

NEW ZEALAND LIBRARIES

BULLETIN OF THE N.Z. LIBRARY ASSOCIATION, INC.

VOLUME 29 NUMBER 4

MAY 1966

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ROBERT PEARCE

STARTING FROM SCRATCH: SOME PROBLEMS IN LAUNCHING FIJI'S PUBLIC LIBRARY SERVICE

The Fiji Government first entered the field of public library development in September 1963 when it created a Library Services Department and appointed a professionally qualified librarian from overseas.

This course of action was the result of a successful government application to the British Council for capital assistance towards a specific scheme of public library development. The application in turn had been prompted by the Secretary of State's 1959 Savingram, famous to all librarians in developing countries of the Commonwealth, which invited all such territories to apply for capital funds to initiate new, or develop existing, public library services. Plans submitted by territories in East and West Africa proved important enough to warrant full-time coordination by two Library Advisers of the British Council, Schofield and Hockey.

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Fiji's application in 1960 for £20,000 sterling capital assistance to build, equip and stock a library in Lautoka was successful, but the funds were not presented until early in 1962. Recruitment of a librarian to implement the scheme was not completed until September 1963.

The first report on Fiji's library services was made in December 1944 by C. R. H. Taylor, Librarian of the Alexander Turnbull Library in New Zealand.¹ Public library service in the Colony was then limited to Suva, where a Carnegie building had existed since 1907, and Levuka, the former capital, where the township board maintained a small community library. At Nadi, the Ramakrishna Mission maintained a reading room; elsewhere, a dozen small subscription libraries were run by various Indian groups, while some social clubs and commercial firms had collections for their members and for mainly European staff. Taylor's report was comprehensive and, for that period in the Colony, bold. He recommended a capital expenditure of £47,150 to set up a "Central Islands Library" which would not only absorb Suva's Carnegie service, but would, through an "Islands Service" section, distribute books throughout the Colony, with the active cooperation of townships and of the Fijian Provincial Administration. Selected schools would be provided with bulk loans. The Central Islands Library would amalgamate with the Fiji Museum and build up a collection of Pacific history materials. Legislation, including a copyright ordinance, was suggested. Noteworthy consideration was given to the paucity of books in Fijian and the Indian languages. Taylor recommended a special grant of £500 per year for five years, to finance the translation and publication of books in Fijian; 20 per cent of the total bookstock should be in Indian languages for the first five years, thereafter, 15 per cent; 10 per cent of the bookstock should deal with Indian history and culture. A building, at a cost of £28,500 with 10,000 square feet of floor space, was suggested, to meet needs for the next 50 years.

The main proposals failed to win the support of government, though action was taken on the separate recommendations to preserve archives with special care and attention.

In 1949, the British Council opened a centre in Suva and its library began service in 1950. No progress seems to have been made outside the capital in the period 1950-56. However, the arrival of a trained Indian librarian to work in the Ramakrishna library in Nadi led to further interest in the Western Division. A former pupil of Dr Ranganathan, D. Krishnamurti began to build his library under difficult conditions, but it soon became apparent to him that the potential for library service in this division was great. The Government of India had now opened an office and library in Suva, and announced a scheme to distribute 50 bookboxes to centres throughout the Colony. At the same time, the British Council initiated its own bookbox service in 1956, and the Indian scheme never really got

under way, owing to successive setbacks to the Indian economy. The Ramakrishna Mission then made a direct application to UNESCO to assist its library to extend services in an area where population was high, and book provision meagre. The application was returned to the Fiji Government. The Government decided to form a special committee "to review existing and proposed library facilities in the Colony and to make recommendations on how they can be improved to make adequate provision for the needs of all communities". This "1957-58" Library Committee, under the chairmanship of the Director of Education, specifically set down its view, with one dissenter, who is now the Member for Social Services, that the Colony's present financial position precluded the recommendation of schemes involving heavy capital and recurrent expenditure. It recommended the Fiji Government to set up an organisation to gradually take over and expand the British Council bookbox scheme. Essentially, all that was envisaged was a Suva headquarters for buying and dispatching bookboxes to local authorities, and other centres, where they would be sent on to sub-centres. After the circuit, the collections would eventually return to the larger centres to build stock in static collections, which would be the responsibility of local authorities. Buildings grants were suggested to encourage the townships. The Committee further recommended that a National Reference Library be established "in due course", that the collection of Pacificana, recently willed to the government by the late Sir Alport Barker, should be cared for by the Central Archives (now a going concern) to form the nucleus of the National Reference Library at a later date. A board of trustees should be appointed to advise on the bookbox scheme and the national reference library. School libraries were declared the province of the Education Department, but more grants were recommended for them.

