

CHAPTER FIVE

PUBLIC LIBRARIES

Public libraries have drawn more attention from historians than any other single aspect of American library history. Jesse Shera's essay "Literature of American Library History" (1973, **1.87**; listed and discussed in Chapter 1, "Historiography and Sources"), treats the development of this literature from its antiquarian beginnings to the early 1970s. David Kaser has suggested in his survey, "Advances in American Library History" (1978, **1.121**; listed in Chapter 1, "Historiography and Sources"), that, especially from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, "the rise of the public library has fired the curiosity of American Library historians perhaps because it is more uniquely American, . . . its once-vaunted social significance gives it greater romantic appeal, . . . [and] the inscrutable vagaries of its motivation are more subject to interpretation." Among the other various treatments of public library history literature found in Chapter 1 the recent compilation of annotated dissertations and theses by Arthur P. Young (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1988) deserves special mention.

Early studies of public library history, such as the reminiscences of Samuel Green (1913, **5.26**), although valuable for contemporary assessments tended to be antiquarian in nature and more inclined to description and applause than critical analysis. However, in the 1930s scholars began to call for the application of the critical standards of historical research to public library history. An important stimulus to this new perspective was Arnold Borden's brief essay, "Sociological Beginnings of the Library Movement" 1931, **2.20**; listed in Chapter 2, "General Studies"). Influenced by Borden's persuasive insistence that libraries must be studied in the context of their coeval culture, a number of classic and still valuable studies of the public library were completed by doctoral students at Chicago and Columbia. Most notable of these were Sidney Ditzion's *Arsenals of a Democratic Culture* (1947 **5.66**) and Jesse Shera's *Foundations of the Public Library* (1949, **4.176**- listed and discussed in Chapter 4, "Predecessors of the Public Library") which together cover the period to 1900. Gladys Spencer's *The Chicago Public Library* (1943, **5.359**) represents an institutional history of this genre.

The fact that these works were such *tours de force* seemed to have preempted further substantive work on the subject for nearly twenty years. However, beginning in the late 1950s and continuing into the 1960s, a number of new studies, focusing on special aspects of public library history, provided a basis for the reconsideration of previous findings. These new efforts approached the subject from a variety of specialized angles; taken together, they represent a significant portion of the more recent historical writing in the field. For instance, two excellent monographs analyzed Andrew Carnegie on the development of the American public library—a general study by George Bobinski (1969, **5.127**) and one on Wisconsin by David McLeod (1968, **5.1079**). David T. Javersak's more recent case study of Wheeling, West Virginia (1979, **5.1069**) has served as a fruitful model for further

research. Another example of a new interpretation was Robert Lee's *Continuing Education for Adults through the American Public Library, 1833-1964* (1966, **5.116**), which, read with Margaret Monroe's pioneering work on this subject (1963, **5.106**), revises earlier treatments.

Other scholars began to investigate public library development in individual states and regions as well as particular issues faced by public librarians. The most impressive of the monographs in this genre is Ray Held's history of the public movement in California in two volumes (1963, **4.242**; listed and discussed in Chapter 4, "Predecessors of the Public Library"; and 1973, **5.263**), which carries the story to 1917. Important state studies in dissertation form include John Colson's study of Wisconsin, 1836-1900 (1973, **5.1080**) and Chieko Tachihata's work on Hawaii and the Hawaii State Library, 1913-1971 (1981, **5.349**). Donald G. Davis, Jr.'s paper on "The Rise of the Public Library in Texas, 1876-1920" (1978, **5.1032**) exemplifies an initial effort at statewide analysis.

Numerous studies have focused on the services of libraries to different groups in the community or the relationship of the public library to other types of libraries. Examples of this research include the studies of Harriet Long (1969, **7.93**) and Budd Gambee (1973, **7.97**) both listed in Chapter 7, "School Libraries," and Miriam Braverman (1979, 5.190), which deal with the tension between the public library and service to youth and school libraries. Elfrieda B. McCauley's study, "The New England Mill Girls: Feminine Influence in the Development of Public Libraries in New England, 1820-1860" (1971, **4.279**; listed in Chapter 4, "Predecessors of the Public Library"), Rosemary DuMont's work on big city public libraries from 1890 to 1915 (1977, **5.175**), and Nelson Beck's articles on service to New York immigrant groups (1977, 3.386; listed in Chapter 3, "Private Libraries and Reading Tastes"; and 1978, **5.773**) are but a sample of the research conducted on various constituencies. These studies supplement studies on service to minorities by Haynes McMullen (1976, **5.170**) and A. P. Marshall (1976, **5.171**). Esther J. Carrier's surveys of fiction in public libraries from 1876 to 1950 (1965, **5.113**; 1985, **5.214**) and Evelyn Geller's *Forbidden Books in American Public Libraries, 1876-1939* (1984, **2.332**; listed and discussed in Chapter 2, "General Studies") concentrate on yet another aspect of library history.

