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(Leads Other Paper)

Libraries & Politics

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LIBRARIES & POLITICS

edited by Keith Armstrong and John Noyce

There is little doubt that the Librarian's role is distinctly political - and propagandist. Most Librarians by their very passivity serve only to reinforce the system they are employed in. However, as we can see from the press of late, Librarians are becoming more militant in questioning the fundamental basis of our society. Librarians for Social Change is in itself a reflection of this trend. What must be decided, nevertheless, is the goal we have in mind when we push for social change. I hope that the following articles will throw some light on this topic.

Keith Armstrong

Enclosed in this journal are a wide variety of views on the nature of the Librarian's task. I find points I agree with in all of them, though I cannot agree totally with any of them. I have, ^{been} and remain an anarchist, yet I recognise that an increasing number of our readers are not. We have reached the stage where both the journal and the groups which have formed around it have to change. Martyn proposes the Guild as a pressure group in much the same way, if I read his article correctly, as the Nalگو Action Group works in local government. Many of you will read this at the LfSC Conference this month which is why I'm feverously typing away to complete the journal (typing errors and all) in time for the conference. Which leads on to the future of the journal. As I spend more and more of my time in publishing and as my degree course at Sussex Univ. nears its peak of work I have to say - our policy of a different group doing each issue must work. By 'doing' an issue I mean writing, typing, producing the issue - to date only the London members of the Feminist Group have managed that (no.5). The Manchester Group actually fluffed no.4, and Keith this time has landed me with the production, not to mention getting more articles (from John Lindsay and myself) to fill out the issue. I'm not moaning (much) but if groups don't volunteer to do future issues then there won't be a journal after no.9 which the Feminist Group is doing. So pull your fingers out!

John Noyce

Pp. no.8 is being done at the Conference, so the postal subscribers will get 6 issues at once - then a long gap until no.9 in the summer - libraries please note! (my rubbish bin is getting quite full of cards saying 'we have not received any issues of your journal since no. ')

'We're all librarians really'

Lee Torrey

The purpose of this paper is to add to the debate on the principles which underlie the provision of public library facilities in Britain at present. It is my contention that because of the historical development of librarianship as a practice, most of the literature has been concerned with practical matters, financial, managerial, technical and continually inward-looking. There has been a lack of theory relating with this practice. I hesitate to use the word "philosophical" for it has connotations of pretention but the library is a social institution related to all other social institutions: this is the theory which I feel librarians need in order that they might understand their function and develop their purpose. The lack of this theory is both the cause and the result of the present position of the library. Where any consideration at all has been given it has been with status and dignity, position and prestige. Here I want to indicate a few of the areas in which I feel there really is need for debate.

I want to limit my consideration to the public library in Britain. Firstly the public library has a function less easily defined than others and through a more widespread social role, social implications of much greater import. The development of the university library is a facet of the development of the university, and its role is much more easily considered in terms of the role of the university itself. Similarly the scientific library or documentation centre is more clearly fixed within a framework of its institution and considerations of its social and political implications cannot be divorced from those of the institution itself. Secondly the public library has developed to a greater extent in Britain than anywhere else, with the possible exception of the USA. Thirdly the "philosophy" is in contradiction with at least one other national library "philosophy"; and fourthly because of the relation between theory and practice I must think and write about the situation in which I work so that my theory may grow out of my practice and my practice out of my theory - the dialectic of praxis.

The public library research group of the library association outlined what they felt to be the basis for library practice: "Aim- to contribute to sustaining the quality of life in all its aspects - educational, economic, industrial, scientific and cultural and promote the concept of a democratic society in which equal opportunity exists for all to develop into true citizens with whole and balanced personalities leading to an increase in the sum total of man's happiness and awareness of himself, his fellow men and his environment"(1). UNESCO, through the public libraries section of the international federation of library associations published in 1972 a similar statement of principles that the public library was "a democratic institution for education, culture and information".