Again, nothing was done to implement the public library recommendations, but the Alport Barker collection was passed over to the Archives.

The 1959 Savingram appeared to solve the problem of lack of capital, but the problem of recurrent expenditure remained. What should be applied for? Funds for the Taylor recommendations, or for the 1957-58 Committee's? The Archivist, Mr A. I. Diamond, recommended a fresh professional review. D. Bruce Roberts, Director of the S.P.C. Literature Bureau, was officially invited "to review public library services throughout the Colony and to furnish the Government with a report embodying recommendations for the expansion and improvement of existing public library services and the initiation and development of new services." In his March 1960 report², Roberts emphasised the need to provide worthwhile service and the necessity to discourage the proliferation of small autonomous library authorities. He recognised the limited funds available for the several kinds of library service mentioned in the Taylor report and

recommended that public library service, the proposed National Reference Library, and the Archives be kept separate in their early years. Giving an example of a scheme to bring public library service to one third of the population, on a basis of one book to every three people within ten years, he projected a capital expenditure, including books, in the first year of £43,000 with a grand total over eight years of £80,000. In year eight, annual recurrent expenditure would amount to £22,640. The scheme envisaged a Suva headquarters, two vehicles, 12 branches built by local authorities but maintained by government, and a staff of nine.

As an alternative, the report presented a scheme to build a National Reference Library, also housing the Archives, with a stock of 5,000 volumes built up over five years. The total capital cost would be £70,000 over the period.

Roberts recommended that if a public library service were opted for, the organisation should not come under any particular department, but be responsible to the Colonial Secretary, advised by a small *ad hoc* committee. After three years, recommendations should be made on legislation. Finally, he recommended that the National Library scheme be adopted in preference to the public library scheme, since he felt that any public library scheme should be predated by a few years of secondary school library development.

However, the famous Savingram was specifically designed to assist *public* library development. Detailed and helpful as the report tried to be, it was doubted whether applications for capital expenditure of this magnitude would be entertained, or indeed whether recurrent expenditure could be guaranteed (one of the conditions of the grant).

In December 1959, rioting for several days had shocked Suva into a realisation that Fiji was not just a paradise in the Pacific full of placid, laughter-loving peoples. In 1960, as Roberts made his report, the authorities were even more seriously troubled by the so-called cane strikes in the Western Division, when over half the farmers refused to cut the 1960 cane crop. Many thousands of pounds were lost by growers and millers alike, with consequent drastic cuts in government revenue and expenditure for that year and the next two. The Western Division accounted for some 40 per cent of the Colony's total population. Economically, it is the most important area in the Colony, the richest sugar-growing and milling area.

The Ramakrishna Mission, meanwhile was planning a new library building in Lautoka, but agreed to delay this if there were hopes of development in the Western Division.

Against this background, it is easier to understand why a modest scheme, based in the Western Division was proposed. £20,000 was requested, £15,000 for a building and equipment in Lautoka, £5,000 for an initial stock of books. Miss Evelyn Evans, Director of Ghana's Library Board, who was holidaying in Fiji at the time, assisted the

British Council Representative and government officials in the preparation of this "cock-shy" of an application.

The capital grant was presented to Fiji early in 1962. Negotiations then proceeded to recruit a Librarian. But there was still another report to come.

In July 1962, H. V. Bonny, UNESCO Library Adviser, visited Fiji during the course of a survey, for the South Pacific Commission, of library services in the South Pacific.

