

**PAPERS AND PROCEEDINGS OF THE  
TWENTY-FOURTH GENERAL MEETING  
OF THE AMERICAN LIBRARY  
ASSOCIATION HELD AT BOSTON AND  
MAGNOLIA, MASS., JUNE 14-20, 1902**

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# **AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION**

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# CONFERENCE OF LIBRARIANS.

BOSTON AND MAGNOLIA, MASS.

JUNE 16-20, 1902.

SOME LIBRARY PROBLEMS OF TO-MORROW: ADDRESS OF THE PRESIDENT.

By JOHN S. BILLINGS, *Director of the New York Public Library.*

WHEN the American Library Association was organized its object was declared to be "to promote the library interests of the country by exchanging views, reaching conclusions, and inducing co-operation in all departments of bibliothecal science and economy; by disposing the public mind to the founding and improving of libraries, and by cultivating good will among its members." When the constitution was revised in 1900, the object of the Association was declared to be "to promote the welfare of libraries in America."

This change is significant, not of a change in the purposes of the Association, but of a general opinion that verbose details of its purposes are now unnecessary. At first the Association undertook much direct missionary work, but this has gradually been taken in charge by state and local associations to such an extent that our work in this direction is now mainly to obtain records of the methods which have been found most successful, and to bring these to the attention of those directly engaged in interesting the people at large, and legislators and tax-payers in particular, in the establishment and support of free public libraries.

It is the welfare of the free public library, and especially the library intended mainly for the circulation of books for home use among the people, and supported from public funds, to which we have given the most attention. This is especially an American institution and it has seemed more important that its uses and needs should be understood and appreciated by the general public than those of purely reference libraries, since these last are fairly well understood by those who most need and use them.

The main argument in favor of the free public library is that it is an essential part of a

system of free public instruction which is a necessary foundation of a satisfactory system of self government. It is not true, however, that any and every system of education tends to produce a stable democracy, and there are great differences of opinion among professional educators, and still greater differences of opinion among other thinking men who know something of the methods and results of our public schools, as to whether our present system is the best one. If the main object of the school and of the teacher is to furnish information and cultivate the memory, there is good ground for objecting to both the quantity and quality of some of the kinds of information supplied. If the object of education is to develop the intellect, to teach the student how to judge as to what is true and to know where to look for it, to recognize wise thought, and to distinguish the man who is qualified to lead from the incompetent man who wants to lead, then our public school system is not well suited to its purpose.

The relations which should exist between the system of public libraries and the system of public schools in a state or city are not yet generally agreed upon by both librarians and teachers. In a general way it may be said that the librarian's view is that the public library should be entirely independent of the public school system as regards its funds and management, that special school libraries are apt to be badly managed, and inefficient for the purpose of interesting and instructing the children, that the librarian knows more about books than the teacher, and can supplement and broaden the teacher's work;—and that teachers should recognize these facts, should be willing and anxious to receive instruction and advice from librarians by listening to lectures and talks at the library and repeating to their classes

what they have been taught, and urging the children to make use of the library.

A few enthusiasts claim that the librarian ought to know more than any teacher, and should supplement the defects and ignorance of each instructor in his own branch, but treat them all kindly and tactfully, recognizing that it is not their fault that they do not know as much as librarians. Some librarians admit that some teachers may know more than they do as to the reading most desirable to supplement the particular instruction which a class is receiving, and will be glad to receive lists of books wanted. All librarians think it very important that the child should learn to use the public library and become acquainted with its attractions, methods, and resources, so that after leaving school he will continue to use it, and they do not consider that any mere school or class library can be a satisfactory substitute for the public library. Moreover, they want the children to come to the public library and use it because this is a means of bringing their parents and friends under the same influence.

Superintendents of schools, as a rule, take a somewhat different view of the matter, that is, if they have given any thought to it, but I am bound to say that many of them reply to questions on the subject, that they have never given it any special consideration. Some of those who have considered the matter say that, of course, the public library is a useful institution, that its chief use is educational, that it should be managed so as to help the public school as much as possible, but that it should not interfere with school methods. They believe that the school should have a library of its own, under its own management, selected with reference to the needs of the different classes and grades, that the teachers should see that the children use these books, and have a record of such use as a guide to dealing in the best way with the individual child. They say that the public library, in its recent arrangements for attracting children and especially those in the lower grades, tends to interfere with the school plans for reading, that the children find in the library much that is more attractive than the books which they can find

in the school library, but which is also less useful; that they acquire the habit of desultory reading, and are led off from the proper course. The junior teachers in the schools in our larger cities stand in somewhat the same relation to the superintendents that the junior assistants in the public library stand to the librarian, and the opinions of each, while interesting, are not conclusive. At present the majority of teachers in the lower grades know and care very little about the public libraries; they may use them to obtain current fiction, but it seldom occurs to them to take their classes to them or to tell the children what they can find there.

