of the reference desk and are an excellent starting point for the study of the history of reference in libraries.

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