

On the Training of Library Assistants.¹

I T often happens to a person who has a good deal to do, that he finds himself in places where he has to ask himself what in the wide world is he doing there. That is a position that I never felt so strongly before in my life. I really do not know what prompted your Committee to ask me to deliver an address, and I do not know what induced me to promise to do so. I am perfectly unconscious of possessing any qualifications that enable me to speak to a body of experts such as you are. It can only be a supposition that I am generally interested in education of all sorts that can have induced your Committee to invite me ; but I am sure they did not know how entirely ignorant I was of the particular subject in which you are interested.

I cannot hope to say anything to you that is new, or anything that is in the least degree worth while listening to ; but since I am here to speak to you and you have come to listen to me, I suppose we may mutually agree to make the best of it. If you will listen to me on that understanding, I will try, as a perfect outsider, to say a few things that have struck me at various times in my life about the position, opportunities, and difficulties of a librarian.

First, you are met as an Educational Society, and what you are interested in is the education of the librarian.

Well, of course any series of lectures can only put before you the heads of the subjects in which the aspiring librarian ought to try to gain knowledge. Let me try to make a few remarks about the temper of mind which he must take with him in his attempt to acquire that knowledge.

Education presents one great difficulty, that it is always pursued upon theoretical lines which have to be largely abandoned the moment that you turn to practice. There is no good thing in this world that does not bring corresponding evils, and

¹ An address delivered at the Inauguration of the Library Association's Classes for Library Assistants.

there is no process to which we subject ourselves which does not do us so much good that we have to spend a certain amount of time in getting rid of it afterwards. That is very strongly the case with education. Education, of course, is a form of mental gymnastics—I mean the education of our youth. It aims at improving our mind, and it is to be hoped that it does improve, exercise, and discipline our mind; but then it leaves our mind at the end of that process with a great number of ideas which have to be got rid of the moment we turn to actual practice.

Let me explain my meaning. If you take up a modern novel, you frequently find a tendency to smile at the priggishness of a young Oxford man. Well, what is meant by that? It simply means that a young man who has taken very seriously to his University studies is turned out into the world with many more ideas than he has experience. That is to say, with many more pigeon-holes in his mind than he has matter to put into them, and so he goes about the world brandishing his empty pigeon-holes. He is trying to fit more into some of the pigeon-holes than they will really hold. I suppose that is what constitutes a prig, but I do not know.

Now, that which I take as an obvious instance of my meaning in education, as carried to its highest point, in a certain degree also is attached to everything else. I am sorry that my researches into the progress of education prove that a good deal of technical education—that is to say, education which aims at fitting a person for a certain profession, and which in its desire to fit him properly for that profession, puts before him a number of subjects which he has to study without making it exactly clear to his mind why it is desirable he should study them—that form of professional education very often leaves upon the mind of those subjected to it the distinct intention, when they have finished with their course of examination, never to open another book in their lives if they can possibly help it. I do not think that is a very good result, not an ennobling result, to have at the end of a system of education. Let us hope that it wears off in the process of time. I am sorry I have heard of a good many people giving vent to these very blood-thirsty sentiments with respect to books. To some degree this is always the result of every system of education which can possibly be devised. There always is a certain amount of objection to it at the end, because it has been, in spite of all efforts made to the contrary,

too abstract, too far removed from actual life. There is a certain difficulty in fitting on the results of any system of education to the actual life which you have to lead.

Well now, let us apply that to the librarian, who seems to be a very strong instance indeed of the immense rebound that must be felt, if he is to become a good librarian, from the system on which he has been taught previously, and from all the maxims and rules which have been instilled into his mind. For, of course, for the purposes of ordinary education you have to be taught that it is desirable to study a subject thoroughly, and to read a book systematically and in an orderly and regular way. Now, you know that a librarian, if he is to succeed in his career, must at once abolish all these views. He cannot afford to read a book steadily and thoroughly, and as to doing things systematically—of course he has to do his cataloguing systematically—I am afraid he has to content himself with picking up such knowledge as he can at such times as he is able to do so. Altogether in life it is more his object to know where knowledge is to be found than to possess knowledge in itself. It is his duty, not so much to have any knowledge of his own, as to make himself a sort of channel or conduit for conveying information where knowledge is to be discovered. Now, that is a great blow to all the principles upon which his early education has been carried out. There he was told to read a little, to read carefully, to read accurately, and to try to commit it all to memory, to lend his mind, in fact, to his study, that it may form his mind; whereas, the moment he becomes a practical librarian, he has to make his mind the chief thing and his memory the chief thing, and try to gain all the information he possibly can about every kind of subject. No one has such a need of encyclopædic knowledge as a librarian. I remember it was once said that a man who had distinguished himself very highly at a University was asked to what cause he particularly attributed his success, and what book he thought had helped him most. After meditating a little while he said: "Bradshaw's Railway Guide." The habit he had acquired of taking imaginary journeys by the help of Bradshaw's Guide, had, on the whole, done more to train his mind than all the lectures to which he had been subjected. That is to say, in his spare moments he picked up a work which is certainly not devoid of interest, if it is read with a little imagination on the part of the reader, and constructed for himself imaginary tours; and

