

# NCLA Keynote Address

Carl J. Stewart

Much have I travell'd in the realms of gold,  
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;  
Round many western islands have I been  
Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.  
Oft of one wide expanse had I been told  
That deep-brow'd Homer ruled as his demesne:  
Yet did I never breathe its pure serene  
Till I heard Chapman speak out loud and bold;  
Then felt I like some watcher of the skies  
When a new planet swims into his ken;  
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes  
He star'd at the Pacific—and all his men  
Look'd at each other with a wild surmise—  
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.



Not too many months ago we were dedicating our new library facility over in Gaston County, and I had the opportunity to participate in that dedication and I began that little address by quoting from John Keats "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer." Afterwards, I got so many compliments and comments about it, not just from my folks at home but from some other guests that we had in Gaston County on that day, that I thought if ever I got another chance to talk to librarians or to dedicate a public library, I might use it again. So, I have done that with apologies to those who were in Gaston County on that fateful afternoon.

As I drove over here this morning, I was listening to the radio and as radio stations so often do, they engage in a certain amount of public service. They are required to do that by federal law giving public announcements from time to time in matters that are in the public interest, and I heard a little blip on the radio that I have never heard before. A young man came on and he recounted the story of a woman who had gone to a doctor's office and who had sat for more than three hours before she received attention in the office of the doctor. The reason she sat for more than three hours before she received attention in the office of the doctor was that she could not read the sign posted in the doctor's office which instructed all the patients to check with the receptionist. Strange isn't it, that even I have to be reminded that there are people in our country and people in our state who cannot read a simple sign posted in a doctor's office instructing a patient to consult with the receptionist. Strange isn't it that we have people who are sick and timid and for one reason or another, born and reared in an environment of shyness and perhaps inferiority, who do not have the temerity, who do not have the boldness to step forward and say, "How can I see the doctor?" We have so many people who are not literate enough to know how to form the words to ask that kind of simple question, who are too embarrassed to do so.

My background, it has been indicated to you, was one of having been reared in a mill village. My mother and father worked in textile mills. Neither one of them completed the eighth grade and among those fine people in that mill village where I was reared, I remember that shyness. I remember that embarrassment. I can remember the embarrassment of so many men and women when the time came even for them to sign their names because they did it in a halting fashion. And as I completed undergraduate school and law school and went away to the Army and came back to practice law, I remember, too, and I still see people come to my office and I prepare for them their wills and they come to me quietly, lowering their heads, and say to me "I have to make my mark," meaning that they cannot sign their names. But, I have to prepare their signature in a special way on that will or on that deed so that they can make their mark. "Carl J. (his mark) Stewart." How many times have you seen a name written like that?

So it humbles me a little bit to come here this morning having heard that announcement on the radio and instruction about if anyone hearing the message wants to help with the illiteracy that still exists in our country today, call a toll free number or write a certain address. Let me tell you, those of you who are so literate, who spend your lives among books, among the great masterpieces of all times, that we have almost a million North Carolinians who cannot read well enough to fill out a job application form, or take a written driver's license exam. Not twenty years ago in 1959, but today, in 1979. I don't believe anyone who is literate appreciates it enough, with no exceptions. I know I don't. I don't know anyone who does. So today when we meet we want to talk about libraries and librarians and what they mean, both to our state and have the capacity to mean to our people.

Many of our people believe that libraries have always been here and indeed the stories indicate that the first library began in the third millennium B.C. The first libraries we know anything about were begun in the first quarter of the third millennium, and a number of great libraries sprung up around the world during the time preceding the birth of Christ. Those libraries were very special libraries. They were libraries where access was available to a very limited number of people, almost always members of the royal household or tutors of the royal households. Even in the time of Christ we have an interest in biblical scholarship. So many of our people believe that gospels were written during the time of Christ that we have a record in the New Testament of what happened in those years, but in reality that is not true. The first gospel was not written until a full two generations after the birth of Christ. That gospel was Mark, by the way. The other two, Matthew and Luke, were written about three years after that and the gospel of John was not written until almost the turn of the first century. Those four gospels were selected from among about twelve gospels that were written about the life of Christ. Even those gospels and subsequent to that, even the epistles of St. Paul, were not available by and large to the people in general, an exclusive party here and there, transferred with great care along the Eastern basin of the Mediterranean. We know now how precious few were the writings of those centuries following the advent of the first millennium. Even if you go all the way up to the 19th century, you find that there were no public libraries in reality to amount to anything in our country until about 1850.