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It is a practical demonstration of democracy's faith in universal education as a continuing and lifelong process, in the appreciation of the achievement of humanity in knowledge and culture", "the principle means whereby the record of man's thoughts and ideas, and the expression of his imagination, are made freely available to all", it is concerned with the "refreshment of man's spirit by the provision of books for relaxation and pleasure, with assistance to the student, and with provision of up-to-date technical, scientific and sociological information" and it must be "readily accessible, and its doors open for free and equal use by all members of the community regardless of race, colour, nationality, age, sex, religion, language, status or educational achievement."(2)

To swim briefly through some of the literature which deals with this consult Nitecki who says "a proposed main objective of the library is justified by indicating its closeness with other ideals as already highly desirable in the society". "the library conceived as an institution serving social democracy and the self-realisation of its citizens"(3). Similarly Joekel(4), Vellard(5) and Kolitsch, who goes as far as to say that a theory of librarianship would indicate the identity of the objectives of democracy and librarianship(6): McColvin says "in a modern democratic society all people must be freely able to use and read, without hinderance or bias or limitations, all those books which will make more or less significant contributions to their lives."(7) While James Tompason says that librarians "as the guardians of freedom of thought they are bastions of liberty".(8) And that shows the change in forty years:

We see the same basic train running through these thoughts—democracy, happiness, material benefit, self-improvement, but nowhere do we find them discussing what is meant by democracy or happiness, self-improvement for what, or material benefit leading to happiness? It might be argued that these are the provinces of the political scientist, or the psychologist, but as none agree I would suggest it is a tenuous logic which is based on words the meanings of which none agree about and then say that working out the meanings is someone else's job. Rather I would suggest that by using words which no-one understands and which allow maximum confusion philosophy becomes mystification and practice justifies the legitimacy of the power of those who exercise it, both acting together in the interests of those on whose behalf it is exercised.

I would suggest that there is implied in all these statements the idea that we are living in a "democracy", that society is progressing in a direction which is "good": in other words they all support the conservative tenet, better is more of the same. However if evidence could be submitted that we do not live in a democracy, that the democratic "content" of our society is decreasing, that "democracy" itself might be mystifying, that production and consumption of knowledge in itself might not be "good" then it can be seen that the public library might be performing a role far from that intended by the protagonists of the statements cited.

When we see that at least one other major society has a basic theory of the library qualitatively different then I feel that we have less cause for complacency in the "rightness" of our "philosophy" and much more cause for rigorous investigation, a rigour so far absent from "philosophical" considerations in librarianship.

All I wish to do now is indicate some of the areas in which questions need to be asked, in the hope of inciting someone to something. First areas of theory. When we talk of freedom of the individual and yet define the human in terms of his social relations do we not have an irreconcilable contradiction? Do the concepts labour, value and money in capitalism not raise such contradictions, not to mention what actually happens in Western industrialised society, that we must be most uncertain of our very most basic assumption? In areas of practice. Do the interrelations of the library with publishing, newspapers and television not give us cause to question what we are providing for people? Does the relation of local government and library control not cause us to question who runs the libraries and for whom? Is the contradiction between saying that we exist to provide people with what they want and yet we exist to provide for their betterment not so obvious that the concept "the good book" should be problematic rather than bandied?

That each of us needs to do is find out and understand the implications of what is happening in society now through use of his critical faculties, to work out for herself what man and society is all about and what ought to be and when to work out how to get from what is to what ought to be. We cannot do it on our own. We can only do it by getting together and talking, sharing our experiences and our knowledge and our talents. I on my own can feel only isolated, confused and pessimistic, but not just to talk, for theory and action are mutually dependent. As humans we are here, not just to interpret that which we have created, but to recreate it.

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Libraries and Politics - a personal view by an industrial 7
 librarian Keith Armstrong

Most librarians who enter industry are caught up in the same motives of greedy ambition and arrogant elitism as the capitalist management they are put there to serve. They discuss the techniques of their trade in a context completely divorced from any social-value considerations. As librarians that are convinced that their duty is to serve rather than to question. They are, in fact, capitalist stooges: they sell their services to the highest bidder and would have no hesitation in passing on information about, say, military weaponry which could be used to burn and maim the innocent of a country as Vietnam. Politics to them is for the politicians; they are 'only librarians'.

As an industrial librarian and a committed socialist I think it might be informative to give some account of my own experience within industry and to outline some of the conflicts that I have been faced with.

My reasons for studying the industrial aspects of librarianship at college were confused. At that time I was, to a considerable extent, politically unaware and attracted to industry by such 'mundane' considerations as a 5-day week and the essence of shift-working, as well as being influenced by my own particular concept of 'bourgeois individualism.' So, to a large degree, I ended up in a work situation which I was and still am temperamentally unsuited to: though this is not to say that within the confines of capitalist society I would ever find a position which 'suited' me; instead, I 'work' in the bourgeois sense of the word only to enable me to stay alive and to continue the REAL WORK of furthering socialism.

