BOOKS AND LIBRARIES IN THE USA*

By ROBERT BINGHAM DOWNS

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My assignment is to give some impressions of books and libraries around the country, as I have had a chance to observe them during the past year. Such a summary is rather difficult, for libraries, of course, carry on a variety of activities, and any selection I may make will omit significant and interesting items. For better or worse, however, I will mention certain matters which seem to me important.

Since it is fundamental to the future of our profession, I would like first to make a few remarks on education for librarianship. Within the past few months, I have been a member of three visiting teams to accredit new library schools, have visited a number of other schools, and for the last ten years have directed a library school. On the basis of this experience, I have come to some definite, though perhaps not very startling conclusions. The first is that an extremely poor job of recruiting is being done in the library field. I know of no library school in the country which is filled to capacity or near capacity, even while staff shortages in college, university, public, and school libraries become increasingly acute. Everywhere I go, head librarians, college presidents, and school superintendents are asking why library schools are failing to provide needed staff members, and I have no satisfactory answers. Of course, I know some of the reasons: competition with other professions, the extra year of graduate study required to become a librarian, the fear among the girls that becoming a librarian would doom them to spinsterhood, the lack of knowledge of the advantages of librarianship as a profession, our recruiting literature is ineffective, and so on. These handicaps can be overcome by education, and probably that would help the recruiting situation.

A pertinent question to ask, I think, is this: whose job is it to recruit prospects for the profession? Most of us seem to assume that it is the responsibility of library schools. I am convinced, however, that it is a job for the whole profession, and most especially the working librarians in high schools and colleges, who are in positions to offer career guidance to some of the best students with whom they come into contact. Many leading librarians were led to enter library work in just that way. No doubt there are also other good solutions. The point I want to stress is that what we are doing now to bring high-quality new recruits into librarianship is proving thoroughly inadequate, and the problem demands the time, attention, and best thought of the whole profession.

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Another conclusion, apparently contradictory, about library education is that we have too many library schools. This seeming contradiction would be removed, however, if an answer could be found to the primary matter of recruiting. What I am suggesting is that there are too many schools for the present number of students. Probably one-half the existing number of library schools could accommodate comfortably all the students now enrolled. There are a few schools with low standards, of course, whose closing would doubtless be of considerable benefit to the profession, but I am thinking more particularly of some excellent library schools with first-class standards, now enrolling 25 or 30 students, schools which could easily take care of classes of 50 or 75. It simply is a most uneconomical operation for these schools to continue to run so far below their capacity. Yet, that is substantially the situation which confronts us throughout the country: Too few students for too many schools.

Since none of the schools is likely to go out of business, and since the serious shortage of librarians is certain to continue, we return again to the problem of how to expand our ranks, and there is the dilemma to which we need to find a solution.

Another matter which I have found is of considerable concern to librarians everywhere, but particularly in the metropolitan areas, is the effect of what are sometimes referred to as the newer media of communications on books and reading. Television is perhaps the most alarming of these media, and now that the Federal Communications Commission has unfrozen a number of additional channels, numerous communities that have not previously enjoyed the dubious blessings of TV are in process of receiving it. Consequently, it will soon be a nearly universal benefit or plague, depending upon the point of view. The testimony of librarians, teachers, and parents is fairly unanimous regarding the effects. It appears that for the first few months after TV is installed, it is thoroughly demoralizing on practically all other activities, including reading. Every available hour, far into the night, is filled with TV viewing, at the expense of school work, regular meals, social life, eyesight, and all normal living. Then a reaction begins, and the TV set may not be turned on for days at a time, or perhaps only for certain favorite programs, and the household starts to pick up other activities again, such as reading.

From the evidence thus far, I am not inclined to think that TV will do any permanent injury to the habit of reading. Some of my friends among public libraries even argue that in the long run it may result in more rather than less reading. For example, librarians are finding that television is bringing people into libraries to look up books on subjects they have seen on their TV screens. This is particularly true in biography, history, politics, and current events.

We know as librarians, and have known for years, that books are in competition with radio, television, motion pictures, and other forms of amusement and recreation. Nevertheless, the American people are continuing to read more books, magazines, and newspapers than ever before.