So you see you are a part of an effort that is extremely new, extremely young. You represent a young profession. Years from now folks will look back and say, "Can you believe that that's the way they ran public libraries?" But, how wonderful it is that since 1850 we have embraced the notion that education is available to all of our people, not just to the royal households, the landed gentry, the wealthy, or the rich and well born. That education should be public, that reading is not dangerous, yea even for all of the people and that, in fact, the ability to read, access to books is essential to the preservation of democracy.

I don't know how long I have had my library card. I speculated that I have had it for about thirty-four years, and I do not come from a family that read. There were no books in my house, but there were books at the public library and there were books in the library of the elementary school that I attended and the most fascinating woman that I remember in elementary school was the librarian.

In North Carolina today, we have come a long way. We have 345 libraries. We have librarians who are not just paid custodians of books, but are something far more. Librarians today are administrators. They are budget analysts, they are personnel directors and yes, they are child psychologists. They almost have to be in order to get along. Today we face a delicate problem involving the financing of public libraries. The State of North Carolina some years ago began a policy of setting aside state funds for the support of public libraries in North Carolina. That sum rose to 4.1 million dollars this last year, having been increased by the sum of \$300,000.00. Today we have legislation pending in the federal congress which is designed to come to grips with the problem of to what extent, if any, should federal financial resources be available for the support of local public libraries.

In North Carolina we constantly wrestle with the problem of to what extent states should support services at the local level. Should we undertake to support in its entirety the public library system in North Carolina? Should we devise a formula whereby at least one-half of the support should come from the state and one-half from local governments? Should we rely entirely upon local governments for that support? If we do that, do we not run the risk of having good library facilities in more affluent, prosperous counties and cities, and very poor and meager resources in counties that do not have an adequate tax base or local resources? All of those are the complexities and problems that we deal with at the state level.

How do we respond to an electorate which says to us over and over again "We want our legislators to cut back on the expenditure of public funds. We are the generation of Proposition 13. We do not want to abide any additional taxes for any purpose." How do we respond as representative of the people to that very strong injunction which we hear day after day as we try to represent the people who in fact give us the chance to represent them to start with?

I put it to you that those are not easy questions, and they do not lend themselves to easy solutions. But, I believe we have embarked on a strong course of support for public libraries in North Carolina at the state level, and I believe that's important. It's going to continue. I am absolutely enchanted by the versatility of the public library system. The cassettes, the equipment you now are calling hardware. You have fallen into the nomenclature of IBM. When I read about the marvelous breakthroughs that we are now having as a result of grants made in North Carolina in the field of telecommunications circulation and Dataphase, and I can't wait to get up to Greensboro and see just how all that works. It hasn't been in operation but just a few weeks. It's enthralling, it's stimulating and it's stimulating particularly to me because of what books have meant to me and what reading has meant to me.

I am doing a lot of traveling these days. I have been in ninety counties in the last twelve months, but I don't go anywhere without a book. I think the greatest waste of time in the world is to see somebody sitting anywhere in a doctor's office, in a lawyer's office, on an airplane anywhere

doing nothing when he could be reading a book. The only time these days that I ever fall out with my wife is when it is her responsibility to do the packing, and she forgets to put the book in the suitcase. There I am in some motel with my pajamas on realizing that I have got to put my clothes back on and go out and get something to read before I can sleep. More than anything else you and I need to commit ourselves not just to the advent of the technological aspects of library science, but we need to commit ourselves once more to the principle that the most important legacy we can leave the next generation is the ability to read.

Even last night as I came in and thought about addressing you this morning and thought about what I could say to you that might be of substance, I almost involuntarily went to look at my books to see if there was something I could read to prepare myself to speak to you. Some of the warmest memories I have of my childhood were crawling in my bed, late at night, getting completely under the covers, and cutting on the flashlight so I could read after everybody else had gone to bed.

I have to think that John Keats had that same sensation when he wrote "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" because, you see, although he was a great classicist himself, he did not understand Homer until he stumbled across the magnificent translation written by Chapman. For the first time he understood. It impressed him so much, it moved him so much, that he wrote a sonnet and he concluded with those marvelous lines about what that book had meant to him.

"Then felt I like some watcher of the skies (an astronomer)  
When a new planet swims into his ken; (his galaxy)  
Or like stout Cortez when with eagle eyes  
He star'd at the Pacific—(for the first time) and all his men  
Look'd at each other with a wild surmise—(could this be)  
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

That's what a book meant to him, and I hope that's what they will always mean to you.



**Four bienniums of presidents: Leonard Johnson, Mertys Bell, Bill O'Shea, and Annette Phinazee.**