

**PAPERS AND PROCEEDINGS OF
THE TENTH GENERAL MEETING OF
THE AMERICAN LIBRARY
ASSOCIATION. HELD AT SAINT
LOUIS, MAY 8-11, 1889**

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MAY 8-11

1889

BOSTON
LIBRARY BUREAU 146 FRANKLIN STREET
1889

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CONFERENCE OF LIBRARIANS.

ST. LOUIS, MAY 8-11, 1889.

COMMON SENSE IN LIBRARIES.

ADDRESS OF THE PRESIDENT, C. A. CUTTER, LIBRARIAN OF THE BOSTON ATHENÆUM.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN OF THE AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION:—

In obedience to an unbroken precedent, I must open this convention with some general remarks. They shall be on Common Sense.

Common Sense—what is it? I hope no one will insist on a definition. Logicians order us to define our terms before engaging in discussion, but I find it much more convenient to leave this one a little vague, trusting to your knowledge of its general meaning and to your willingness to allow a certain latitude in its use. But if I must be explicit, I will say common sense is my sense; other people's sense, when it differs from mine, is little better than nonsense.

One definition I must protest against, however; I cannot agree with the man who declared that common sense is thus named because it is so *un*common. We could not conduct the affairs of life if this were true. In our own field common sense is the very characteristic of American libraries. We must not blow our own trumpet too loudly. We must not overlook the magnificent accumulation of books in German and French libraries, the good fight made by our English brothers against prejudice and ignorance, the zeal and the complete organization of the Italians. Yet I believe that the same qualities that have made our nation (with certain glaring exceptions) the best of pioneers—the same fitting of means to ends, the same suiting of the man and the thing to the environ-

ment, the same content with small beginnings, the same ingenuity to contrive and quickness to seize upon every improvement—the same common sense, in short, have been shown in the spread of our libraries, as in the settlement of our country, to a degree not seen in older lands. Our libraries have been like our railroads. When we were poor and population was scanty, we built railways in the cheapest manner: two planks with a flat iron rail spiked along them, turning up every now and then to run through the bottom of the car,—a tramway rather than a railroad. The English traveler, seeing it, wondered and sneered; but it was the only way in which we could build them, and so we opened up the country. Now that we have got riches from the territory then reached, we have carried our railway system far ahead of any; we run palace cars across the desert. So our libraries, begun modestly a century ago, by making the most of a little and by the use of mother wit, have, with the schools, opened up a great country of intellect, have extended themselves more than anywhere else on the globe, have become a necessity—at least wherever the New Englander goes—and, the era of luxury having come, one finds them on the frontier, or what was lately the frontier, at Minneapolis, at Denver, with all the perfections of material and *personnel* that the Library Bureau and the Library School can furnish. A century ago western libraries were founded with coon skins; now they cross the prairies

side by side with the concrete sidewalk and the electric tramcar.

Yet there is much still to desire. If common sense is not uncommon in ordinary life, no more is blundering, because mankind mix with their judgment so much unreason from passion, from fashion, from prejudice, from thoughtlessness, from laziness, from habit. Even the most practical people fall into most irrational acts. As I came here I saw a country house on a lake bank, where there was a lovely view. A barn was planted between the dwelling and the lake, the house turning its back upon the water and facing a cabbage field. Was this sensible? Is it sensible to risk one's eyesight on the ill-printed newspaper in the vibrating car? Is it sensible for a man to devote himself so closely to business that, when he has won the riches which authorize leisure, he has no health to enjoy it and no tastes which leisure can enable him to gratify? Is it sensible for men to "put an enemy in their mouths to steal away their brains?" Is it sensible to waste months of the too short school life of 5,000,000 children in learning the vagaries of an irrational, inconsistent orthography? Is it sensible—there is no need to lengthen the list. Anyone's observation furnishes him examples enough of the unreason of sensible people. Now, let your memory run over the past management of your and your neighbor's libraries and see if there also you cannot pick out instances of equal blundering: a great sum spent on a building, and none left to buy [books; book funds bequeathed, and nothing to run the library; a librarian appointed because he is cousin of the wife of the president of the board of trustees, or an old classmate, or a union soldier, or because he is secretary of the Young Men's Democratic (or Republican) Club; a book rejected for religious or moral reasons, and the rejection made known in every newspaper in town; a catalog, for economy's sake, prepared by cheap labor, so that the work has to be all done over again; a new building made barely large enough to hold the books already belonging to the library; the reading-room, which should be the quietest place in the building, made so magnificent

as to attract crowds of sightseers; and so on, and so on.