My first contact with the industrial environment was at International Research and Development Co. Ltd., in Newcastle upon Tyne - a firm which is part of the Reynolle-Parsons cum Vickers enterprise and which, amongst other things, carried out research into the military applications of the super-conducting motor. My experience there was a formative one in convincing me of the imbalance and fundamental evil in existing within capitalist society: it was my first experience of active trade union politics and brought me into direct conflict with the senior management I was put there to serve; so much so that I was warned either to steer clear of industrial action or otherwise be rewarded with the sack. The specific issue which brought matters to a head was a fight against a swingeing round of redundancies in 1972. A work to rule was instituted by the Union and a one day a week stoppage put into effect. As far as I could I saw to it that the Library played an active role in supporting these measures and I personally joined the picket line. Our campaign was a successful one though the harassment and character assassination many of us suffered (my boss even examined my poems and found 'worrying' signs of deviant behaviour in them) left behind a bitter feeling which led to a number of prompt departures, including my own, in the months ahead.

As the recent election results showed, it is the ordinary everyday issues that count with ordinary people, matters such as jobs, homes and prices, and, indeed, more often than not as these affect the local picture. It is to deal with these problems at the grass roots level that community organisations have sprung up all over the country, forming a new and important type of social and political pressure group. It is at this level of politics that librarians not only could but should become involved, if they are to become an integral part of the community they aspire to serve.

Although community work involves people very much as individuals, there is an obvious need not only for professional expertise but also for the back-up resources of local library systems. Public libraries must be geared to working within their communities and this in effect means working at the neighbourhood level because a local community is now generally recognised as an area comprising no more than 200 to 400 households. Libraries must embrace the community development philosophy. This is now an internationally recognised process whereby individuals and communities are enabled to use their own talents and growth potential to create a society in which individuals and communities have access to resources adequate to meet their needs as identified at the local level. This means librarians going into various communities, not as weekly or fortnightly guests but to become part of the community team along with Community Development workers, Social workers and other professionals, Tenant Associations representatives and, of course, the residents. The team approach is currently in vogue among local authority social workers, while librarians are themselves being increasingly drawn into management - team activities, so some form of precedent is there. It is still the exception rather than the rule, however, to find librarians engaged in on-going community projects comprising anything more than efforts aimed at achieving short-term gains for the library, say in the form of publicity for some new aspect of the service.

Community action, one believes, is the key field of political activity so far as librarians are concerned. Even within the local authority context we are minnows in a very large pool, a minority social service, and if enough of our colleagues could see people as people first and readers second we could increase both our impact and our drawing power. Our business is not books, it is people, and we exist not so that people may read books as such but that by doing so they can develop fully as people within a free society. We know that it is not enough simply to provide the materials and the premises, thereby turning our libraries into out-price reading clubs for the middle classes. We must render our libraries relevant to the needs of that greater public which ignores us, and we can do this by the outreach approach, the highest form of which is the direct involvement of the library in the social, political

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and cultural life of the community.

This means contacting community leaders locally, and need one say, there are seldom local politicians, but instead are members of Tenants Associations, Parent-Teacher groups, Youth Organisations, and of various local pressure groups. The next step is to become involved in community activities, which may comprise among other things, literacy classes, pre-school story hours, community festivals, youth clubs, or perhaps ad-hoc affairs such as campaigns launched to oppose motorway expansion, the closure of a local school, or job losses. The important thing is that by such direct involvement at the community level we should be working with and not for people.

The exact nature of our contribution will vary with the individual and from place to place, but the benefits of professional knowledge and experience are not to be lightly dismissed. In such obvious areas as the acquisition, selection and circulation of materials, publicity and the planning of programmes, librarians could play a major role. Less obvious but also important would be our efforts to break down the, at times, over-healthy respect that ordinary people tend to have for the orinted word ---the "keep it behind glass covers and only use it when you hands are clean" mentality. Voluntary workers also, for all their other sterling qualities, at times display the most Victorian of attitudes towards the protection of the bookstock, hence some professional perspective of the "books are meant to be read" variety can come in handy. Whatever librarians do in such situations however, be it telling stories or editing the community newspaper, one of the most important contributions that they can make is to give of their time. Most voluntary efforts can usually attract sufficient funds to keep going, and often a far more serious need if for people, people who will become interested in community projects to the extent of giving up their own time to help. The work is anything but easy, and often requires one to work in uncomfortable surroundings where frustrations tend to come easier than rewards. At the same time this is really what librarianship is all about, solid people to people stuff.

