

CHAPTER FOUR

PREDECESSORS OF THE PUBLIC LIBRARY

Before considering the public library movement that emerged in the middle of the nineteenth century, a movement that defined the nature of librarianship in America, an orderly and chronological treatment of sources requires attention to those types of libraries that in some way led to the acceptance of general access to books and in many instances merged into tax-supported public libraries. These libraries were of three main types: (1) the parochial libraries of Thomas Bray, (2) social libraries, and (3) libraries devoted to specific groups of people or specific purposes.

Parochial Libraries of Thomas Bray

Thomas Bray (1658-1730) was an Anglican clergyman who, through the auspices of the Society for the Propagation of Christian Knowledge, established libraries throughout England and Wales. During a brief span as commissary to Maryland, he established parish libraries on the eastern seaboard in the early eighteenth century. Charles T. Laughler's *Thomas Bray's Grand Design* (1973, **4.31**) is the most definitive overview. However, a number of other studies treat various aspects of Bray's efforts to plant libraries in the colonies, and they deserve examination as well. Among the more important are Bernard C. Steiner's early but basic essay (1896, **4.3**), William Houlette's general article (1934, **4.8**), and Joseph T. Wheeler's studies of Bray's work in Maryland (1939, **4.13**; 1940, **4.14**). Herbert Searcy's dissertation (1963, **4.27**) is one of the few devoted to this subject. More recently, John Van Home has edited the American correspondence of the Bray Associates from the mid-eighteenth century in *Religious Philanthropy and Colonial Slavery* (1985, **4.34**).

Social Libraries

The term *social library* has come to signify the kind of library that generally provided a circulating collection of materials and frequently a reading room for the use of any person meeting the established criteria, which usually involved a fee or subscription, or a payment to become a joint owner or stockholder, of the library. In the nineteenth century, many of these libraries were known as "public libraries," a term that gradually came to describe tax-supported, publicly administered libraries open to all freely on an equal basis. Social libraries in their many forms reached the peak of their significance by the mid-nineteenth century and have been the subject of a considerable body of research.

The standard treatment of the rise of social libraries in the United States is Jesse Shera's *Foundations of the Public Library: The Origins of the Public Library Movement in New England, 1629-1855* (1949, **4.176**). Recently, Haynes McMullen has provided complementary treatment about "The Very Slow Decline of the American Social Library" (1985, **4.310**). In a related general essay, David Kaser has provided an overview of the history of the reading room to the early twentieth century (1978, **4.297**).

While Shera's work was a landmark treatise, it also stimulated new work on the subject of social library development in various states and cities. Several efforts deserve mention here. Haynes McMullen has probably done more work in this area than anyone else and has published essays on Ohio, Illinois, and Indiana (1958, **4.228**); Kentucky (1960, **4.236**); and Pennsylvania (1965, **4.255**). Other important work has been done by John Francis McDermott on Missouri (1944, **4.161**), Frances L.

communities (1952, **4.197**), and Elizabeth Welborn, again on South Carolina (1956, **4.221**; 1959, **4.234**). Jane Flener has studied developments in Tennessee (1963, **4.241**), Ray Held the early period in California (1963, **4.242**), and Harry R. Skallerup the libraries and reading rooms among early American seamen (1974, **4.284**). Edward Stevens has analyzed early social libraries in Ohio (1981, **4.304**); Victoria Musmann has studied "Women and the Founding of Social Libraries in California, 1859-1910" (1982, **4.307**); and Joseph Yeatman analyzed Baltimore libraries from 1815 to 1840 (1985, **4.311**).

Many individual social libraries have attracted the attention of library historians. The earlier and more famous institutions are subjects of classic studies. America's first and perhaps most important social library—the Library Company of Philadelphia—has been explored in detail by George Abbot (1913, **4.97**), Austin Gray (1937, **4.139**), Edwin Wolf (1954, **4.207**; 1955, **4.214**; 1956, **4.222**; 1960, **4.237**; 1976, **4.292**), Dorothy F. Grimm (1955, **4.209**), and Margaret Korty (1965, **4.253**). Arthur S. Roberts (1948, **4.173**), Sister M. V O'Connor (1956, **4.219**), and Marcus McCorison (1965, **4.254**) have examined the Redwood Library Company of Newport.