I cannot help regretting the amount of time that is wasted on statistics. They are interesting, but they are costly to prepare and to print, and I would rather see the time spent on making the library more useful. Statistics are like the notices that we post: few persons read them, still fewer heed them; but we are obliged to post them lest we be asked, Why did you not tell me? So we must have statistics, I suppose. There are persons who, like children, must pull up their plants to see if they are growing. And they want to know such details,—how many bakers and how many candlestick makers use the library, what percentage of fiction and what percentage of theology is used, on what day in the year the most books were taken out and on what the fewest. Yes, it is all interesting; looks as if it ought to be useful; is sometimes needed as a defence against the attacks of the unfriendly; but one would like to know how often any practical measure is the result of the figures so laboriously got together. Perhaps it is enough that they sometimes prevent foolish measures being adopted.

I am not objecting to temporary or to comparative statistics. Often very important questions in the management of a library can be settled by a little investigation; but when they are settled why continue to make the same investigation year after year? For instance, a year or two ago, being annoyed by the assertions of certain impatient people that it took half an hour to get a book at the Athenæum, we kept a careful watch for some time. Leaving out half of our circulation, which comes from the room in which the delivery-desk is, and so takes too short a time to measure, we found that the other half averaged three and three-fifths minutes per book. Having made the trial for two or three months and finding the figures always the same, we dropped the investigation. In some libraries, having been once begun, it would have been continued forever. Comparative statistics too, such tables as Miss Cutler and Mr. Crunden have added to the reports which they will read to you at this conference, such

tables as ought to have been added to the last census report, are very useful.

I have wished sometimes that I could see more wisdom in the employment of assistants. One hears not infrequently that a new library is to be opened in a city or town; that the trustees have appointed a librarian of some experience, and assistants with no knowledge either of library work or of literature, and that they expect the librarian to buy a large stock of books, arrange it, catalog it, lay out his system of charging and the whole scheme of library work, in the mean time training these raw assistants, and to open the library in some incredibly short time—three or four months, perhaps. Formerly one used to hear of a similar appointment of the librarian himself—some ex-editor or retired clergyman; but that folly is abandoned, at least in starting a library. I note also another improvement—boards are beginning to hire a few graduates of the Library School for a while, to help set things going. But the time allowed by impatience, especially for training the untaught assistants, is likely still to be too short.

In fact, there is not any one thing in library work in which less sense is shown than in failure to allow enough time for difficult work, and in eagerness to have a thing done almost as soon as the resolution has been taken to do it.

There is room for improvement in the appointment of assistants. The librarian ought to be given the entire appointment and dismissal of his assistants, and to be held strictly responsible for their work. He is much better qualified to judge of what is wanted and what is done than any one can be who is not always on the spot. In the selection he must justify his privilege. He should remember that he cannot make a silk purse out of a sow's ear; and he should not accept or should dismiss at once, not merely those whom he finds to be unfaithful shirks, but those whom he finds to be slow, stupid, clumsy, illiterate, especially illiterate. A man can hardly hand a book over a counter properly, a boy cannot get a book well from the shelves, to whom it is no more than a block of wood.