It is also basic political action, for by helping people to help themselves one is also helping them towards increased self knowledge and an increased political awareness. A community which has been able to organise itself to face up to its own problems has been definately enhances in terms of social and political utility. This was a notable feature of the High John experiment where the increased community awareness was one of the more tangible signs of success. At a more specific level the arming of ordinary people with the kind of information necessary for survival in the modern world is sure to be regarded as another important social advance. Governments, trade unions, political parties and the press, not to mention big business, all need information in order to function properly. If such powerful interests as these feel the need then how much more do the poor and the less socially adequate

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Decisions in libraries are, too often, taken at the "top", or the "centre", with the result that the people employed in libraries are split into two separate groups: those who "manage" and those who work with little or no control over the way their job is done, and no say in the day-to-day running of the place in which they work. Neither the Unions, nor the Library Association, have even attempted to challenge this lack of democracy, and are now absorbed into the structure of control.

Both the Library Association and the Unions are monolithic organizations including in their ranks people of widely differing, if not actually opposing, views. The Unions represent not only those who work in libraries, but people from other industries, and this, at the same time as attempting to reconcile the different interests of managerial and non-managerial staff. As a result, the Unions have contented themselves with improving conditions of service, limiting their demands to such things as higher pay (even these have been unsuccessful - a consequence of the lack of solidarity caused by conflicting internal differences). The Library Association, on the other hand, has evolved into an association of management, and confined itself to improving standards of librarianship.

A Librarians' Guild would bring together all those who work in libraries (excluding those who "manage"). Its members could combine to tackle specific issues within the L.A. and the Unions, but in the main the Guild would not be diverted from the major issues of power and democracy within libraries, by secondary, short-term considerations. The Guild would accept all library workers into its ranks (including clerical, ancillary and cleaning staff), and would be completely free from craft divisions. It would, as a result, be free to tackle the thorny, but crucial, issue of workers' management, initiating discussion about forms of democracy within libraries, but more than this, agitating directly for full workers' control of all libraries.

At first glance, other issues, such as the "need" for professional qualifications, do not seem to be closely related to those of democracy in libraries. Yet, in fact, such issues are the lynch-pin of the power structure. It is the giving of paper qualifications which divides us, threatens our solidarity with other libraryworkers. Such things as job-reservation stand or fall upon our acceptance of "qualifications".

The principles of de-schooling can be equally applied to libraries and librarianship as they can be to education. The long period of theoretical study at college can never compensate for practical experience, and yet the substitute is in danger of being accepted (if it is not already), for the real thing. Shorter theoretical courses designed to back-up practical work obviously need to be introduced as an alternative, if not a replacement for the longer exam-orientated courses.

Worse, however, are the artificial divisions created between qualified and unqualified, which serve only to justify gross disparity of income and legitimise the undemocratic distribution of power. Any Guild would need to concentrate on the provision of courses designed to reinforce experience and attempt to abolish the whole system of judgement (and/or assessment) and the false divisions which such a system creates.

There is a need to build an organisation which can promote the interests and aspirations of all full-time and part-time library workers (whether "qualified" or not) - interests which have been ignored by the LA and the Unions alike. Such an organisation cannot work in isolation and should attempt to establish the widest possible links with similar groups in other industries. Our struggle to control our everyday lives is part of a wider struggle and should be seen as such.

(the above article is intended to provide a background for broader discussion at the LfSC conference in February.)

Note: the author has reservations about the use of the word "Guild", but has used it for sake of convenience, being unable to think of a suitable one-word alternative).

continued from p 10 (W.J.Martin's article)

need to be kept informed? By appraising such people of their rights, be these social, political or legal, librarians can help strike a blow against those creatures that crawl beneath the paving stones of society - the moneylenders, unscrupulous door-to-door salesmen, slum landlords and back street abortionists. Alright, what if we cannot do all of this off our own bat, at least we can try to do something, and we can start by helping to staff community information centres, acting as contact points and simply be being there. Some librarians are already committed to community politics, and that many more should follow is important not just for community development but for the future of the profession as well. Unfortunately a great deal of time is still being wasted over arguments about what constitutes our job as librarians and what does not. Do it now, later for the questions!

continued from p 6 (John Lindsay's article)

- 7) McColvin, Lionel R. Public libraries and other libraries. Libri, 6(4) 1956 pp305-321.
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continued from p 8 (Keith Armstrong's article)

and in sanction-busting in Rhodesia. I have also engaged in work at a community level here - assisting in the groundwork for the 1975 Killingworth Festival. Inevitably, however, I must leave - the compromise is just too great.