Institutional histories of individual public libraries have been a continuing feature of public library history that has provided impetus for comparative studies as well as local history. Although they vary somewhat in sophistication, classic works include Walter Whitehill, *Boston Public Library: A Centennial History* (1956, **5.526**); Frank Woodford, *Parnassus on Main Street: A History of the Detroit Public Library* (1965, **5.563**); Philip Kalisch, *The Enoch Pratt Free Library: A Social History* (1969, **5.468**); Phyllis Dain, *The New York Public Library: A History of Its Founding and Early Years* (1972, **5.765**); Clarence Cramer, *Open Shelves and Open Minds: A History of the Cleveland Public Library* (1972, **5.897**); Bruce Benidt, *The Library Book: Centennial History of the Minneapolis Public Library* (1984, **5.577**); and Joseph B. Rounds, *The Time Was Right: A History of the Buffalo and Erie County Public Library, 1940-1975* (1985, **5.790**).

Many major studies of large public libraries and good case studies of smaller libraries remain only in dissertation and thesis format or have appeared as journal articles. Among these are Jerry F. Cao's "The Los Angeles Public Library: Origins and Development, 1872-1910" (1977, **5.265**), Stanley Rubinstein's "The Role of the Trustees and the Librarians in the Development of the Enoch Pratt Free Library and the Free Library of Philadelphia, 1880-1914" (1978, **5.472**), and the fine articles of Ron Blazek on Florida libraries, among them, St. Augustine (1979, **4.298**, listed in Chapter 4, "Predecessors of the Public Library").

Students of public library history will want to read these and similar studies in conjunction with the publications about prominent public librarians and biographical sketches of lesser-known figures that appear in Chapter 15, "Biographies of Individual Librarians and Library Benefactors." Studies of particular importance are those by Joseph A. Borome on Justin Winsor (1950, **15.1963**), Edward G. Holley on Charles Evans (1963, **15.607**), and William L. Williamson on William Frederick Poole (1963, **15.1400**).

One of the obvious results of the increasingly solid research conducted before 1970 has been the more recent growth of studies that have sought to analyze, clarify, and explain aspects of public library history and to integrate that phenomenon into the mainstream of historical thought. Some efforts seem to have been ideologically oriented, while others have drawn primarily on new approaches and methods. Insofar as they differ from the more traditional treatments, they may deserve status as revisionist. Among those who stimulated new thinking about the role of public libraries in society were Dee Garrison whose dissertation on public library leaders, 1876-1910 (1973, **5.145**) and accompanying articles (1971, **5.134**; 1973, **5.146**) excited broad appeal, and Michael H. Harris whose "The Purpose of the American Public Library: A Revisionist Interpretation of History" (1973, **5.147**) and a more complete treatment, *The Role of the Public Library in American Life: A Speculative Essay* (1975, **5.158**), struck a more historiographic chord. Garrison's widely cited *Apostles of Culture: The Public Librarian and American Society, 1876-1920* (1979, **5.191**) synthesized much of growing literature on the debate that had ensued in the mid-1970s and made a persuasive case for the new study of motivations and perceptions. The "Harris-Dain Debate" brought other scholars into the discussion, such as Evelyn Geller ("Intellectual Freedom: Eternal Principle or Unanticipated Consequence," 1974, **5.151**) and Phyllis Dain ("Ambivalence and Paradox: The Social Bonds of the Public Library," (1975, **5.156**). This scholarly argument carried on in more popular as well as academic journals. Two issues of the *Journal of Library History* (vol. 10, no. 2 [1975]; vol. 13, no. 1 [1978]) capture the flavor and vigor of the dialogue.

The outcome of this intellectual ferment was a much broader, stronger, and better-integrated pattern of research in the past decade. Among the various approaches, the books and articles of Wayne A. Wiegand are significant, and they are scattered throughout this chapter as well as Chapter 12, "Library Associations," and Chapter 15, "Biographies of Individual Librarians and Library Benefactors." One example is his "British Propaganda in American Public Libraries, 1914-1917" (1983, **5.210**). Other scholars who are finding new approaches include Daniel F. Ring who employed socio-biographical methods to study the Cleveland Public Library during World War I (1983, **5.910**), and Robert V.

Williams with his statistical study of the 1850-1870 period (1986, 5.219). The opening of new research fronts has also yielded fresh insight into women's roles in libraries as demonstrated in Chapter 14 "Women in Librarianship."

Interest in public library history continues, and the past fifteen years demonstrate that, as a phenomenon with a peculiarly American stamp, the subject retains its hold on the professional imagination.

General Studies

Before 1876

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5.3 "Free Town Libraries." In *Public Libraries in the United States of America: Their History, Condition and Management; Special Report, Part I*, U.S. Bureau of Education. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1876. Pp. 445-59.

5.4 "Public Libraries of Ten Principal Cities." In *Public Libraries in the United States of America: Their History, Condition and Management; Special Report, Part I*, U.S. Bureau of Education. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1876. Pp. 837-1009.

5.5 Quincy, J. P. "Free Libraries." In *Public Libraries in the United States of America: Their History, Condition and Management; Special Report, Part I*, U.S. Bureau of Education. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1876. Pp. 389-402.

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