In his report³ Bonny's primary purpose was to advise the Commission on the part it should play in assisting territorial library development. In additional unpublished sections to the general report, he submitted information and comment on services and plans in individual territories. A greatly abbreviated version of the main report was published in 1963.⁴

Bonny said that the thought leading to Fiji's Lautoka scheme was that Suva was already sufficiently served by existing libraries and furthermore, that the Suva City Council was not yet ready to relinquish its library powers to government. He did not see why a headquarters could not be set up in Suva even if this were the case, which he doubted. "As it is", he said, "the library service is to commence in Lautoka without any definite policy of future development, or indeed any guarantee that it will extend its operations beyond the municipality of Lautoka." This did not reflect on the sincerity of the proposers of the plan, who he felt sure would have agreed to his idea, had he proposed his alternative at the time. He criticised the plan to spend £15,000 on a building and only £5,000 on books. He continued, "It now appears too late to commence the service on these lines. Therefore, we must accept the situation as it is and hope that the Lautoka project will be as a pilot project and lead to overall library development". But, he warned, the technical planning should be geared to the future developmental pattern, which he had indicated, and the bookstock not to be regarded as a Lautoka bookstock only.

Bonny seems not to have taken into account the recent political developments in the Colony, outlined above, since no mention is made of them in his report. If the Lautoka proposals were not the most correct from the accepted textbook pattern, they were correct from the political, economic and social angle. His realistic acceptance of the situation and proposals for its technical planning for future development were clearly wise and practical.

The initial problems facing the writer on his arrival in September 1963 may now be summarised as:

- 1 Was the Western Division the best place to begin the new service?
- 2 Would future development be hampered by this seemingly back-to-front approach?
- 3 If the scheme as projected was satisfactory, should the available funds be apportioned as suggested in the application?

4 What was the function and purpose of a new public library service in a developing country such as Fiji?

The last problem was examined first. The educational and informational role of the public library in the economic and social development of such countries has been many times well expounded, notably by librarians in Africa ^{5, 6}. The importance of information in national development has recently been stressed by UNESCO⁷. Any inventory will show that books come high on the list of needs in Fiji at this stage. The literacy level of the population has not been accurately assessed, and will not even be measured in the 1966 census, but without doubt it is higher than in most developing countries. Schools and health services are comparatively well developed. Suva's population (1956 census) comprised 10 per cent of the population. Libraries existed in the capital, but Suva is comparatively isolated from the other concentrations of population. The Western Division, in which Lautoka stands, holds 40 per cent of the population within an area offering reasonable communications in the way of roads and shipping, radio and telephone services, but with no libraries to speak of. It is the economic and perhaps key political centre of the Colony, whilst Suva is the governmental and commercial centre.

In Fiji, which has almost one half million inhabitants, 41.4 per cent of the population are Fijians, 50 per cent are Indians and the remaining 8.6 per cent include Europeans, part-Europeans, Chinese, Rotumans, Tongans and other Pacific island people. Clearly, in such a multi-racial, multi-lingual society, the public library can also take part in the vital work of increasing understanding and communication between the various population groups.

A study of the foregoing reports and of the political and economic situation not only revealed to the writer good reasons why the Western Division should have been chosen, but convinced him that the choice had unmistakable advantages: distribution to a large section of the population was feasible; although the term "pilot project" has been overworked, the Western Division scheme allowed experimentation in towns, townships, development schemes, a chain of adjacent island communities and villages, to discover the most suitable policies and methods; the scheme would reveal demand and avoid spending funds on a national headquarters which might prove too small in a very short time, as had the library in Enugu; lastly, the drier climate of the West offered fewer problems in the early stages, in buildings and bookstock maintenance.

The disadvantages were not underestimated; separation from the government centre where the legislators could appreciate the new service, an important matter in developing countries; difficulty of distribution to the Northern and Eastern divisions, if the services

were to develop for the Colony as a whole.

Once decided that our scheme was the best for the situation and what exactly we were trying to do, the problem of the apportionment of funds had to be faced. The agreement had been to provide accommodation for the Librarian, too, out of the funds. To adopt Bonny's preference and spend £5,000 only on the building would have left little room for a library. Experience elsewhere also led the writer to decide that funds for books are likely to be increased when the need for more books is forcibly made apparent, whereas temporary premises can remain temporary for indefinite periods. Although a good library building is useless without books, a good building is important when a new service tries to make an impact in a developing country, both for the public and the pioneer staff. The building planned with a private architect was not a costly edifice; it was handsome, but functional and added something to the town. In February, 1964, the British Council gave a further grant of £5,000. The building, including a three-bedroomed flat, above the vehicle-port at the rear, eventually cost about £16,500 sterling. The rest of the funds was spent on books, equipment and furniture.