I am past the stage where I can even pretend to conform to the fundamentally unjust precepts of capitalism. Yet I still find myself, for practical reasons, employed in that system. It is a dilemma facing an increasing number of people; it is a dilemma which can only be resolved by fundamental social change involving a mass movement of workers, including the hitherto politically-spineless Librarian.

LIBRARIES AND THE WORKING CLASSES IN THE 19th CENTURY

John Noyce

Libraries are essentially institutions run by and for members of the middle classes. When considering the use made of libraries by the working or labouring classes one finds oneself questioning generally held views, for the history of libraries in Britain has been written, with some significant exceptions, by librarians who have tended to concentrate on the factual aspects of history and in this respect library history is analogous with local history where, until recently, the antiquarian approach was rampant. The present writer has the growing feeling that use of libraries by the working classes in the 18th and 19th centuries was greater than has been hitherto supposed. This essay, whilst making use of the traditional literature on library history, tries to look at the provision of libraries for the working classes in a wider context than purely librarianship (1).

The organization, maintenance and use of a library involves three groups of people: the sponsors, the staff and the readers. Tension inevitably arises between these groups as to the suitability of books and the principles which are to govern the running of the library service. The sponsors tended (and still tend?) to be people who felt they had a 'social mission' in life, and tended to dictate the tastes of their readers. The influence of the church had always been strong in many of these libraries, but this was to begin to wane in the 18th century with the growing interest in secular literature and a variety of commercial and private libraries were begun; the rise of the commercial libraries especially was closely associated with the emergence of the novel as a new and popular literary form in the mid-18th century.

The spread of literacy, the increase in leisure time and a growing political awareness encouraged some sections of the working classes to read what they considered important. Gradually these readers found their own ways of obtaining literature, be it through book clubs, or by founding their own libraries. An early example was the Leadhills Reading Society formed by the lead miners in the village of Leadhills in Lanarkshire. Not only were they highly paid, but they only worked six hours a day which was of course low for the time. This was a non-proprietary library, supported by the monthly contributions of the miners themselves, with some encouragement from the local gentry (2). This was in fact the first non-clerical private subscription library and although it was imitated in the neighbouring mining village of Wanlockhead in Dumfriesshire in 1756, it was not generally imitated elsewhere. As we have seen the high wages and low working hours which the Leadhills miners enjoyed led to the forming of their library; whilst the interest may have been apparent elsewhere in the country there were few such privileged groups of workers in the 18th, or indeed the 19th, century.

If libraries were available to the working man, and if he had learnt to read - two big ifs - they were more likely to be the various subsidised libraries aimed at working people; their names were varied - Working Men's Libraries, Mechanics' and Apprentices' Libraries, Village Libraries, Parish Libraries, Penny Libraries, Itinerating Libraries (3).

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The books provided were varied, but all aimed at improving the morals of the working classes. One such library is described in Rev. Francis Wrangham, Vicar of Humanby, near Scarborough, in a report to the Society for Bettering the Condition and Increasing the Comforts of the Poor in 1807:

"I have lately founded a small parish library, which I keep in my vestry, consisting of the twelve volumes of the Christian Society's Tracts, the Cheap Repository Tracts, the Cottage Library, two volumes, the Pilgrim's Progress, Gilpin's Lives of Truman and Atkins, Doddridge's Gardiner, Susan Gray, Lucy Franklin, etc., etc., under an idea that the lower classes delight more in concrete than in abstracts; or (in other words) that sermons are less read than tales " (4).

The literature available

We know from accounts such as these what the ruling classes wanted the working people to read. With difficulty we can trace occasional references to libraries such as Leadhills, where the privileged portions of the working classes had started their own libraries. What is difficult to discover is what the "man in the street", if you like, was reading in the early 19th century. Because so little has survived historians have tended to concentrate on the wealth of material available on the reading habits of the middle and upper classes.

The cheaply printed chapbooks and broadsheets which abounded in the late 18th and early 19th centuries reached a wide audience and, for many, were the only reading material easily available. Printers such as James Catnach of the Seven Dials area of London produced a wide range of publications, often badly printed but widely read. The broadsheets on sensational murders sold at the murderer's execution were printed in vast numbers - Catnach's account of John Thurtell's murder of William Weare in 1832 sold about 250,000 copies (5). Street literature such as these chapbooks and broadsheets was in many ways the predecessor of the popular newspapers which were to appear in increasing numbers in the second half of the 19th century. These chapbooks also, in the view of one social historian, "represented, though in a debased and mutilated form, the remnants of a popular culture - the culture of a peasant England whose humble art forms lingered long after industrialism had sapped its vital strength" (6).