At present it appears that the librarians are more aggressive, energetic, and filled with the missionary and proselytizing spirit than are the teachers, possibly because the work of the latter is more monotonous and fatiguing.

I have several times been asked by legislators and jurists whether the public schools and the public libraries could not wisely be consolidated under one central management and thus be made to work harmoniously.

It is theoretically possible, but I think that the result would be that the libraries would lose much, the schools gain very little, and the public at large be profoundly dissatisfied.

The Library Association has a special committee on co-operation with the Library Department of the National Educational Association, and it is to be hoped that this committee will find a satisfactory solution to the problems connected with the relationship of the library to the school. No hard and fast rules can be established, but it would seem that the library, supported by public funds, should not interfere with the work of the public school. On the other hand, one of the most important functions of the school is to train the children to use books and libraries, and at the present time the chief obstacle to the proper performance of this function is that the teachers themselves are in great need of instruction about public libraries and how to use them. For the great majority of children story books and works on general literature of the right kind are not



only more interesting but more important means of education than the average textbooks.

The class which, at present, far outnumber all other classes in this country is, as Professor Bryce says, the group of "thinly educated persons whose book knowledge is drawn from dry manuals in mechanically taught elementary schools, and who in after life read nothing but newspapers or cheap novels."<sup>1</sup>

Those who have had practical experience in free circulating libraries know the truth of this characterization, and are trying to get the children interested in the library as early as possible; if the library proves more attractive than the school it is quite possible that the school methods should be changed. But whatever may be thought of elective studies in the high school and college course, the public library system of instruction must necessarily be largely elective; and mere amusement should not be the leading elective, as seems to be too often the case.

In recent years the subject of co-operation between libraries and librarians has been one to which much thought has been given and for which a great number of plans have been proposed. To secure the most useful co-operation, it is desirable to bring into the work many libraries which are not intended for the circulation of books, except, perhaps, among a limited class, and some of which are not supported by public funds. These include the libraries belonging to the general government and to the states, university libraries, and the larger libraries belonging to and managed by private corporations, either as reference libraries only, but for the use of the general public, or as reference and lending libraries for the use of members, stockholders, or subscribers only. Among these are many scientific, historical, and technical libraries.

The problems of these reference libraries have been receiving increasing attention in the Association in recent years, as is shown by the organization of a section devoted more

especially to their work, and the subject of co-operation will come up for discussion at this meeting in several ways and will, no doubt, be considered from several different points of view. The question, as it appears to most libraries, is, What can the greater libraries do for us in the way of cataloguing, bibliography, lending of books, etc., with the tacit assumption that whatever they can do, they ought to do.

It does not seem necessary to produce arguments in favor of this view, but perhaps a suggestion that the smaller libraries should, on their side, assist the larger ones so far as they can, may not be out of place.

The public library in this country, which now stands, or should stand, second, if not first, in interest to every librarian is the Library of Congress. I feel it to be a duty as well as a pleasure to report to you that the work of this library is being well done, and that Congress has recognized the wisdom and tact of its librarian by increased appropriations for books and for service. You are all familiar with the work being done by this central library for other libraries throughout the country by furnishing catalogue cards, bibliographical data, etc. I think it well, however, to remind you of your duties to this your National Library, and especially that the librarian of every city, town, or village in the country should make it his or her business to see that one copy of every local, non-copyrighted imprint, including all municipal reports and documents, all reports of local institutions, and all addresses, accounts of ceremonies, etc. which are not copyrighted and do not come into the book trade, is promptly sent to our National Library.

I cannot speak so positively and definitely about the state libraries or the great reference libraries of the country, but most of them will be glad to receive such local publications as I have indicated, and the New York Public Library especially desires assistance of this kind.

The controversy between the individualists and the collectivists which is going on in many fields of human activity exists also among those interested in library organiza-

<sup>1</sup>James Bryce, "Studies in history and jurisprudence." N.Y., 1901, p. 200.

tion and management and is taking much the same course there as in commerce and manufactures. The tendency is towards organization and division of labor, at first by co-operation, later by consolidation. The free public library is tending to become a special industry by unification of methods for the purpose of securing the greatest product with the least expenditure. The general public, and many librarians, think that the measure of greatest product is the number of books circulated. This is the argument used with city officials to secure increased appropriations, and the kind of books which will circulate most rapidly and the methods of advertising which will increase the number of readers are matters of much interest to library trustees and managers. From this commercial point of view much remains to be done in the way of co-operation. It is probable that the co-operative cataloguing now under way could be much facilitated, and a considerable saving to individual libraries effected, if one small committee of experts selected all the books to be purchased for each and every library. These books could then be catalogued, with annotations on the most elaborate plan, classed, marked, and delivered to the several libraries, where, of course, they would go on open shelves and be advertised by co-operative short lists. The libraries could then discharge most of their cataloguers and experts. One-half the money now used for salaries could be devoted to buying books, the circulation would increase, and the business would flourish.