Other examples of significance include the work of Austin B. Keep (1908, **4.88**) and Marion King (1954, **4.205**) on the New York Society Library; Sarah Cutler (1917, **4.105**), J. B. Nicholson (1955, **4.211**), and Wayne A. Wiegand (1977, **4.294**) on the "Coonskin Library" in Cincinnati; Harry M. Lydenberg on the Berkshire Republican Library at Stockbridge (1940, **4.148**); Russell Bidlack's history of the City Library of Detroit (1955, **4.208**); Charles W. David's study of the Longwood Library (1957, **4.223**); Edgar Reinke on the Charleston Library Society (1967, **4.265**); and William Van Beynum on the Book Company of Durham (1968, **4.269**). A recent addition to this literature is Barbara W. Stanley's centennial history of the Rye (New York) Free Reading Room (1984, **4.309**).

Several other types of social libraries deserve mention here. The athenaeum, an aristocratic mutation of the social library idea, is also covered in this section. Among the more important studies of this type of library are Charles K. Bolton (1909, **4.90**; 1927, **4.118**), William I. Fletcher (1914, **4.101**), Mary Regan (1927, **4.121**), Walter Whitehill (1973, **4.281**), and Ronald Story (1975, **4.287**) on the Boston Athenaeum. Joseph L. Harrison (1911, **4.94**) and Grace Leonard and Chesley Worthington (1940, **4.147**) have written on the Providence Athenaeum and Cynthia B. Wiggin has studied the Salem Athenaeum (1966, **4.262**; 1968, **4.270**).

An additional type of social library has received considerable attention—the mechanics' and mercantile library. William Boyd's dissertation (1975, **4.286**) is the definitive treatment of the subject, but a standard survey of an earlier period remains Sidney Ditzion's summary article (1940, **4.146**). Individual libraries that have received serious study include the Apprentices' Library of Philadelphia by John F. Lewis (1924, **4.112**), the San Francisco Mercantile Library by Joyce Backus (1931, **4.128**), the Mercantile Library Association of Boston by Gordon Gaskill (1949, **4.175**), and the Young Men's Mercantile Library Association of Cincinnati by Merle Carter (1951, **4.184**).

Circulating, Sunday School, School District, and YMCA Libraries

A final group of social libraries oriented toward a special purpose or a specific clientele deserves mention here. These libraries have generally lacked the level of attention that other social libraries have received, and there has been comparatively little research done in recent years. Circulating libraries, those endeavors designed for commercial profit, have been studied more thoroughly than the other specialized social libraries. While Jesse Shera's *Foundations of the Public Library* (1949, **4.176**) contains much useful material, the most significant overview is now David Kaser's *A Book for a Sixpence: The Circulating Library in America* (1980, **4.350**). Circulating libraries in

a more recent case study of a single such library in post-Civil War Austin, Texas (1986, **4.352**). Philip B. Eppard has studied the demise of the modern rental library (1986, **4.351**).

Although Sunday school libraries have been a popular topic for some historians, substantive work remains to be done. General studies of particular interest include the work of Frank K. Walter (1942, **4.329**), M. E. Hand (1950, **4.331**), Maxine B. Fedder (1951, **4.333**), Alice B. Cushman (1957, **4.338**), F. A. Briggs (1961, **4.343**), and Ellen Shaffer (1966, **3.342**; listed in Chapter 3, "Private Libraries and Reading Tastes").

School district libraries are covered in Sidney Ditzion's classic article (1940, **4.325**). More specialized studies include Helen M. Wilcox on the early development of this type of library (1953, **4.336**) and state treatments of the early periods in New York by Alice C. Dodge (1944, **4.330**) and in California by Ray Held (1959, **4.341**).

YMCA libraries that emerged just before the Civil War and flourished afterward have not received detailed attention. However, several useful essays on the subject have appeared, including those by Doris Fletcher (1957, **4.339**) and Joe W. Kraus (1975, **4.349**). Since the precursors to the modern public library are such a diverse group of libraries, users of this bibliography would do well to examine the entries in the preceding chapter, especially those dealing with reading tastes and private book collections. Many articles in the following chapter, which deals with public libraries, will have relevant information that relates to the predecessors of individual libraries and to groups of social libraries that merged with the new tax-supported institutions. Finally, Chapter 9, "Special Libraries," contains a subdivision on historical society, museum, and institute libraries that includes relevant material, since some social libraries developed into these types of libraries as they matured or changed direction.

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