In the 18th century coffee houses had developed to facilitate, amongst others, the exchange of ideas. This had led to the provision of newspapers in the coffee houses for users which was encouraged by the high price of newspapers caused by the stamp duty. It would seem likely that coffee houses, and some public houses, encouraged the reading of newspapers both by individuals and put aloud for groups of people - the latter method being important when for many people literacy was a skill not easily obtained. A number of coffee houses, and to a lesser extent public houses, began collections of books for loan, often by subscription. In London in 1849 there were said to be about 2,000 coffee houses frequented by working people and, according to

William Lovett, about a quarter of these had libraries - some as many as 2,000 volumes (7).

The stamp duty on newspapers was "a heavy burden on the working class reader"(8) which greatly hindered the efforts of the politicized parts of the working classes to spread their views. In 1830 as a result of the French revolutionary upheavals, there was a resurgence of radical activity in London which was expressed in several ways, one of which was the emergence of a number of working-class papers which ignored the newspaper stamp duty and therefore in the establishment's eyes were illegal. In the following six years a mass of such papers were produced in secrecy by radical printers and distributed throughout Britain. These "unstamped", such as the Poor Man's Guardian and the Destructive, were an important source of information on current events for many workers in this period (9).

The autobiographies and reminiscences of working men frequently refer to the dearth of suitable reading matter which they encountered in the first thirty years of the 19th century. This dearth was of a two-fold nature. In the first place there was an absence of cheap editions of standard works, and secondly, a lack of special literature designed for popular use. From the 1820s both types of material were to be increasingly provided by a number of publishers issuing works - both standard and new works - in cheap editions, often in series, such as Constable's Miscellany, the S.D.U.K.'s Library of Useful Knowledge, Murray's Family Library, Milner's Cottage Library, etc. Much of this was part of the middle class desire for 'elevating literature'(10). The "blasphemous and seditious press" was also being cheaply reprinted - though on a smaller scale than those mentioned above. Works such as Paine's Rights of Man were continually reprinted in the first half of the nineteenth century in spite of a great danger (especially in the 1810s and 1820s) to the printers and publishers of arrest and imprisonment(11).

A Worker's Own Library

It was still difficult - though gradually becoming easier - for working men and women to acquire reading material which they could afford. There were still many who could not read or write and the development of education was necessary before the working classes became literate. The long hours of work left little time for first learning to read and write and secondly to read consistently. However, many working men had the drive and energy to combine reading with their often arduous work. This was easiest for those who could regulate their own hours of work, such as the weavers (though probably only during their affluent period) and craftsmen such as tailors - Francis Place being a famous example. He had his own private library at the rear of his shop which became famous for the frequent meetings of London radicals. Others had their own libraries, though references to them are difficult to find. There is a satirical description of a Yorkshire village politician from 1849 which, according to one historian, has "the feel of authenticity". The old man described is a cobbler and the sage of his industrial village:

"He has a library that he ^{rather} prides himself upon. It is a strange collection...There is the 'Pearl of Great Price' and 'Cobbett's Twopenny Trash', 'The Pilgrim's Progress'...and 'The Go-a-head Journal', 'The Wrongs of Labour' and 'The Rights of Man', 'The History of the French Revolution' and Bunyan's 'Holy War'...'The Age of Reason' and a superannuated Bible."(12)

From the 1820s onwards there were an increasing number of suggestions for new libraries and reading rooms for the use of the working classes. Some were middle class attempts:

"The construction of upper stories to the places of worship of different sects, for the purposes of libraries, reading-rooms and public instruction generally"(13).

Others were proposals by workers themselves:

"I propose the establishment in every city and large town of a LIBRARY with a Reading Room and Hall, for mutual instruction and communication of knowledge, together with a POOR MAN'S PRESS from which may be issues daily or weekly periodicals; appropriated to the interests and enlightenment of the working class and supported by themselves"(14).

The latter is interesting in that the author clearly sees the need for the workers to produce their own literature - hence the "Poor Man's Press". Alas, it remained only a suggestion(15).