in that way he gained a more complete knowledge of geography than he could have secured in any other way. He knew the distances by rail from one place to another, knew their relative position and gained an enormous amount also of accurate and useful knowledge. A librarian has to do something of the same kind. He cannot even say that "Bradshaw's Railway Guide" is not a useful thing for him to know.

In fact, I remember once receiving from a great librarian a severe reproof. I was standing looking at the new books which had come into the library, and I picked up one which contained a series of interesting but perfectly useless documents of modern date reproduced by photography. It was an enormously big book, and I turned to him and said, "What is the good of a book like that?" He put his hand on my shoulder and said, "My good man, do not ask me a question like that; if I ever stopped and asked myself such a question, I should be totally unfit to be a librarian." It is a librarian's business to take everything and put it into its proper place and see that it can be got at by anybody. Of course, you will recognise that that is a very painful position to be in and requires an extension of your mind which is very tedious.

To be called upon to be perfectly tolerant to all subjects is a very severe demand to make upon oneself. It is hard not to interest oneself more with one subject than another; but it is one's business to get a certain amount of information about all possible subjects, so that one can be useful to anybody who comes for assistance, no matter what his subject may be.

That, you will observe, is a not only very large demand upon your general tolerance, upon your charity, upon your kindness and upon your moral virtues, but also upon your intellectual qualities. Because it is almost equivalent to a demand that you should leave off the systematic training of your mind in the subjects in which you are interested, and instead of pursuing—what, of course, must be set before you as the object of all education, if you are working for yourself on definite lines—knowledge in some definite sphere, thoroughly and exhaustively, you are condemned by the mere fact of the line of life that you are choosing to be omniscient smatterers. If condemned to that, you of course must make the best of it. You must after all consider that you are not all so very learned or very clever; that if you were to give yourselves to original research, probably after five years' pursuit of it you would not astonish the

world by the vastness of your discoveries; but if you are good librarians, and help on many other people to gain an amount of knowledge that they otherwise would not have gained, perhaps you may be thought to have not inadequately done your duty in the course of your life. Therefore, if you have abandoned the hope of writing works of European importance and being either men of science or men of letters famous throughout the world, there is no knowing how many geniuses you may not inform, and how many people you may not set loose who will be much greater than yourselves could ever have been if you had applied yourselves diligently to some particular study.

The object then of a librarian is not so much, as I have said, to acquire knowledge for himself. In fact, it has been remarked that the librarian who reads his books is ruined for his work. It is his business to put them on shelves, and know what they are about. He must sternly prohibit himself from reading one through. He must practically be himself a purveyor of knowledge to others and not seek to secure knowledge for himself. One great object he has before him is to be a keeper, a zealous custodian of the books committed to his charge. In that way, I am bound to say that a librarian is called upon to make the most tremendous sacrifice that any one can be called upon to make, because, of course, the more he loves books, the more he dislikes seeing people read them; everybody who reads a book does it so much mischief. The actual fabric of the book suffers from being read; and I am sure that the proper-minded librarian could but wish that the habit of having every form of excellent book sold for a penny would spread, so that nobody need molest the more valuable books unless he were a genuine student. His feeling for an old book, for a beautiful book, for a precious book, is such that I am sure that anybody who has the keeping of them must thoroughly detest seeing anybody else taking them in hand. It is a librarian's duty to make knowledge accessible, and this comes into sharp contrast and collision with his own desires and his own aspirations. To keep the book safe and secure is a thing that he must set before himself; and every reader of it he must regard as more or less a wrong-doer to the integrity of the book.

