

Why Not a Co-Operative Library?

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Foreword

This little publication pleads the cause of a sphere of co-operative activity hitherto practically unexplored by our people. The wide and successful experience of the authors, in the field of library education, sufficiently proclaims the merit of the pamphlet. Miss Bateson, under the aegis of Carnegie Corporation of New York, conducted the very successful library demonstration in Prince Edward Island. She is well known to Study Club members in eastern Nova Scotia, many of whom listened to her brilliant discussion at the last three annual Conferences. Dr. Tompkins has been a vigorous pioneer for libraries among the people of eastern Canada. His outstanding contributions have been adequately demonstrated in the parishes of Canso and Reserve, N.S. His untiring zeal for the education of the masses is too well known to demand any further comment.

The fact that this publication is a response to numerous demands from various sections of the country is an actual demonstration of the cherished contention that economic progress and social improvement pave the way for cultural achievements.

M.M. Coady.

Why Not a Co-operative Library?

Eastern Nova Scotia is becoming famous for its co-operatives, its Credit Unions, its Co-operative Stores, its Co-operative Lobster Factories. The time seems ripe to carry the idea into a new field—that of books. Is there any more rewarding co-operative venture? For the price of a magazine every individual in a community of 100,000 can have access to 50,000 books or to any of those 50,000 that he may want to read or can use. It is a matter well looking into.

Why We Need Libraries

At a recent conference on Government in North Carolina one of the speakers asked why people had allowed the politicians to lead them by the nose and his answer was that in far too many cases education stops when the child is fourteen years old, before he knows anything of the principles of government, or the simple economics of living. Education, he said, must be a continuing process, “We must reach adults through libraries, extension classes...in order that they may be able to analyze public questions and act accordingly.” There never was a time when it was more necessary that the ordinary citizen should know things—particularly matters relating to economic, social and political affairs.

For Information

Books then are a means of educating people on public questions. But they are more than that. They are a mine of information on all subjects. From bringing up the baby to the final science of undertaking, information is readily available in printed form and any public library worthy of the name aims to supply its readers with any information they desire. The public library has no rigid definition of education: it is as interested in accommodating the man who wants to build a well-lighted, well-ventilated barn, or a woman who wants information on hooked-rug designs as in satisfying the needs of the student of Shakespeare. Its idea of education is to take hold of people where they are, satisfying their needs and meeting their interests and to let them develop in their own lines.

Today, owing to the increasing number of public libraries, books are written simply and attractively to appeal to the simplest reader. Though, indeed, who is the “simplest reader”? Investigations into ‘who reads what’ in the public libraries on this continent and in England must cause a shock to the high-brow. More reading, reading of the more difficult type of book, is done by the workers, clerks, and so-called ‘ordinary’ people than by professional people with more academic education. When people have learnt the mechanics of reading and are interested in a subject it would not be safe to set limits to what they are likely to read.

Books as Wage Earners

In the United States and Canada during the last few years there has been a great increase in the use made of books in the public libraries. Many of the unemployed have used the public library for diversion, often desperately necessary, but not a few have helped themselves through its service to new jobs. Only today the story came up of a young man thrown out of employment who had sat in the library all day for six months putting himself through a stiff course in accounting. At the end of that time he passed the necessary examinations and last week he took a position as accountant. Numbers of people have come to that same library for information on small industries-chicken-raising, mushroom-growing, various handicrafts, which have helped to keep them going during the years of depression.

Then there was the case of a man who in 1931 lost his job as worker in a detective agency. For months he was to be seen at the library from its opening at 9 a.m. until the lights were put out at 9 p.m. He was not killing time but working out a scheme of his own; a new way of housing and feeding poultry. And it was poultry-keeping deluxe that he went in for. Today his air-conditioned hen houses with equipment for uniform regular feeding, which produces uniform dependable eggs, are a great success. Not only are his eggs in great demand but his hen houses too and he is enjoying prosperity.

The Science and Industry Department of a large library was pleasantly surprised a few months ago when one of its well-known readers walked in and announced exuberantly, "Well you won't believe it but you have saved our firm \$10,000 a year." The firm was a large lumber concern with branches all over the country and in the course of its business a vast amount of waste lumber was produced. The man in question had spent months at the library hunting through all sorts of technical magazines and publications and amassing information which enabled him to invent a way of treating the waste lumber so that it could be used for fuel, at a net profit to the firm of \$10,000. There are by-products of the coal industry in Nova Scotia which could be turned to wealth if the necessary knowledge were available and use made of it.

Leisure-time Reading

In every so-called democratic, progressive country nowadays enormous sums are spent on public education. It is rightly felt that democracy is only safe if its citizens are educated and reading is one of the keys to education. Boys and girls are turned out from school with this key in their hands but instead of finding treasure houses to unlock they are left to explore the tawdry resources of the cheap magazines. Their ardent desires for adventure and romance are vitiated and perverted. No small proportion of juvenile crime and delinquency is traced directly by those concerned with its treatment to the reading of trashy magazines and it is worth noting that judges of juvenile courts and those interested in prison reforms are almost invariably keen supporters of libraries. The wholesale reading of cheap literature represents to say the least a lowering of morale and debasing of taste and ideals. In putting before its community selected reading matter of a stimulating, truly recreative type, the public library is fulfilling one of its most important obligations.

