

A GLANCE AT THE PUBLIC LIBRARIES

BY FLETCHER PRATT

EVERY public library in the United States now places restrictions on the use of fiction. In the reading-rooms (reference-rooms, in library jargon) the reading of it is under the interdict as far as possible. The Buffalo library allows only one book of fiction to be drawn by a reader at a time; Newark has announced that it will buy no more of the frivolous stuff for its main library; New York removes the chairs from the room in which fiction is on display ("Grab it and get out of here!"); Baltimore keeps its fiction shelves closed and makes readers select the exact book they want from a catalogue; Brooklyn buys but ten or twelve new novels a month out of the hundred or more published; and Dr. Arthur E. Bostwick, one of the big men of the library profession, defends the policy of allowing readers to take books home by saying that "books used in the building are used trivially and consist of light fiction, while those taken home are studied seriously."

American librarians, in fact, have become obsessed with the idea that the national literature will go to the dogs unless they persuade their customers to read something beside fiction. Indignant papers in the library journals and long discussions at librarians' meetings are given over to the great question of how to keep the public from reading what it likes and how to induce it to read the mouldering stacks of books it doesn't care about. It is not a question of literary excellence, for in these discussions the fiction of Joseph Conrad and the fiction of Harold Bell Wright get exactly the same treatment. In the librarian's scale of values Milton Work

on bridge and Emily Post on how to hold a fork are serious authors, while Sinclair Lewis on *Babbitt* is a mere frivolous butterfly.

Three classes of books—travel, biography and history—are held in orthodox library circles to be the best antidotes to this depraved fondness for works of the imagination. To these the best shelves are given, for them the special bulletins are printed, and on them the lady attendant spends the best efforts of her cajolery to make her percentage of non-fiction circulation high. Since biography began to be popular with the publication of "Six Eminent Victorians," even this highly respectable class has got a certain bad odor; one must read the older biographies, or, better still, books of travel, to really win a librarian's heart.

But the American public annoyingly refuses to appreciate these efforts to raise its literary taste, and so turns from the public libraries to the two-and-three-cent-a-day lending libraries, from which it can get whatever it wants. The growth of these commercial libraries is the salient feature of the American library landscape today. A compilation by the *Publishers' Weekly* lists sixty-seven new ones established in 1927. They outnumbered the new book-stores by five to three and the new free libraries by seven to one. More, each of the sixty-seven is provided with an attendant chain of deposit stations in drug-stores, stationery shops, and news-stands.

The librarians explain their failure to keep abreast of the times by saying that since they can't buy everything, they prefer to get books for scholars, and point to

their growing circulation figures as evidence that their effort to educate the public away from fiction is a success. But a rummy suspicion goes the rounds that the figures are cooked. A favorite device for increasing circulation painlessly is to require every reader who uses a reference-book to fill out a slip for it. These are then reckoned as circulation, and thus a man who drops in to look up the capital of North Carolina or the address of his aunt contributes to the circulation of the library he uses. Another potent scheme is to take books into the schools; a third is to offer vacation libraries of twenty-five or fifty books for the Summer. Are they read? Who cares? They make circulation, and circulation, in the librarian's mind, is the *summum bonum*. Yet even with these aids circulation growth falls below the ratio of population growth in most cities.

II

The librarians themselves grant that they are not keeping up with the output of the publishers. For this they assign one all-sufficient reason, to wit, that they do not receive the appropriations they got fifteen or twenty years ago.

Not that appropriations have failed to go upward. In most of the large cities, in fact, they have doubled since 1914. Reports from 248 cities show that they were twenty-two cents per capita in 1913, twenty-four cents in 1915, and forty-six cents in 1926. But appropriations for schools have quadrupled in the same period. In 1903, the libraries, then much fewer and smaller, got 1.5% of the cities' budgets, while today they get only 1.2%. Meanwhile, expenditures have so far out-distanced appropriations that they are left behind.

Books, for instance. One can arrive at a rough estimate of the increase in their cost by comparing two sets of figures. The publishers annually report the number of new titles they issue, and the Department of Commerce gives out an annual report on

the retail value of books printed in the country. The value figures include items not in the publishers' list, such as pamphlets and continued printings of old books for which the demand is not dead. But as the elements other than new books are fairly constant and the comparison is one between years, it is not invalidated.

