

# An evaluation of education for librarianship in New Zealand: the Saunders Report

*cautiously considered by MARY A. RONNIE*

It is impossible to comment in detail on the very thorough report<sup>1</sup> which has resulted from Professor Saunders' visit to New Zealand. What I shall try to do in this article is express some of the feelings which its recommendations roused in me, and go into details where possible and relevant.

Let me get rid of one annoyance right away. After years of work by the New Zealand Library Association and its members to provide librarians in schools, I consider it unfortunate that the fragment of a course presented at the Wellington Teachers College was not included in Professor Saunders' terms of reference. We should not give up so easily. This splinter of library education could have had a closer relationship with the Certificate course with its substantial content. Some assessment should be made of its relevance to the library profession. It is not for teachers to make judgments about librarianship. No more need be said in this context.

On reading Professor Saunders' descriptions of course structures and methods of teaching, I am left with a feeling of both fairness and accuracy about both schools, although I have been out of earshot for some time now. And one can but agree about the need for more staff, greater course flexibility, more practitioner participation, and, most of all, more research. The biography and history of New Zealand librarianship is practically untouched, let alone analyses of our activities, for future planning.

But in this Ronnie-eye-view I want to look at the report in the light of my reactions to it, in the light of my quite intense feelings about our professional aims. What I say will no doubt be irritating to those who see elitism from a different angle, or may even think it wrong. I consider that the public who use our libraries – private, public, institutional or entrepreneurial – should be served by the very best. In terms of proposals for educating those who will serve, I would prefer to see increased access to the highest level, rather than the development of wider availability of a second best. If you can stand it, read on.

Concern for the survival of librarianship has been a slightly nervous world-wide topic since, for no good reason, our profession grew afraid that the 'information' world would somehow eliminate us. This word 'information' has achieved such general application that I doubt if it would now add anything of real significance to the names of our schools. There were information desks at Dunedin Public Library in 1942: it was and is a library. Much more serious is the real threat of user pay policies, apparently meekly accepted in command positions, yet

threatening to divert our attention from true purposes while fiddling for small returns.

In the face of this we need to be concerned that our library education teaches not only financial management in the administrative sense but also makes our students aware that their prime concern is the significant body of knowledge which is librarianship and that it is for accountants to be experts in calculation.

Max Broome in his splendid presidential address to the Library Association (London) last year assessed some of the principles of librarianship particularly in choosing programmes for public libraries, where some services have been challenged by the British Government's new Minister for the Arts, Richard Luce. We in New Zealand, in just such a threatened situation, with consultants delivering the word of God, need to breed young librarians who are capable of identifying library purposes—for the many as well as the specialist few; of assessing the quality of materials and of information; who can ignore the cat-calls of 'Elitism' and select the best, thus supplying our citizens with a wide range of materials not otherwise visible to them.

Education for librarianship in New Zealand has been the subject of constant review and change since the inception of the NZLA Certificate Course in the early 1940s. The Saunders Report is the current valuable addition to what must be a continuing process. The first course was initially expected to go beyond intermediate level, to a recognised professional qualification. The establishment of the Library School within the National Library Service in 1946, granting a post-graduate diploma, left the certificate course as an intermediate qualification within the educational structure, and therefore within pay structures too. Despite location changes since then the fundamental relationship between the two courses has not changed. My experience of both has coloured my reactions to at least some of the proposals in the report.

One of the first things I lived through in the days of my certificate training was the correspondence course, the kind of thing now graced by names like 'distance learning', but still basically consisting of mail order teaching, however packaged. No name can remove the remembrance of the stifling boredom, the time-tensions, and all the negative elements of those tedious two years. Indeed it was all so depressing that I went off to Professor Ramsay's English classes at the University of Otago to get the stimulus of face-to-face teaching.

And I was one of the luckier students. There were four or five of us at Dunedin Public Library doing the





papers at the same time, so that some of the activities could be done together and we could discuss ideas with each other. And we were also stimulated by on-the-job training by people like Dorothy White and John Harris, while Archie Dunningham presented a living example of constant thought and the inevitability that things could and must change. These and the positive attitudes of the Otago Branch helped to make the course tolerable—or did they? Perhaps they made the library profession attractive, with their sharp contrast to the questions in buff envelopes which sank the heart at each monthly opening.