Mechanics Institutes

The Mechanics Institutes and similar bodies were intended for the instruction and education of the working classes. Some were genuinely started and run by working people, but eventually these, like the others started by the middle classes, became institutions run largely for, and by, the middle classes. It has been estimated that there were 804 institutes (mechanics institutes and other bodies). One historian has collected and examined the book-stock totals for 622 individual institutions of which 416 - two thirds - each had individual book-stocks of less than 1000. Only 53 institutions had book-stocks exceeding 3,000. He comments that "the typical Mechanics' Institute, in fact, was very small, had very few members, and had only a very small library book-stock"(16). Witnesses to the Select Committee of 1849 on Public Libraries, particularly George Dawson, a travelling lecturer, and Samuel Smiles, of Self-help fame, were agreed that Mechanics Institutes' libraries contained a high proportion of dull, heavy, outmoded and outdated donations. However, some of the smaller Mechanics Institutes had better libraries than might have been expected because they had acquired those built up by earlier institutions. (eg. Kendal M.I. had by 1850 absorbed the Kendal Economic Library, founded in 1797). The provision of fiction and political works was controversial and in several cases was one of the topics of contention between middle-class and working-class in mechanics institutes.

The move towards public libraries

As we have noted earlier it is difficult to assess the amount of library provision by and for the working classes in the early 19th century because of the lack of evidence which requires more research(17), however it is clear that the growing interest in the reading habits of the working classes was leading the way to the provision of rate-supported public libraries and, in this respect, the experiences of the mechanics' institutes were to be important. Such provision of public libraries out of local rates was a contentious issue which was continually debated in the 1840s. It is in the evidence given to the 1849 Select Committee on Public Libraries that we find some details of the provision of reading material by workers (usually artisans) themselves. Indeed, much of the evidence offered to the Committee in support of public libraries was based on the readers' success in supplying themselves with books. Thus William Lovett in evidence to the Committee:

"I judge from the efforts which have been made by the working classes to establish libraries for themselves. The better-paid mechanics or artisans exert themselves to have little libraries of their own. I know a great number who have respectable libraries"(18).

One of the reasons for the continuing interest in library provision for the working classes arose out of the concern for the eradication of drunkenness and associated immorality. In 1834 the Select Committee on Inquiry into Drunkenness considered, amongst other topics, the provision of libraries and reading rooms. Francis Place, whilst deeply suspicious of this Committee, gave evidence and in reply to one question agreed that

"the establishment of parish libraries and district reading rooms on subjects both entertaining and instructive to the community might draw off a number of those who now frequent public houses for the sole enjoyment they afford"(19).

There were, however, libraries established in public houses. George Dawson, for example, told the 1849 Committee that at Nottingham, because the Operatives' and Artizans' Library refused to admit theological or political works, "many working men have withdrawn from it, and formed a new library, and the books are kept in public houses, and there they go and pay a small subscription, and perhaps take a glass of ale, and read"(20).

There was much opposition to the provision of public libraries. For instance Colonel Sibthorp during the debates on the 1850 Public Libraries Bill (introduced as a result of the work of the 1849 Select Committee) was extremely vocal in his exasperation with the thought of public money being spent on libraries. He considered that the Bill was "wholly uncalled for" asking "what would be the use of these libraries to those who could not read or write?". Indeed Parliament "would soon be thinking of introducing the performance of Punch for the amusement of the people"(21). A more considered attitude was expressed by John Inray of Aberdeen, in 1849, who thought that the feeling of some landed proprietors was "that they were raising the lower classes too highly by giving them information

and that it is better to keep them without it"(22).

Lack of working class readership in public libraries

Despite the opposition of Colonel Sibthorp, the 1850 Public Libraries Act became law and local councils were empowered to levy a small rate for their provision. From the start it was a slow process with much opposition from local ratepayers. Those libraries which were started were often badly housed, badly stocked, and poorly staffed. However the public library movement was on its way. Whilst some of the impetus for the establishment of public libraries came from a concern by the middle and upper classes for the morality of the working classes, these institutions largely failed to attract working people and when one visits some of the old Victorian reading rooms still being used by public libraries today one can begin to appreciate why (23).

Thus, from the 1880s onwards there was a growing awareness by librarians of the need to attract working men into their libraries. In 1885 the Librarian of Messrs. F. Braby & Co's Library and Club addressed the Library Association on the way in which librarians could "assist the Working Classes to use their Saturday half-holiday profitably" and his article shows clearly how the middle classes expected workers to consistently occupy their time usefully: "if we as librarians can give the working classes the benefit of our knowledge...we shall render essential service to a class to whom it is of vast importance to economise their time, both in thinking and working"(24). Although this, the earliest article in the professional literature on this topic, was in a British journal, all the numerous references over the ensuing thirty years are in North American journals (25) in articles with titles such as "Value of the public library to working men" and "Working men and the library". We find blunt statements such as "public libraries have failed to attract the artisan class"(in Canada), and "provision for the working man by the library should be made ^{as} a right, not a favour"(26) which are in marked contrast with the platitudes of a British librarian referring to the involvement of English public libraries in technical education: "if the progress of the last few years is maintained, the English public library will soon have attained at once its rightful place and its maximum of usefulness"(27).