In 1914, then, the publishers announced about 9800 new titles and new editions. These had an aggregate retail value (including the other items mentioned) of \$87,000,000, or something less than \$8,926 a publication. In 1927, there were only 8900 new books and new editions, but they had an aggregate retail value in the neighborhood of \$280,000,000, giving an average value of nearly \$31,500 a publication. Some of this increase can be explained away, no doubt, by the increased sales of reprints and paper-backs. But there remains an imposing rise in prices. The one-dollar novel has become the two-dollar novel, and the seventy-five-cent book of verse a two-dollar book of verse. In other words, the libraries are getting almost twice as much money, but they are paying more than twice as much for their stock in trade.

But that isn't all. A certain portion of these increased appropriations has gone into heavier salary lists, and a still larger bit has gone into pork. Aldermen have found that a branch library in the home ward is a good fence-builder. Thus the money goes, leaving little for books. The Brooklyn Public Library spent \$126,560 for them in 1914 and only \$174,080 in 1927, with prices more than doubled, and the Akron Public Library (an extreme case) bought \$8,137 worth in the former year and only \$4,134 worth in the latter. Small wonder, then, that the libraries try to shunt their patrons from the new fiction to the antique history, travel and biography. They can't afford the new books, and their failure to provide them works into a vicious circle of declining public interest, declining pressure on city councils, and declining appropriations.

Meanwhile, ambitious libraries con-

stantly bite off more than they can chew. Not content with "taking literature to the people," their elder and legitimate aim, they have of late tried to make their libraries the chief fountains of learning in their communities and the only book-distributing agencies. Newark conducts direct-mail advertising campaigns among engineers and business men with all the fervor of a company pushing a new safety razor; Los Angeles and San Francisco call upon college professors and students to use the local libraries for all purposes; grandiloquent posters in other American libraries advertise library work as "the profession upon which all others depend," and the librarians do their best to make this a fact by inviting specialists of all kinds to do their research work in public libraries.

This is an invasion of the field of the university and special libraries, and the process has been accelerated by the bequests of well-meaning collectors and the natural tendency of all librarians to specialize. The New York Public Library now has no less than eighty-three special collections, including groups on such topics as magic, penmanship and shooting. But a special collection makes a heavy drain on the resources of the library that maintains it, for it involves the purchase of numbers of rare and expensive books and the services of highly-trained assistants for the benefit of small groups of students. These students often come from considerable distances, and while the specialization is no doubt of benefit to them, it leaves the general reader with a feeling that he has been told to go hang.

The paradoxical cheapness of certain sorts of literature is one of the reasons why the general reader is quite willing to keep away. Public libraries have always received their warmest support from that comparatively well-educated section of the public which reads the classics and semi-classics by choice. Fifteen years ago most of these books could be had only in out-of-print editions at high prices. But then

came the Everyman's Library and the Modern Library, and now nearly every publisher has something of the sort. The annual number of new editions of old books has gone up from 760 to 1,450 in fifteen years, while the number of new books has sunk from 10,135 to 7,450. Every purchaser of these reprints is a patron lost to a public library.

Parallel with this is the discovery by the publishers that the star system could be applied to literature. The increasing effort given to making the best-sellers even better sellers has thrown on the libraries the burden of providing an immense number of copies of the two or three books at the head of the current list, with the certainty that in a year or two they will cease circulating for good and all. Stacks of such successes as "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse," "Red of Redfields," and "Michael O'Halloran" can be found gathering dust in every large public library in America.

Meanwhile, a new class of readers has risen to call for these best-sellers. These new readers are the stenographers and shop-girls, sheiks and shebas who want "good live fiction." A compilation by the Syracuse Public Library shows that 12,109 of its card-holders are school-boys and school-girls, that only 5,134 of them are business and professional men and women, and that the 12,000-odd remaining are largely stenographers and clerks who like books with a kick. Twenty years ago a similar compilation by the Albany Library showed about as large a proportion of students, but the proportions of the other readers were reversed.

These new readers represent the second and third generations of the wave of immigration that struck this country between 1890 and 1910. The old folks read the *Staats-Zeitung* and the *Novy* when they read anything; the youngsters are brought up on the tabloids and carry the literary tastes inculcated by these sheets into the libraries. "Fewer old people patronize the library now," said the librarian of a

branch in the foreign section of New York, "and we have had the Italian books taken out because of the lack of demand. The young people read English, but they want nothing but the cheapest and trashiest books." It is this younger generation which supports the commercial lending libraries, which give them books that even the public libraries refuse to supply.