So I quail before the suggestion that professional library education is likely to be proposed in this way, and that there is 'overwhelming support' for it. I am aware that teaching packages can contain more than my dreary question sheet, that videos and slides and tapes and stuff can be added. But these are simply more decorative, and no more a serious exchange of ideas than any other one-to-one communication. They are no substitute for the discussions of a group of good minds changing and modifying each others' views and attitudes. Of course I should declare my prejudice. I am reduced to a fury of impatience when highly paid lecturers fill in time with videos or read out illegible words from overhead projectors: it is even more insulting when the words are legible. It all saves writing a fresh cohesive paper of connected thought. At least the process of writing those essays which Professor Saunders sees as too large a part of our curriculum—he may well be right since report writing is also important—seems likely to produce progressive reasoning rather than descriptions of successive terms. It is something like the difference between information and knowledge.

But I digress. Back to learning at a distance. Even supplemented by a few intense weeks of personal attendance this does not add up to professional education. It certainly gives an opportunity to those who

cannot go to Wellington to receive a second best training—a word not idly chosen. Recent eavesdropping on tutors in just such a system suggests that the element of drudgery is not confined to the students. Education should not be dominated by dreary deadlines at the post-box. My commitment to librarianship was not created by the course, although it was a good course as courses go. Fortunately, like Saki's good cooks, it went. My memory tells me that we were all glad.

I find it hard to believe that there is any parallel system for first professional qualifications in either law or medicine. The clinical schools which have enabled teaching to be done in other centres than Dunedin or Auckland are devices for wider experience, not facilities to make training more accessible to students. Perhaps we need a clinical school in Auckland.

In the years between completing the Certificate Course and going to the Library School in Wellington, it was impossible to escape the dichotomy within the NZLA which the new diploma created as soon as the first graduates emerged at the end of 1946. Those who had earned the certificate instantly felt downgraded. Were they? They were and they were not. The new qualification did not replace the one they had. It replaced what they might have gone on to get, had the intended advanced course materialised, and they and their tutors had the stamina to carry on. But that reality was irrelevant at the time. Resentment at the threat to promotion was both bitter and vocal for some years. I fear that the very existence of two levels of qualification creates divisions. The best cure is a reasonable and academically sound method of progress from one to the other.

The division in the profession will certainly not be improved by blurring the differences. And that edges are blurred is made clear from the report, despite the acknowledgement that there are significant differences between the courses. What these are is not always clear, but one thing is evident—the presence of graduates in increasing numbers at the certificate classes has created an upward pressure which could be considered unfair to those with the basic pre-requisite of University Entrance. I would be strongly opposed to the exclusion of graduates. But they should be made aware that this course has a target level. The suggestion that there should be a greater intake to the diploma course would solve some of the problem in the best possible fashion, both for the graduate students and the expanding library market.

But I have great misgivings about amalgamation of the two schools. We have two courses and we appear to accept that they should continue, with different objectives. We also have resentment within the profession because of confused aspirations. We need to be honest about our educational structures, both with ourselves as professionals and with those we recruit. Can we maintain the differences, and make it clear to students, if they are taught in the same school?

One of the arguments advanced in favour of separation in 1979 was that the diploma would achieve a clearly post-graduate level, its concepts not so influenced by the more practical, more routine-oriented nature of the certificate course. Within the university, research would be more likely, both for students and staff. Nine years later we have a certificate course cruising upwards, and a diploma course producing much less research than had been hoped when it left the National Library. Nor am I convinced that amalgamation of the two staffs will nece-



ssarily make better use of time and expertise, valuable as constant cooperation certainly is. More total time is certainly a requirement, and I endorse the move towards this. Amalgamation is another matter.

Apart from the structure of the courses, the other element which has considerable impact on the quality of library education is the time available. One of the inevitable comparisons made, because it is so easily measurable, is this element of difference between our two levels. It was one of the very obvious differentials prior to 1979, when certificate students came to Wellington for a total of twelve weeks, with some intervening exercises. Diploma Students must have had nearer to thirty weeks. What is the difference now? Professor Saunders rightly sees that extension of time for the diploma course is desirable.