The working man's own library

Whilst it is difficult to trace descriptions of private libraries of working men in the early 19th century, there are several descriptions of those in the later part of the century. Max Beer records a meeting he had in London shortly after his arrival from the continent:

"In the spring of 1895 I passed a corner house at the junction of Tottenham Street and Cleveland Street, London, W1, and noticed in the window of the ground-floor living room a number of Chartist pamphlets and Radical books, amongst which Thorold Rogers' Economic Interpretation of History was laid out for sale. I entered the room, and met there an elderly gentleman sitting amidst a litter of papers and books,

evidently from his library, of which, owing to his reduced circumstances, he desired to dispose"(28).

The elderly gentleman was William Townshend, a contemporary of Karl Marx on the General Council of the International, who was influential in the working clubs in London in the 1870s. A second description of Townshend's library comes from Frank Kitz who met him in the Manhood Suffrage League in 1874:

"First in my memory is W. Townshend, a tall, gaunt, kindly old maoemaker, the possessor of a vast accumulation of books and knowledge pertaining to the cause. He would read us voluminous essays upon the helots of Greece and the plebians of Rome which caused a stampede of our younger and more flipper visitors. Poor Townshend! He died in poverty and his beloved books which he struggled so hard to acquire fell into the hands of strangers"(29).

Townshend was only one of many literate London clubmen who saw self-education as part of the class struggle. There were no doubt others with similar libraries (30). We also have an account of the dispersal of the library of John Burns, a socialist of the 1880s who eventually became a cabinet minister in the Liberal Government of 1906. Burns amassed a remarkable library in his home in Battersea on trade unions and the working class movement though the account of its dispersal after his death makes for sad reading (31).

Conclusion

This essay has many gaps, but gives some pointers towards a new view of the use of libraries by the working classes in the nineteenth century. We need to reassess the reasons for the provision of libraries by the upper and middle classes for the working classes, and the failure of such institutions time and time again to attract working people. At the same time much more research is needed into the libraries which were started and used by working class people. Many were of an informal nature (collections of books in coffee houses and public houses, book clubs, mutual improvement societies, etc) and these in particular need more research to trace what little has been recorded of their existence. The autobiographies and reminiscences of working people need scanning as do contemporary journals for details of the private libraries collected by many working men. When we can see more clearly what existed then the conclusions to be reached may well be different from those set out above. Only one previous study, as far as the present writer can trace, has been made of the specific use of libraries by the working classes and that is confined to Scotland and the early part of the nineteenth century, but its concluding paragraph makes a suitable conclusion to this short essay:

"Always, of course, men and women of irresistibly enquiring minds would rise above their depressing surroundings and find an education for themselves. In time, education was to reach down to such people and ease their task. In time, too, libraries - parish, subscription, Institute or endowed - were to present

a wide view of all kinds of books. But that was not until the second half of the century. In the early years of the nineteenth century reading was a powerful tool that some feared might become a weapon. In consequence, those who attempted to guide the reading habits of the working man did so in response not to his real needs but to their own fears, while the working man found in his own libraries not merely a source of pleasurable reading but also a useful opportunity to test his powers of self-help"(32)

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- 21) Hansard, 1849, cxi, col.1174-1175.
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Dear John,

As usual I really enjoyed reading the latest LfSC which always seems to put my thoughts into words - well the few I have about libraries anyway, as I'm usually too lazy/incapable of doing so myself. I always tend to sit down and write hearty letters expressing my appreciation of your work - so here is one!

The article about children in libraries I found very interesting. Its strange but Cornwall County Library seems to compare very favourably with some of the examples quoted. Their policy/attitude towards children in libraries is very liberal but in one isolated instance it is falling down and is only aggravated by the team system. I can see that the aim of the system is to encourage co-operation and to prevent the stagnation of library and bookstock that can happen in a branch where the librarian is static. But there is one branch I visit where two boys of 14, semi-illiterate are completely banned from the library when I'm not there because they are under "24-hour police surveillance" for among various unproved crimes of bashing bus shelters they have "stolen apples"(proved). The other staff in the library are unqualified and their attitude is "they can't read so why let them in?". So it has become a battle between me the Great qualified and the Unqualified who are not supposed to think and are naturally resentful. So the boys suffer which is sad as we are now stocking material for adults who can't read. Not that they probably want to learn to read anyway so perhaps I'll just become disillusioned!

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