If the public libraries stopped here in their refusal to supply books it would be bad enough. But the censorship which begins on the level of good taste inevitably works into a criticism of morals, and as such it irks even the most doltish reader. Let a new work be a truthful one, and down comes the censorship. "Jurgen" is hardly to be found in any public library in the country. Ambrose Bierce is set down as immoral in many cities, Frank Harris in others, and Dreiser in nearly all. As far as the public libraries are concerned, "Susan Lennox" simply does not exist. Even the classics feel the edge of this censorship. Many libraries maintain a double-star case in which Rabelais, the Arabian Nights, and Boccaccio are permanent tenants, under lock and key, to be issued only when the librarian in charge has looked over the applicant and decided that his appearance indicates a moral character sufficiently stout to withstand such poisonous stuff. In the Buffalo Library the Decameron was long kept in the private office of the librarian, where the reader had to peruse it under that worthy's watchful eye, lest, incited by the fiery words of the Italian, he dash out and perpetrate a statutory crime on the first female he met.

III

But censorship is only one manifestation of the lush growth of the new library technique, which has been invented apparently with the idea of making an easy thing as difficult as possible. Nothing is more curious to the outside observer than the typical librarians' preoccupation with the infinitely little. Recently, for example,

an angry controversy raged through the library world as to whether Radio or Wireless should be the heading under which books on the subject were classified. A long paper in a library magazine discusses the question whether the titles on the backs of thin books should run up or down the back, and solemnly rehearses arguments on both sides, gathered in an elaborate referendum on the subject. In a library where the writer once worked hours of discussion at a staff meeting were given over to the absorbing question as to whether it was better to hold a book in the left hand and insert the charge slip with the right, or *vice versa*.

Classification is naturally another field wherein library technique runs riot. In some libraries, such as the New York Public's great reference department, old and bad classification schemes are a serious hindrance. The system at this library grew out of an old private library scheme; it has no particular logic or arrangement, and one must spend hours searching for information that should be available in minutes. The trouble increases with the number of books that have to be shoe-horned into the antiquated arrangement, and as time, money and cataloguers are lacking for a re-classification, no abatement is in sight.

Happily, this is not the general condition. In 1876 Melvil Dewey announced his Decimal Classification plan, and it is now in use in 96% of the American public libraries. It is so simple that its essentials can be learned in a day and so elastic that libraries running all the way from 5,000 to 5,000,000 volumes use it. Only the great system of the Library of Congress can compare with it, and this system, recently perfected, is regarded quite rightly as one for big libraries only. But whatever the classification scheme, the librarians find time to wrangle over its details. A recent survey of public libraries lists a long line of topics over which there is violent disagreement as to classification. Is a diplomatic history of the Papacy to be classified

with the Popes or the nations? Are chronicles in verse poetry or history? Do books about the structure of edible plants deal with food or botany? Where should books on duels be placed? These are among the questions that fever the library world.

Germane to this is the libraries' passion for correct names. Mark Twain's books, in the majority of American libraries, have had the name of the author painted out and Clemens written in white ink below; Anthony Hope's novels are to be found only under Hawkins; and some libraries go to the length of rewriting, on the inside and out of Anatole France's works, the Thibault which was his family name. Only Joseph Conrad has escaped; Korzeniowski is too much of a mouthful for even a librarian. Married women writers have their names altered almost invariably. When Dorothy Canfield married a man named Fisher, Canfield was erased from the library catalogues and book backs. Ida Bailey Allen, who has been three times married, has seen her books pass through a triple change.

This tireless energy over trivialities argues that small minds are at work, and sure enough, there is a certain lack of intelligence among librarians. The reason is not far to seek; intelligence follows the cornucopia, and library work is probably the worst paid of all intellectual vocations. The library journals today are filled with such ads as these:

Wanted—Trained librarian for library of 4,700 volumes in city of 25,000. Salary, \$1200 to \$1500. Experience and pleasing personality will be given preference.

Wanted—Librarian with ability and pleasing personality competent to take charge of circulating department. Salary, \$1200.

Wanted—At once, in Middle Western university, assistant for order work and some desk work. Salary, \$1700.

The average starting salary of a library assistant is about \$75 a month. After twenty years of experience the dignity of a branch librarianship and \$2000 a year may be reached. From beginners on this long pathway, a university diploma with

additional library-school work is required—in Minnesota, by law.

Yet there is never a shortage of workers. Twenty-three full-fledged library-schools with all-the-year-round courses and forty-eight Summer-schools which cover the same ground in a slightly longer time are shooting out new ones at the rate of a thousand a year, and the libraries constantly recruit others from the ranks of ordinary graduates without special training.

Since girls first discovered that it could furnish them with pin-money while they waited for someone to love them, library work has been a prime favorite with the female of the species. It involves little labor, and that of a highly genteel character; it demands no great mental ability and it places the husband-hunter who enters it on public exhibition, where she can look over and be looked over by all the nubile males of the district under the most refined auspices.

