

## When Is a Librarian Well-Read?

*Mr. Yerke is librarian, California College of Arts and Crafts, Oakland.*

DR. ROBERT H. MULLER'S article in the July, 1953, issue of *College and Research Libraries* entitled "A Program for Staff Reading" has implications which are both hilarious and tragic.

It is hilarious (if one be on the outside) to behold a profession which has to address itself seriously to the question of whether the press of its duties has proceeded to the point that it can no longer adequately keep track of its essence: the *contents* of books. At the core of the matter does this mean that there is an enormously professional attitude toward the outside of books, but no well-defined one toward the *inside*?

It is tragic (if one be on the inside) that the consideration of the librarian's reading habits has to pay off in terms of percentages, budget increases and statistical tables. This leads to a quantitative consideration first, though the author clearly is aware of this danger. It also runs headlong into a financial problem: one doubts that college and university library salary budgets can be increased 13% (approximately) to accommodate on-time general reading by librarians.

Behind the surface disturbance created by this problem must lie some very fundamental things. Two basic assumptions apparently have long been accepted. One is that librarians were formerly better read than now, and the other is that librarians are, or were, necessarily literarily inclined.

The librarian of a large college recently remarked to me that he was not, to be frank, a bookman. This man is an administrator, and it may well be that he need make no extra-effort to be well-read in general be-

yond the level of any college-trained reader. Administration is much the same near the top, whether one administers an oil company, a railroad or a library. However, we are not all near the top, so this line of thought must be abandoned.

Bookmanship, as the term traditionally is understood, has an inescapable association with Humanism and the concept of the "whole man." The present arbitrary division of studies into the humanities and the sciences, is not inevitable. Humanism can and should include the sciences, and so the realm of bookmanship is not exclusive of scientific pursuits.

At one time the term librarianship carried inevitable connotations of scholarship and bookishness. It did not, however, contain many connotations of services to readers, or service in any field save scholarly counsel in the fields of traditional academic endeavor. Neither was there professional training prerequisite to the assumption of duties as a librarian. It was all charmingly informal and eccentric. I am speaking, needless to say, of pre-Dewey, even of pre-Industrial Revolution times, from whence so many of the popular conceptions stem.

Now there are numerous positions in a larger library where professionally trained librarians do not customarily handle book materials. With the trends toward more extensive collections and expanded readers' service, much librarianship is changing to administrative and technical manipulation.

The generalized duties of the librarian in a small library, or the librarian in a slow-moving old-style larger library break down into particular fragmentations of the whole process. How few librarians are able to keep the "whole function" in mind? For

how many librarians have the real pleasure of being the order librarian, the cataloger, the reference librarian and the overall administrator and policy-maker at the same time? If one has more than a very few thousand books it is an impossibility.

This circumstance, forcing specialization on the part of a librarian, paves the way for departmentalization, professionalism of the "specialty" kind, and the fragmentation of the older concept of the "whole" librarian. The "whole" librarian may be going the way of the general practitioner in medicine.

This is not to be deplored in itself, any more than the trend toward the general practitioner's decline, for the specialist can do many things that his generalized colleague cannot do. But this does leave the problem of the extent and quality of any librarian's reading.

The statistical table in Dr. Muller's article shows the number of volumes which a librarian, following a staff reading program of his outline, will read at the end of a year—and at the end of 25 years of carefully chosen reading, how many more volumes he will have read than the ordinary non-librarian college-trained reader. In the "ambitious librarian" category the figure is 1750; for the "non-ambitious librarian" it is 1000.

I should rather see the term changed to "the librarian who takes great pleasure in reading" and "the librarian who reads dutifully." By doing this we call attention to the librarian as a person and a personality. To deal with persons and personalities is something which statistical considerations must necessarily shun. Yet by doing this we suddenly have a whole man again, and not a fragmented professional quantity.

This whole man will have human attitudes towards things in general, and not just professional attitudes about specialized things. This brings up the question whether

librarians, now, are necessarily literarily inclined: are they all potential bookmen?

If librarians were *ipso facto* bibliophiles, there would be no problem about staff reading, because the librarian's natural avocation would be reading. But it seems that many specialized functions in libraries do not require a dose of bibliophilia at all, but simple adequate subject proficiency. The chairman of an academic department in one of our universities confided to me once that the object of the young Ph.D. candidate *now* was to know "just enough" to get in: to meet, in other words, the minimum paper and personal requirements.

None of this is suggesting that librarians should not read more, or to suggest that Dr. Muller's two-hours of staff reading daily is not a good thing. But it raises a question about the background factors that have brought about this situation.

In consideration of the foregoing as a whole, it does not seem to be particularly strange that there is no time on the job to read for general purposes. And that is one illusion about librarianship which we can mark off. If, further, it is considered too much to ask librarians to spend a heavy amount of their leisure time engaged in reading, then there is another illusion shattered: that librarians are essentially literarily inclined. If librarians start a race to become storage batteries of information the result will be much different than if they read to become "whole" men. It is the difference between a John Muir and Finch and Trewartha; between Faust and Wagner.

That is not to say that one is absolutely better than the other. The world and librarianship, too, need both. But it then becomes one of the problems facing us to arrange things so that both can be accommodated in the amounts needed, and that the whole recruiting and training of librarians become acutely aware of this. The problem deserves our earnest attention.