As a source of recreation, information, and a means towards real education, libraries appear to be necessary. Progress is made by utilizing all knowledge and experience, past and present and for this there must be available in every community the best of everything in print. To quote from "Illinois Libraries", April 1936, "A boy on the shoulders of a tall man can see farther than the tall man. Libraries must provide all strength and virility represented by the tall man capable of holding the boy on his shoulders."

Country-wide Library Service

Granted that libraries are a necessity, libraries meaning not only books but specialists to select them and give guidance as to their suitability for particular needs, how is a community, largely rural, to secure such a service? It is now generally accepted that for towns and cities an adequate well-selected, well-organized library is a necessity. But what of the country? Surely people there need as many books, well-selected, well-organized, as do city dwellers. Their need is even greater, but the reading needs of rural people are only beginning to be met. We can learn something from what has been done in the last ten years in Great Britain, in the United States and in Canada.

Great Britain

In 1917 a survey was made of libraries in Great Britain. The survey revealed an almost uniform state of stagnation in the smaller libraries. The reason for this is obvious: a small community cannot afford either the services of a first class librarian or a large supply of books; consequently its library is usually indifferently managed and lacks sufficient material on any subject to satisfy the needs of vital readers. To quote from a recent report on libraries published in England, "Whereas a town of 500,000 inhabitants will require roughly ten times as much gas or electricity as a town of 50,000 and a hundred times as much as a town of 5,000, this rule does not hold good in library service. A community of 5,000 may include readers with as great variety of tastes as a community of 500,000 and will therefore require having access to as wide a range of books. For a public composed of general readers with a variety of wants, no small library can provide an adequate service."

As no small community can itself support the necessary service, a larger unit of support, larger in area and therefore population is necessary. In England the county was taken as the unit and since 1922 in England there have been established in all the counties, county libraries, linking up and strengthening the existing small libraries. They were helped for the first few years by the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust but when the experimental stage was over they had proved themselves, they were left to themselves. It is noteworthy that no county has allowed its library to lapse and that Lancashire, which has suffered great economic misery owing to the collapse of the cotton industry and the closing of many of its coal mines, has every year increased the county grant for library purposes. Evidently it was regarded not as a luxury but as one of the basic necessities.

United States and Canada

For twenty years there have been county libraries in the United States. In recent years, however it has been realized that the county, in the United States and in Canada, is not always a sufficiently large unit. English authorities now state that the minimum population for the support of an adequate library is 75,000. Authorities in the United States and Canada put the minimum 40,000, with a minimum annual appropriation of \$25,000. Where the population of a county reaches the minimum the county is a convenient unit but often a larger territory and population is more advisable. These larger libraries are described as "regional libraries".

The Fraser Valley Union Library in British Columbia is the outstanding example of a regional library. For five years beginning in 1930 the Carnegie Corporation offered the total sum of \$100,000 for a demonstration of rural library service in the Fraser Valley. The demonstration proved successful and at the end of the period the library was taken over by the people of the Valley who have since that time financed it themselves. The territory served by the Union Library includes twenty-one governing bodies, two cities, a village, district municipalities and rural school districts. The total population of 39,894. The library has a governing body composed of representatives from all the districts and is supported at a rate of 35c per capita of the population collected as a tax from all the people in the districts served. This is a low figure and it is expected that with the return of better prices for farmers the tax will be raised to 50c. So successful was the venture that three other regional libraries are in process of organization: namely in the Kootenay, Okanagan Valley and Vancouver Island. The Carnegie Corporation gave a total grant of \$15,000 to help in the initial organization.

From 1933-1936 the Carnegie Corporation financed a library demonstration in Prince Edward Island. This year the library was taken over by the provincial government. The library serves a population of 88,000 people and has proved most popular. It consists of about 40,000 volumes, distributed through twenty-two branches scattered throughout the Island. In addition to books for general reading any resident of the Island may obtain, through the branches, any book he wants or books on any subject in which he is interested. All the 40,000 volumes, or as many of them as he can digest, are his for the asking. Every Friday about a hundred and fifty books are sent out from the headquarters to the branches in answer to such requests.

The Case of Nova Scotia

A good library service in Nova Scotia would mean the establishment of about ten regional libraries. One section, at least, of the province seems ripe for such-The County of Cape Breton. The population is not much larger than that of Prince Edward Island and if come assistance could be secured for the initial expense of setting up the scheme, a first rate library service could be maintained for an expenditure of \$40,000 annually. This sum would provide the books needed to supply information to farmers, fisherman, miners and technical workers on matters relating to their work, it would provide the tools of self-education and recreation for the whole population and it would also afford library services to the schools. It would provide for three or four trained librarians and a

supervisor. The salaries for librarians would be equivalent to those paid to high school teachers of similar standing. The custodians in charge of local branches would receive about 25c an hour. In some places they are voluntary workers but this small sum ensures attention to the work and is in the long run an economy.

The county of Cape Breton spends every year \$700,325 on education and would seem reasonable to supplement this with an additional \$45,000 for further education of a kind which is equally essential. In England, in the United States, and in Canada, all those who have given thought to the matter are saying that the establishment of the public library today is a matter as important as was the establishment of the public school in its day, and that it is a logical continuation of the public school.

A successful library established in Cape Breton would be the beginning of libraries for the people in Nova Scotia, it would bring home to the province the truth expressed in a recent report by the British Department of Education, "A policy which spends millions in teaching people to read and grudges thousands in providing them with books is as shortsighted as would be the policy of a railway company which provided trains but grudged the cost of time tables."