Melvil Dewey established the first library-school at Columbia in 1883. Columbia was not then co-educational, but he took in many girls, and soon faced a faculty trial for breaking the university rules. By 1914 there were fifteen such schools in full blast, and five of them had found the applicants so numerous that they required college graduation or a stiff examination for entrance. Now nearly all of the twenty-three full-time schools have put up the bars; a college diploma or the completion of the major part of a college course has become the usual requirement for entrance.

The subjects taught in these schools vary little, but the degrees conferred show the bewilderment of the pedagogues. Carnegie and Pratt Institute give mere certificates of librarianship; Buffalo and Michigan classify library work as an art and hand out a B.A.; golden California rates it as worth an M.A.; at Illinois and New York State it becomes a science and a B.L.S. is granted; Columbia gives a plain B.S. for one year's work, but crowns a second year with an M.S.; Washington awards a B.S. in L.S.

In no case does the course extend beyond two years, and the pedagogues have had to drag in such subjects as the History and Philosophy of Printing to make it last that long. Before these schools got under way the libraries trained rather better staffs than they have now on a month's lectures with practical experience. The truth is that there is very little to teach; any literate person can learn all there is to a library system in a few weeks. Consequently the library schools have to drill their future B.S.'s and M.A.'s in the beautifully vague principles of "library economy," and to impress them with the importance of such details as inserting the charging slip with the right hand, or lettering the title on a thin book in the proper direction.

That the salaries earned in library work are lower than those of reliable telephone operators is not important to the fledgling bibliophiles. Their jobs, in the main, are only a stop-gap between education and marriage. When the library worker has reached her late twenties without being discovered by an eligible male, she begins to take it seriously and cries to be placed in charge of a branch where she can really earn a living.

There are never enough branches to go round, but the head librarians, pushed from below by their staffs and from above by aldermen anxious for pork, do their best, and so new branches are added apace. The fund established by the obliging Mr. Carnegie makes it easy; all the city has to do is furnish the books; the Carnegie fund will put up the imitation Greek temple and even the funerary vegetation around it. Los Angeles now has forty-three of these tiny libraries, beside eighty-six deposit stations, which are branches in embryo; Buffalo has added four since 1914; St. Louis has added nine, including seven Carnegie branches; Detroit ten, including eight Carnegies; Cincinnati ten, including nine Carnegies; the Enoch Pratt of Baltimore nine, in addition to rebuilding others; and even little Akron, which

spent half as much money for books last year as it did thirteen years before, has put in three new branches.

These branches are as alike as so many pumpkins. In each is a tiny reading-room, a diminutive children's department, a bulletin board for the announcements of the local ladies' clubs, and a small collection of books. Obviously, neither the collections of the branches nor that of the main library can increase very fast when every book must be duplicated twenty-five times, one copy for each branch. Still the branches grow, and with them the process of splitting good, big libraries into small, bad ones.

IV

Once in a while, even a public library gets a good man—one of those rare souls in whom a romantic devotion to literature or the public service is combined with administrative talent of a high order. Walter L. Brown, of Buffalo, is such a man. He meets the branch problem by vigilantly keeping down the branch collections, concentrating on the main library and making temporary loans from the big collection to meet the requirements of the back blocks.

Herbert Putnam has wrought similar marvels with the Library of Congress, though he has no branch problem. The service system there, the special exhibits and collections, and the classification system make it in the truest sense what it should be, a great national library. St. Louis, Detroit, Los Angeles and San Francisco stand out in the library world, the two former because of the administrative talent of Dr. Bostwick and Adam Strohm respectively, the two latter because California libraries generally seem to have found the secret of cozening almost unlimited funds out of their city councils.

But it is in Newark, N. J., that library administration touches what is probably its highest peak. There, John Cotton Dana, working with a small city and a limited appropriation (compared to St. Louis,

Detroit or Los Angeles), has made the public library a model to be imitated. He has met the restricted purchase and branch questions by putting his fiction into the branches and keeping the main library for students; the appropriation problem by boldly spending some of his money for advertising and thus forcing the library on the attention of the public and city council; the staff problem by making the requirements for entrance to the service so stiff that to have worked in Newark is to have won a diploma of merit in the library world. The public's side of it is that any book and almost any information is in-

stantly available. Few libraries are used so much.

Right across the Hudson is the great New York Public, in any one of whose vaulted corridors Newark's whole collection would be lost. The contrast is striking. In the New Jersey institution one watchman is at the door and a whole corps of eager assistants stand ready to help the visitor; in the marble monument to the Astors one may count a dozen policemen in neat horizon blue idling about to enforce the library rules, while one poor boy struggles vainly with requests for information.