Common sense has much to do with the rules of a library and their execution. Where it prevails there is no red tape; the rules are simple and elastic, designed only to secure equal rights to all, but to restrain no one of his liberty needlessly. Some rules must be as the laws of the Medes and Persians; they must never be relaxed in the least, because such is the pressure upon them that, if they are broken through at any one place, they will be swept away entirely. Such in my library are the rules that prohibit more than one of the "new" books being taken out at once by the same person, and impose a fine for keeping new books over time. Every one wants to violate them all the time. As long as it is understood that such rules are immutable and unrelenting, no one protests, and everything goes smoothly; let the least sign of yielding appear, and there will be a clamorous crowd, claiming concessions as precedents. So when a boiler gives way but a little, all the water flashes into steam, and the stout iron files in fragments far.

But there are other rules that are made to be broken, or rather to be enforced only to restrain impudent encroachers; and others, again, that, while generally maintained, should be let down at times—experience only can teach when, how far, and to what people. The object to be aimed at is to give the greatest assistance to all, to let each get as much out of the library as possible without interfering with its use by others. No written rules could ever bring this about; nothing but the constant attention, thought, judgment, of a librarian, for it is hardly necessary to say that the power to relax rules should be in the hands of the librarian and of him alone. If it is intrusted, except very sparingly, to assistants, there can be no uniformity, and there is some danger of favoritism. It goes without saying that every librarian should be above all suspicion of favoring any one. As librarian he has no dislikes, hatreds, jealousies; he is of no sect in religion, of no party in politics; he helps all alike, as the physician heals all alike. When he finds among his assistants one who is also impassionate and impartial, he may intrust him or her with the dispensing power.

In the choice of books there is more opportunity for the exercise of common sense and less room for the operation of definite rules than anywhere else in library management. The buyer who clearly sees what work the library should aim at doing, and follows out his course consistently; who yet does not confine himself within too narrow limits, remembering that many men have many minds; who is cautious in deciding, remembering that when he has bought a book he cannot buy another with the same money; who carefully considers the tastes and capabilities of his readers, knowing that even he who leads the horse to water cannot always make him drink; who takes especial care to provide the books that are asked for, knowing that a borrower to-day is worth two in an uncertain future; who consults the critical journals with the greatest care, and is always open to suggestions, because two heads are better than one, will, if he has funds, get together a well-selected library or deserve the praise of having provided an excellent working collection; and yet he shall not seldom find that a book which he rejected is one which some inquirer especially needs.

Rules for buying one can hardly give, yet there are certain general principles. In literature dulness is the unpardonable sin; in science, inaccuracy; and in those classes which are a combination of literature and science, like the historical, both dulness and untrustworthiness disqualify, though neither alone would be sufficient cause for rejection, nor both together in all cases, for in books a great name covers a multitude of sins. Soundness or unsoundness of doctrine, whether in theology or philosophy, in the social or the natural sciences, is not to be considered by the buyer, even if he thinks himself competent to decide. The ability with which the views are maintained, the fame which they have gained, are the points for him to regard. For the book which will mislead the reader there is an antidote in the book written on the other side; but for the book which will send the reader to sleep there is no remedy. Of the causes for rejection I should say: Inaccuracy, evil intent, dulness; but the greatest of these is dulness.

Even worthlessness is not always cause for rejection. A library that has money will often buy a book for the mere perversity of its argument, the density of its ignorance, the extravagance of its style, for reasons like those which moved Augustus de Morgan in compiling his "Century of paradoxes." A great library should contain monuments of human folly as well as of human wisdom.

If there is any question on which common sense gives no uncertain answer, it is in the admission of fiction to the public library.