In the current economic climate, and with the all-too-obvious pleas for easier access to library education, it is no doubt fruitless to seek a two-year first professional qualification. Working with graduates of UCLA in the past left me in no doubt of the quality of conceptual thinking which had been gained over that period. Involvement at present with a two-year programme has confirmed those impressions. Certainly the present twenty-six weeks at Victoria [University of Wellington] must mean work at high pressure, and it says much for those teaching there that the students emerge with professional awareness.

Another point on staffing which is well made by Professor Saunders is the need for participation of practitioners in the courses. Conversely it seems a pity that the teaching staff could not have some means of practical interchange and keep a hand in the marketplace. My own preference, no doubt impractical, would be to have a half-and-half existence. Perhaps some of the desired additions could be of a new hybrid kind: now lawyers do that.

The market-place itself is clearly growing and changing. Jock McEldowney's recent article on library staffing from 1975 to 1985<sup>2</sup> demonstrates the changing role of graduate librarians, those working in special libraries having risen by 230%, with those in universities by only 4%. There is clearly a growing and non-traditional market for library expertise. This makes our early calculations of student intake out-dated. It was always a somewhat less than scientific concept, which worked reasonably well when institutional needs were roughly known and these were the major employers.

With new opportunities discussed by both McEldowney and Saunders, there is clear need for expansion of the graduate course in response. Saunders sees an additional role to the responsive one—that library educators should be innovators 'pointing the way forward'. My own feeling is that forward thrust could best come from real interaction between academics and practitioners: some part-time mixing as discussed in the report.

Our philosophy regarding the certificate course is based on nearly 50 years of history, 50 years of respect for this qualification which is not paralleled elsewhere, and not recognised elsewhere either. There is more than a suspicion that it survives at its interesting and confusing level because of the women who need it as a training place. Do we still think of it as a total career qualification for women, but not recommended for men as the likely breadwinners? And because we are a female-dominated profession, have we made sure that it is a bloody good

course, and what does it matter if it does not fit a neat professional/non-professional pattern? Where does that leave it, and us, in professional terms, rather than pragmatic ones?

I am in no position to judge the quality of the course now, but I see no reason to doubt Saunders' assessment of its intensive nature. If the staff are to follow his advice and 'identify absolute essentials and slim courses down accordingly', they must have some guidance from the marketplace as to what these essentials should be. From the beginning we have tended to be drowned by detail. I remember years of suffering from tutoring Paper 2 of the old correspondence course which was about issue systems. I kept thinking that all these painful efforts were for records most of which were thrown away quite soon—and some which were kept (like knowing what people have read) should not be available to anyone but the borrower. I was glad to be rid of that exercise in futility. What a comfort that we can buy systems off the peg.

But I digress again. While I agree with much that is said in the Saunders Report about the certificate course, about its relations to the diploma, about the problems of blurred edges, amalgamation of the schools seems no solution. Given more discussion with those out in the market, I feel that both courses, at their appropriate levels, can be alive to the needs of libraries and the people who use them—a people no longer so homogeneous as when I trained, no longer satisfied with one language, one culture.

There is great excitement in being a librarian in New Zealand. That is what I want all students to feel; and that it takes a long time to learn about it, much of it in the workplace; and that there are rewards at intermediate levels of activity. Even better is the eagerness to learn more and have the opportunity to do further study. I really do not care a hoot if our certificate is better or different from anyone else's. But I do care if it gets tied in the past, and if its holders feel down-trodden because there is no way up.

But that does not mean a softening of professional requirement or weakening of professional qualifications. It means a real cooperation between the two courses of training, and a considerable capacity for intelligent practitioners to contribute.

## References

1. Wilfrid L. Saunders, *An evaluation of education for librarianship in New Zealand: A report to the Joint Committee on Librarianship* (Wellington, N.Z.: Dept of Librarianship, Victoria University of Wellington, 1987). A limited number of copies are available from the Department, \$NZ15.
2. W. J. McEldowney, 'Qualified Staff in New Zealand libraries 1975-1985', *New Zealand libraries*, v.45, no.8 (December 1987) pp.169-173.

*Mary Ronnie, former National Librarian, New Zealand, is presently lecturing at the Graduate School of Librarianship, Monash University, Australia.*