In this connection, I was much struck several months ago by some comments by Gilbert Highet in *Harper's Magazine*. Mr. Highet wrote that: "It is strange to compare the world of books with the other realms of communication: the movies, the radio, and their child TV. If you go regularly to the movies, watch and listen to TV and radio, you keep feeling that they are brilliant in execution, but poor, desperately poor in ideas. When you look over a library or bookstore, you find the opposite. Thousands, millions of ideas confront you; almost too many to cope with; a wonderful plenty: something like the richness of life itself. Only, the execution is often faulty. Brilliant thoughts are unintelligibly presented. Complex arguments are buried beneath irrelevant facts. Ofter a good

conception is clumsily worked out and couched in ugly jargon. Still, there is no dearth of ideas in our world. They come up so plentifully that we can only select, and admire, and enjoy."*

There you have an excellent summation of the strong and weak points—both of books and of the other media of communication.

In an increasing number of cases around the country, librarians have decided that if they cannot lick the new media, they will join them. That is why we find that the stock in trade of librarians today is by no means limited to books. Books continue to be our basic tools, but we are using a wide range of auxiliary devices: documentary films, film strips, sound recordings, slides, microcards, microfilm, FM radios, TV installations, etc. Instead of letting the so-called audio-visual materials and paraphernalia steal the show from them, progressive librarians everywhere are simply incorporating these devices into their varied arsenal for the dissemination of ideas. It is a case of conquering rather than being conquered.

There are those who think the public library is losing ground, or at least is in danger of losing ground, under the pressure of the new media. Bearing upon this point, I would like to read a quotation from a letter written by one of the outstanding leaders in the library profession, a man eminently qualified for the title "library statesman." In the letter, he writes, "Today the public library will either have to become more soundly educational or it will go out of business. The radio, television, and movies give information and entertainment. The rental library and the news-stand furnish light reading. The public schools give a lot of training that young men like Benjamin Franklin got from subscription libraries. Consequently, the demand for the library is not what it once was. I should add also that the elimination of immigration has likewise lessened the need of the public library as an institution especially useful in Americanization. In view of these changed conditions, the public library is going to have to appeal to people at a different level. It will have to be more understanding, and it will have to know more about teaching with books and other library materials. That means staffs will have to be employed that have better educational backgrounds than staffs have previously had. And the same is true of other types of libraries."

In case you don't recognize the language and style, the writer of the letter was Dr. Louis Round Wilson.

Proceeding now to another topic, one of the striking features of the library landscape in this country since the end of World War II has been the many new buildings. New ideas of library planning, architecture, and decoration have brought about a revolution. Among the interesting developments are modular construction to provide for greater flexibility, scientific lighting, air conditioning, and extensive use of color. The emphasis is on function, but at the same time the buildings have frequently achieved much beauty and attractiveness. We do not need to go far to find excellent examples, such as Chapel Hill, Cullowhee, and Greensboro. Next month, in Georgia, two more outstanding examples are to dedicated, at Georgia Institute of Technology and at the University of Georgia. I was also much impressed with the new buildings at Oklahoma A. & M. College, Ohio State University, and the University of Toledo. There are numerous others I haven't had an opportunity to visit. One point is clear: the users of libraries in the future will have pleasanter, more comfortable, and more convenient buildings in which to work than they have ever had in the past.

*Highet, Gilbert, "Fiction, History, Fun." *Harper's Magazine*: v.205, p.102, Nov. 1952.

In this cursory review, I have mentioned library education, the effect of TV and other media of communications on libraries, and recent developments in library architecture. All these are of live concern to the librarians of the country at present. Another topic that has been much on the minds of librarians in recent months is intellectual freedom, censorship, and the problem, in general, of attacks on books. Nearly everywhere I go, this is an issue that is exciting debate and controversy. Last month, I did a guest column for Robert S. Allen on this subject. The column was syndicated to a number of newspapers around the country. Because it expresses my own ideas and also describes what is happening these days, I would like to give you the substance of this article, which was entitled "Books Under Fire."

At home and abroad, books are under attack. Book burning, real and symbolic, has become a common spectacle. A phenomenon commonly associated with medievalism, the Inquisition, Nazi Germany, Communist Russia, and other authoritarian regimes has suddenly appeared to menace certain basic freedoms in the United States.