To many persons fiction is the only means possible of going into society, of meeting a variety of their fellow-men, of traveling, of living anything but the dullest and most monotonous of lives. I should no sooner think of excluding fiction altogether from a library than of prohibiting tea and coffee. Both of those beverages do harm to certain constitutions, as fiction destroys the fibre of certain minds; but to deprive the majority, who can safely use all three, of their enjoyment for the sake of the weak few, is not the American method. In a college library one may approach nearest this exclusion; for a student's reading should be mainly study, and his recreation should be out of doors. All the fiction in a college library ought to be classic, to be literature. Slipshod English and flabby thought should be rigidly kept out. And some such rule may be usually followed in the public library to a limited extent. Except in the great cities, the public library is obliged to select its books; it has not money enough to buy everything; why should it not select in some degree for literary merit? Without believing in salvation by style, one may yet think that education in English is one of the functions of that supplementary school which we term library. Well-written books and well-thought books are not necessarily dull. No one calls "Treasure Island" dull. It could not be better written. That is a book of sensational adventure; but there are plenty of love stories, domestic stories, character novels, society novels, that have style, interest, movement, thoughts. Provide such liberally; then, if the money holds out, and it seems necessary

to add the vulgarities of Optic and Alger and the twaddle of Mrs. Southworth, do so sparingly. We are told that there is a call for these last authors that must be satisfied, and that a library which lacks them and their likes will be deserted. Undoubtedly there is a call, for they are prolific authors, occupying a great place in the catalog, so that they continually meet the eyes of readers, and, moreover, they have merits. What we want is to substitute: *first*, some other story-tellers who have greater merits, who can tell as interesting stories better, and with a better moral, and *next* to substitute in part some higher class of reading that shall give more information and exercise the mind more. Something can be done, as I here said, by having a plentiful supply of good reading, *all interesting*, and a scanty supply of reading that is not so good. More can be done by judicious suggestion, when advice is sought, or when all the books asked for are out, the greatest care being taken to recommend books that will be sure to be liked, avoiding a dull book like poison. We have been told lately that suggestions will be resented as impertinence; that depends on how they are made. And it has been said that in a busy library there is no time for such work. True, that is one of the advantages of a small town and a small library but, —but, —but, —almost everywhere there is a chance to get in a little of this influence; and when library committees, and the public that is behind library committees, wake up to the perception that in this supplementary public school which we call public library, it is their duty to provide teachers as well as text-books, the attendants in the delivery-room need not all be merely animated machines, with no higher ambition than to pass over the counter 300 volumes an hour. If there are several attendants, one at least will be competent to give advice; if there is only one, he will have been chosen because he had some knowledge of books —and of human nature. Let no one imagine, by the way, that this attendant —whom in library matters we might call the Adviser or Suggester—will have an easy time, or that a successful adviser can be found everywhere. His or her qualification

is tact, tact, tact, —first, last, and all the time, quite as much as book knowledge. Both would grow with practice. Two other qualities the suggester needs —enthusiasm and unflinching patience. The committee, too, must have hope and faith, for statistics are silent here, giving scanty indication of the work that is done. They may indeed show that there is a fractional percentage less of fiction and more of history borrowed, but, as usually kept, they will not indicate that good fiction is read where bad fiction was read before; they do not indicate if the novels taken are read with a purpose or not, with the mind open or shut, if they are devoured at the rate of one a day, or as by the young people's society I knew of where "Romola" was gone through one winter and the "Tale of two cities" another, with photographs and guide books and consultation of histories and discussions of character. The effect of such stories read in such a way might justify Sir John Herschel in regarding "the novel in its best form as one of the most powerful engines of civilization," or prompt the Bishop of Ripon's glowing eulogy on the usefulness of fiction.

A librarian ordinarily collects pamphlets as unhesitatingly as the little dog runs out and barks at the passing buggy. The dog could not give any reason for it, but all his ancestors have done it, all the curs of his acquaintance do it, and he has done so himself from his earliest recollection. Certainly pamphlets are often good to have, but not all pamphlets are good for all libraries. The historical society should not store up the medical tracts, but send them to the medical library, and that, in turn, will send its legal or scientific tracts having no bearing on medicine to the law and scientific libraries. Even a general library may well hesitate to swell its cataloging expenses, and crowd its shelves with many classes of pamphlets. How great is the probability of an old report of a charitable society in a distant city ever being of use? Of course it may be, but is the chance great enough to justify spending on it money needed for other objects? But on the other hand, every town library must collect exhaustively and preserve tenaciously every book, pamphlet, map, plac-