Moreover, this committee of experts for the selection of books to be purchased would naturally be consulted by publishers as to what particular varieties of literature are most in demand. It would suggest subjects and writers, read MSS. and indicate the pictures which would stimulate the circulation of the volume, and not be objectionable to any one. From this, it would be an easy step to undertake the publication of books for free public libraries and thus effect a wonderful reduction in cost; and if the librarians take up the business of bookselling the scheme will be still more neat and compact.

I need not go into further details, or show what might be effected for the world's progress by simply extending this scheme to an international system; no doubt you can all readily imagine the results which might be obtained by a great cosmopolitan free circulating library trust with the latest attachments and improvements. We should then have accomplished an important part, what some consider the most important part, of the original object of the Association, which, you will remember, was declared to be the "reaching conclusions and inducing co-operation in all departments of bibliothecal science and economy." Of course, in the formation of the expert Board of Managers, the demand for representation which will be made by the leaders and managers of different religions, political, and sociological sects and parties would require consideration, and there are some other important details to be considered by the Committee on Co-operation when it takes up this part of its work.

I do not think there is any immediate prospect of the formation of such a free public library trust as I have indicated, or that the cheapening of library service in this way is desirable, even if it were possible; but there are many things in the mechanical details of library economy in which co-operative work may be of service without checking or interfering with individual development.

Circulating libraries supported from public funds will naturally tend to greater uniformity in methods and scope than reference libraries supported by corporations, but each has something to learn from the other.

There are some men — and women — who have a great desire for uniformity, who think there is only one best way; they want codes, and rules, and creeds; they want all schools and high schools and universities to have one system, even to the periods of their vacations; they want a rule about fiction, and about classification, and about salaries for all libraries, and they want resolutions passed about all these things.

Concentration has its evils as well as its advantages. Some excellent library work in our large cities is done by institutions or societies

which use the library as a means to secure attention to their special end, which may be religious, sectarian, humanitarian, or sociological. The friendly rivalry of different libraries in the same city often has good results, though perhaps it may be a little wasteful of money. To secure the use of a library, the energy and enthusiasm of a propagandist are very useful, but the propagandist does not work to the best advantage in a systematic hierarchy. It is the old question of the individual worker or dealer versus the co-operative, or the consolidated establishment, and while the ultimate answer may be in favor of the latter as giving the greatest amount of useful results with the least expenditure of force, we can understand the feelings of the individual worker who fears that he will be crowded out, and who says that "the lion and the lamb *may* lie down together, but the same lamb don't do it again."

It must be remembered that almost every change in the manner of doing things is injurious to some individuals. Evolution affects not only the fittest, but also the unfit. If it be true that the public library is injuring the business of the bookseller, that the hustling administrator is crowding out the scholar in library positions, and that old-fashioned readers find their old resorts in the libraries less comfortable because of the crowd which now frequents them, it may still be true that the general result is satisfactory.

The question as to whether the public library shall undertake to do other work for the public benefit besides the supplying of literature has occasionally been raised, but has not been seriously discussed as a general proposition. When Mr. Carnegie's offer to provide branch library buildings for the city of New York was made public, many suggestions were made as to the desirability of making these buildings something more than libraries. For example, it was advised that they should be made social centres and substitutes for the saloon, that they should have lecture rooms, rooms for playing various kinds of games, smoking rooms, and billiard rooms; and even public baths in the basement were recommended. At the present time, in a large and crowded

city, the need and demand for public library facilities is so great that it has seemed best to confine the work of these buildings to library work proper, but in more scattered communities, where sites are not so costly, and meeting-rooms less easy to be obtained, some of these suggestions are worthy of careful consideration, and it might be well to collect the experience of the members of the Association bearing on this question, and make it a subject for discussion at a future meeting.

As usual, during the past year, there have been some public expressions of doubt as to the utility or expediency of circulating libraries. Mr. Howells suggests that we may be in danger of reading too much, "reading to stupidity." Lord Rosebery also warns us to beware lest much reading should destroy independence of thought, referring to the "immense fens of stagnant literature which can produce nothing but intellectual malaria." Of course, in some particular cases reading does produce bad results. It would, no doubt, be better for the public in general, and for their own families in particular, if some men and some women had never learned to read. "On a barren rock weeds do not grow—but neither does grass." It might also be better for the world if some sickly, deformed, degenerate children did not live, and the jail fevers of the eighteenth century probably disposed of some criminals to the best advantage; nevertheless it has been found to be wise economy to spend considerable sums of money in lessening the mortality of infants, and of jails, in the inspection and regulation of tenement houses, and in the compulsory restraint of contagious diseases, because the majority of the lives thus saved are worth saving, and they cannot be saved without preserving some others who from the mere utilitarian point of view may not be worth the cost.

The expenditure of public funds upon free libraries is in like manner justified by the general belief that it will do more good than harm. We cannot yet furnish satisfactory statistical evidence as to the results of the free public library experiment which we are trying on a large scale; there does not yet seem to be any