

TRAINING FOR LIBRARIANSHIP IN NEW ZEALAND

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THE QUESTION OF LIBRARY TRAINING has recently given rise to a good deal of controversy. It has been debated in Library Association branches, amongst library staffs, and at annual conferences. At times a good deal of heat has been engendered, and more often than not the issues have been clouded by misunderstanding and marked by personal feeling rather than reasonable statement and argument.

Broadly speaking, the argument is between those who emphasize the value of university work plus a professional course as a basis for professional training and those who give priority to practical experience. It is resulting in a conflict between Library School and General Training Course, with dangers of a very real split in Association membership. It is the purpose of this article to attempt a clarification of the issues and a statement of the main principles which have determined Training Committee and Council policy in this respect. And right at the beginning I wish to emphasize that the conflict is largely an unreal one, or rather that the issues are not fundamentally what they seem to be on the surface. The dissatisfaction is clear enough. The reasons for it are not so clear, and the course it follows is confused and often contradictory.

Expanding services demanded more librarians

First of all, let's examine the situation as it arose. Ten years ago the NZLA began seriously to face the problem of ensuring a supply of trained librarians to cope with the library development that was being pushed forward. The situation was roughly this: in the whole country there were only a dozen or so librarians qualified by training and experience in the basic techniques and theory of our profession. Some had gained their knowledge from experience in English and Scottish libraries, under what may be called the apprenticeship system, unaided by professional courses of any kind; some had taken the English Library Association courses by correspondence; a few others, a very few, had studied at library schools in America and England.

From none of these sources was there assurance of a further supply in any sufficiency. Most of those going to overseas library schools had done so on Carnegie Fellowships, which had been provided for key jobs only during a certain period. British trained librarians were no longer migrating, and in any case in this as in other professions the time had obviously come for New Zealand to stand on its own feet if it was to develop a library system suited to its needs. The correspondence courses offered by the Library Association, London, had serious disadvantages. They were a constant source of trouble due to the distance at which they were operated, and they were in many

respects unsuitable for our requirements, if not for the requirements of modern libraries in general.

In these circumstances the NZLA considered what could be done. In the larger libraries some attempt had always been made to give practical training to juniors. The Auckland Public Library, for instance, has a long tradition of careful training in cataloguing. And in one centre, Dunedin, a course of lectures attended by staffs of the public and University Libraries was held in 1937. But these were the exceptions.

The General Training Course is started

The main problem was the scarcity of librarians able and free enough to give instruction. It was obviously wise to use the few available to the maximum advantage. If the time used to instruct in one library or one centre could be used on a national basis it would go much further. So was born the idea of the General Training Course.

The launching of the General Training Course strained the resources of New Zealand librarianship almost to breaking point. Those few in the profession who were both able and willing to act as tutors, to prepare courses, and to examine, were already without exception overworked in their respective jobs. But it was obvious that it was precisely such people who were essential to its success. So sacrifices were made and the Course got under way.

It was not a perfect course, and no one thought it was. It was merely the best device that could be thought of in the circumstances. It was designed to introduce librarians to the theoretical problems of their profession and to ensure that they got practical experience of its elementary techniques. The point was stressed that librarianship was a combination of theory and practice, that it could not be taught simply from notes, and that students trying to take it while working in sub-standard libraries would find themselves up against almost impossible odds. There was clear recognition also of the defects inherent in any correspondence course, particularly the lack of direct personal contact between student and tutor, and various methods have since been tried to overcome this.

That this Course got going at all is a tribute to the courage, resource and determination of the NZLA. That it was carried on right through the difficult war years must always be a matter of wonder and of admiration for those who did the work. Something was said at last Conference, in the course of an address which must make even the person who delivered it blush to read now in cold print, about the endurance of the students of the course. It would be more appropriate to recognize the endurance of the tutors, and the sheer hard work and NZLA office organization that have kept it running. 'Many have given it up because the time factor wore them down', the speaker complained, as though any professional course is worth while which does not, amongst other things, test precisely this quality of endurance. Something new in excuses for failure—'worn down by the time factor'

Recruits did not come in

But the main fault of the General Training Course was nothing to

do with the course itself. The trouble was that after several years of operation we seemed to have fewer trained librarians than ever. The Course was for those already in library work. It brought no recruits. The profession was caught in a vicious circle, the stupidly vicious circle of cheap labour. Because pay was so low librarianship was confined almost entirely to women, chiefly girls who regarded it as a not un congenial way of filling in time until they should be claimed by the more interesting and permanent career of marriage.