Repressive action takes various forms: inquiries by Congressional Committees, state legislation, local ordinances, extra-legal steps by police officials, movements by sectarian interests, veterans' organizations, and other private pressure groups to ban books of which they disapprove, the withdrawal by school boards of liberal textbooks (mainly in the social sciences), attempts to force libraries to remove from their shelves or to label controversial books and magazines, boycotts and legal measures against booksellers and publishers. Incited by these activities, our lunatic fringe has proposed such absurdities as the formation of a vigilante committee to purge a great Midwestern university library of Communist literature, the labeling of "all subversive material" in the Library of Congress, the removal of publications of the United Nations and UNESCO from school libraries, and the branding *in red ink* in letters an inch high all Communist or "subversive" material kept in libraries for research purposes. According to a recent estimate, over one hundred communities in the country are feeling the impact of censorship, and there are signs in every direction that the drive is gaining momentum.

This wave of obcsurantism is easily explicable psychologically in terms of the period in which we live. The people are reacting in a perfectly normal fashion to fear and hatred of an enemy. They are responding to demagogic statements by headline-seeking politicians, to the inflammatory and violently-prejudiced writings of a few sensational columnists, to growing antagonism to the United Nations and internationalism in general, and to other emotional appeals. In every critical era of our history there have been similar attempts to suppress unpopular points of view, but probably none comparable to the present in virulence and intensity, because our very survival as a nation appears to many to be at stake. Another factor is that more books, magazines, and newspapers are being read than ever before, and the rise of American literacy has made reading more suspect among the anti-intellectuals. Legitimate scholarship and creative literature in the United States are therefore being threatened in ways unmatched in our time, except during the Hitler reign in Germany and in Communist Russia.

An object lesson in the rapidity with which an important operation can be undermined, sabotaged, and partially destroyed may be observed in what has happened to the United States information libraries abroad in the past six months. Here was an excellent system of 194 centers in 61 countries, standing high in prestige and influence, among the most effective ambassadors any country could have, with 30,000,000 visitors passing through their doors last year. The information libraries were engaged in presenting a broad, fair picture of life in the United States, helping to correct the too-prevalent conviction that Americans are barbarians, with no genuine culture or civilization of their own. The book collecions were representative of our best writings in science, technology, fine arts, literature, history, philosophy, religion, and the social sciences. Within a few

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short months, through violent attacks from various sources, largely *uninformed*, the State Department's confused and confusing directives, the bad judgment of several librarians in the field who, lacking proper guidance, actually burned some books, and the accompanying unfavorable publicity throughout the world, there was a quick reversal of sentiment toward the information libraries. Because of the presence of a few hundred controversial books among a total of more than two million volumes, the library staffs have been demoralized, the reputation for objectivity of the libraries has been seriously damaged among the people they are designed to reach, reduced congressional appropriations may force the closing of about one-half the centers, and the impression has spread around the world that freedom of speech and of the press no longer exists in the United States. This is a high price to pay for the removal of a handful of questionable books—books which, if they did not belong, should have been quietly taken off the shelves without fanfare. What can be salvaged from the wreckage by the now-independent International Information Agency remains to be seen.

How to combat and to counteract the current reactionary trend against books, reading, and other things of the mind is a complex problem. No doubt our difficulties will continue until the end of the cold war and international turmoil, for it is in such an atmosphere that fear and hysteria flourish. We need also a revival of confidence in the rightness of American traditions, in particular those fundamental guarantees enumerated in the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. Most of all, we need courage on the part of influential citizens, following President Eisenhower's precedent, to speak out against those forces which, often plausibly and with good intentions, are trying to destroy freedoms essential to our form of government. In one locality after another, it has been found that where citizens' committees or other organizations are willing to take a strong stand against censorship, it has been possible to defeat pending legislation, to have municipal ordinances declared unconstitutional, to stop illegal police activities, to frustrate self-appointed private groups, and to awaken the people to the dangers inherent in repressing free expression.

There are two basic facts about censorship which would-be censors apparently will never learn. First, banning a book, given the contrary streak characteristic of human nature, automatically creates a universal desire to read it, and frequently has been responsible for making best-sellers out of what would otherwise remain mediocre failures. (For an analogy in another field, note our "noble experiment" of the twenties and thirties). Second, ideas cannot be killed by suppression. There is scarcely any record of a book's total disappearance being caused by censors' fires. Somewhere, almost invariably, a copy has survived which can be multiplied and passed on to succeeding generations. Only when the ideas expressed in books have lost their interest do the books vanish. The most certain way to breathe life into a book and to insure its longevity is to prohibit its being read.

These, then, are a few matters of concern to American librarians in the mid-1950's.