Staff had to be trained and bookstock ordered, catalogued and processed, once the building was under construction. Graduates are in short supply in Fiji and no suitable graduate could be recruited. A University Entrance qualification was required instead. Two men were recruited as assistants, one Fijian and one Indian. Personality, knowledge of languages, customs, and the work and pastimes of the local people were considered as important as academic attainment in staff selection. The first part of the training was motivational. It was vital to instil a "missionary spirit" into the new staff, to make clear what we would do, why, and what it would lead to. Although the two men would eventually undergo professional training overseas, they performed every task in the non-professional routines of a library, to give them a proper appreciation of what would be required of more junior staff whom they would later train.

The new bookstock presented problems worthy of a separate paper. Should the library provide books in all languages or only in English? Would children below the age of 18 predominate in membership, as in most developing countries? What simple reading books were available with Pacific backgrounds? Should practical subjects be stressed, as they were by the New Zealand Library Service bringing service to new areas⁸. What proportion of funds should be spent on reference and bibliographical material, in the absence of a general reference collection of any size in the colony? Should multiple copies be bought of selected volumes, or the money spread to provide fewer copies, but a collection of wider scope?

Decisions were made on these problems and a written book selection policy drawn up which would be used for the first eighteen months. This policy was presented to the Member for Social Services,

under whose portfolio Library Services came in 1964, as a guide to the aims of the library, and as a protection for the Librarian and library authority. This is worth while in any developing country, where a new library service begins.

At the writer's suggestion, a Libraries Advisory Committee was formed "to advise the Member for Social Services on the development of Government libraries policy and the coordination of library services in Fiji". The librarian acted as secretary, the Secretary for Social Services was the chairman and members included the Archivist, the British Council representative, the Suva City Librarian, and representatives of the Education Department and the Ramakrishna Mission.

The policy and methods of administration suggested by the librarian for the new Western Regional Library, including the principle of free service, were recommended by the Committee to the Member and subsequently adopted.

In the Western Division, to ensure rapid development of the service, even in the absence of a vehicle, a body of trained staff and branch buildings, negotiations were carried out with three local township boards, at Sigatoka, Ba and Nadi. Library Services would guarantee to provide a collection of books, up to 2,000 volumes at each centre, a proportion of which would be changed at suitable intervals, basic training for the township's own library assistant, advice on methods, inspection services, and the resources of the central library stock, if the township would accommodate the books, administer the branch service, provide its own stationery, equipment, furniture, and periodicals. The three townships agreed to join the cooperative scheme and were all providing service six months after the opening of the regional library headquarters in Lautoka.

The Western Regional Library opened in November 1964. The first annual report covering the period 22 November 1964 to 31 December 1965 is at present with the printers. 15,000 volumes had been accessioned and catalogued. 1,000 volumes awaited processing. The annual book fund, additional to the original grant, had risen from £1,000 in 1964, to £3,500. Staff numbered one Librarian, four assistants and a typist, with one assistant training overseas and one to follow him in March 1966. Over 5,000 readers had registered in Lautoka, over 60 per cent of whom were below the age of 18. Issues totalled 95,318 from Lautoka.

In the three townships, each with over 1,000 volumes at present, registered readership averaged 400, 70 per cent of whom were children. At one book per reader, issues averaged 300 per week at each centre on limited opening hours, but were increasing rapidly as the available bookstock expanded.

Experiments in service to island communities were carried out in two selected villages in the Yasawa Islands and at Malolo and Vatulele islands. A postal loan service was opened to all individuals in the Colony. A course had been held for 20 teachers in charge of secondary

school libraries. The library in Lautoka had formed a natural meeting place for a variety of interest groups in the community. Filmshows and children's "extension" activities had been introduced. Finally, a five-year plan of public library development, culminating in a Suva headquarters, and including staff training as a special feature, had been agreed upon by the Fiji Government.

The service had overcome the problems of starting from scratch. Now it must meet the challenge of continuing development.

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