The turnover was rapid and had disastrous consequences. Better pay could hardly be justified for people who were merely filling in time. But without better pay we could not expect to attract persons wanting to make it their life's work. Men were in effect debarred because the wage was not a living one. And from the training viewpoint the wastage was enormous. I speak here from the bitter experience of one who spent several years training staff who no sooner became proficient than they left. In this absurd and futile task did many of us spend our time over a period of years. It sounds monstrous, and it was monstrous. We were all of us—university libraries, public libraries, special libraries—caught in this wicked and uneconomic system. And as library service was expanded to meet increasing needs throughout the country so the whole silly business gained momentum and ever more energy went in training ever more transient staffs.

The problem was how to break the circle. Somehow we had to make librarianship possible as a permanent career, somehow to attract persons of sufficient intellectual maturity to assume a share in administration and training. In practice this meant that men must be drawn in as well as women.

Library School planned to attract recruits

The opportunity came when the end of the war brought schemes of rehabilitation. A Library School was planned. A bursary system ensured that students could keep alive while training. A full time staff relieved the pressure which had hitherto fallen entirely on practising librarians. And—and this is a key point—the National Library Service was able to provide jobs at salaries sufficient to attract people with the necessary qualifications. It was a masterly move, and the Library Association threw its whole weight into the project. Without it we should, I believe, have faced an inevitable collapse. The sheer physical strain and the absence of any alternative light ahead was becoming unbearable.

The end of the School's third year sees the New Zealand library profession considerably strengthened. New blood has been added, a reasonable balance is being achieved between men and women, and the annual loss amongst the newcomers is reduced to almost negligible proportions. Moreover, these newcomers are of a quality which is making itself felt. They bring to our profession the experience gained in other walks of life or in overseas service. They are intellectually stimulating, as anyone who has lectured at the School will testify. And their standard of education is the highest that this country provides.

Criticisms of the Library School.

Now all this has had to be achieved within the framework of New

Zealand's very slender librarianship resources. Apart from the School's two Directors we have had no outside help. In the circumstances it was inevitable that there should be deficiencies and that other of our operations should suffer. But to seize on these defects while overlooking the basic gains recorded is unwarrantably childish and should not be tolerated by the Association. Before anything else we should understand and appreciate the manner and extent of our plan's success. Only then we are justified in listening to the complaints.

What are these complaints?

1. That the Association's General Training Course is being neglected in favour of the Library School, and should be taken over and run by the School!

In fact the School is so badly understaffed that it has to rely for a great part of its lecturing on visiting librarians. It is the unanimous opinion of the Training Committee after serious consideration that the school staff are at present getting too little vacation for the efficient performance of such work. The General Training Course meanwhile has continued uninterrupted. It is obviously not without faults but it has been designed for a particular purpose and does fulfil a real need.

2. That the public libraries are getting no recruits from the Library School because its graduates are all seized by the National Library Service!

This is simply not true. The truth is that those graduating from the School go where they can get a reasonable job. My own library has managed to attract three of them. Several have gone to public libraries, many to special libraries. But public libraries on the whole offer salaries that are insulting to anyone with professional qualifications.

3. That too much importance is placed on university degrees as a prerequisite for entry to the profession, that admission to the School should not be confined to graduates, and in particular that it should always be open to librarians who have completed the General Training Course!

The answer here is that the School has been planned for a very different purpose from the General Training Course. The latter is for already practising librarians, the former for those wanting to become librarians. The School is strictly limited in numbers by practical considerations of space and staff, and that being so it is essential to have some basis for selection, and some minimum qualification. It is only right and proper that such qualification should be an education of university standard.

This does not imply that university graduates necessarily make good librarians, or better librarians than those who have learnt the job by years of practical experience. (Some of the most inept creatures that ever starved on a librarian's salary have been Masters of Arts.) It does mean that the person fitted by temperament and ability for librarianship is better with a high standard of education. Such a background can conceivably be acquired without going to a university, but in our day and age and country the normal method is to take a degree course. It is done for all other professions, and it would be absurd if we,

whose whole purpose is to make knowledge available to readers, should require anything less.

Over and above our general education we need a special training in practical techniques, but to acquire the latter without having an understanding of the ends to which they are directed would reduce us to the level of robots and render us as ineffectual in assisting readers as librarians have so commonly and unfortunately been in New Zealand. Those who think differently are speaking the language not of librarianship but of book clubs.

RECRUITING FOR THE LIBRARY PROFESSION

There have been two opposing views as to the best method of recruiting for the library profession. Some librarians feel that they can choose candidates for the profession better than the library schools can, since they know the kind of person needed for a particular job or for a particular library. Such a person might then work a year or more in a library before going to library school and from that experience be in a position to get more out of his professional education. The library schools, on the other hand, tend to feel that while the judgment of some librarians is sound, the schools by and large are in a better position to make the selection because they are called on to do so much of it. In general, the selection of students by a library school can be more systematic than selection by many librarians, and wise selection of students can be set down as one of the most important contributions library schools make to the profession.

—Metcalf, Keyes D., and others. The program of instruction in library schools. Urbana, Univ. of Illinois pr., 1943. pp. 126-7.