Now, if he is to be a keeper of books, of course he must know about books in themselves, and all of you doubtless know what a charming pursuit that of the love of books is. I do not

know that any pursuit has more attractions than any other. I imagine that all that we call our hobbies or tastes are attractive to us. That primitive instinct of man of having to go out to hunt every morning that he might maintain himself throughout the day, I suppose, is deeply rooted in us all, and therefore we have a desire to hunt for something appropriate for ourselves. If it be books, the hunter feels a sense of pride when he has discovered something which the ordinary person does not know. To know how to appreciate the beauty of books, to know the difference of types and history of printing, to know in what particular class the book stands,—of course these are very delightful objects of pursuit, few, I think, more so. There is no hobby, no taste, which really is more refining and more ennobling than that, because when you think of what a book contains, when you think of human knowledge and how it is spread, when you think of the wonders of writing and use of words and the means of transmitting ideas from one mind to another, and when you think how that process is passed on, why surely the instruments in that process cease to be in any way mechanical. They have a grace and beauty and charm that nothing else can have; they are instruments of the highest pleasures and the greatest utilities that man can ever enjoy. The absolutely material charm of books is very great, and is a charm which I hope all of you will enjoy.

I daresay some of you whom I am speaking to are beginners in some public library which only possesses the inferiorly printed books, which are the great product of our own day, and that you are not called upon to be custodians of any books that are of very great intrinsic value. Still, I hope that the day will come when you may feel that it is your object to try and get even for the smallest library some really valuable and interesting book—interesting I mean as a book. A public library which only contains the cheap editions of modern books that are needed for ordinary use by the ordinary man surely falls below its proper purpose. It ought to have something that is precious and worth enjoying for itself. Bibliography is a thing that ought to be very widely spread. There is nothing in the present day that needs enforcing so much as a sense of reverence towards the past. I do not think there is anything that is more likely to draw and command the reverence of the ordinary man than the holding up of a beautifully printed book.

To show it him and let him know the process by which that

book came into being, and to show him the exquisite care with which the early printers did their work is to make a great step in his education. Then, if he were a very modernly minded man, you might teach him a little lesson in political economy by pointing out to him that books were beautiful like that just so long as they were in competition with manuscripts, and you might point out that the moment manuscripts disappeared, printing sank to a worse condition than even that in which it is now. It was only competition that made the early printers do their work so well. They were, after all, free human beings, and they knew that they had to justify their existence.

The books need not be very rare, but to have at all events some good books connected with every library is an object which I think every librarian ought to set before himself.

Well then, I need not speak to you, of course, about the desirability of learning all that can be learned about books, the stages in their development, the history of typography, and the history also of bindings, everything that goes to make up a book as we know it, the development of every part of the manufacture of that book.

It is one of a librarian's joys and pleasures to learn all that can be learned about a subject which must be to him of paramount importance, because he will never be a good librarian unless he is an artist and has an artistic admiration for the works of art which he knows mankind have made in the past.

But about that matter I need not speak, as I observe you have lectures provided for you on all those subjects which enable you to learn what is necessary about books to begin with. Yet, all that can be learned about books in lectures is as nothing compared to the actual practice of life itself. All that lectures can do for you is simply to prepare your minds, to give you certain points, to lead you to ask yourself certain questions, with the knowledge that you are perfectly sure in the practice of your ordinary life to find an answer. But then besides his duty as being a custodian of books, the librarian has the duty of making their contents of value to others.

Again, I need not speak to you about cataloguing, which is now becoming a most important science—a science to which anybody may be proud of devoting his highest and best energies. But about the matter of bibliography, perhaps I might venture to say to you one or two words. I am using bibliography in the sense of knowing the literature connected with particular

subjects. Now, for that purpose, as I have already said, you require a general knowledge of some kind or other. If the librarian is to make his library valuable, the back-bone of knowledge which he requires is, roughly speaking, history. I do not forget that scientific books are, perhaps, most widely read. But science is continually making new discoveries and re-arranging old ones ; and to make a scientific library valuable you may start from one pretty clear axiom, which is, that the last book about any particular science is presumably the best, or at least is one to which in the first instance you may refer your enquirers. That is and must be true about science in itself, but, of course, the history of science, *i.e.*, the relations of scientific writers one to another is part of history from the point of view from which I am speaking.

The librarian should have a general knowledge of the progress of human affairs and of the advance of the human mind in various branches. Well, I admit that there is nothing which it is more difficult to learn in outlines than history ; but in that I think I can help you. I never was able myself to read a short book on history ; a compendium or hand-book is an abomination to me. If I want to know anything at all about a period of which I am absolutely ignorant, I find that if I take down the biggest volumes I will learn in an hour very much more than I could possibly learn by reading a condensed account. Somehow or other, just as when one goes for a change of scene one finds that one acquires knowledge somehow or another through the pores of the skin, so I think that librarians gain knowledge by looking at their books, but still more by looking at the headings of chapters and seeing what the book is about. You can learn very readily an outline of a great many subjects by adopting this method. You can get a skeleton arrangement around which your knowledge may grow by gaining some hold upon an historical view both of events and also, of course, of literature and of the developments of the human mind. It must be historical and must be chronological in the first instance, of course. Then it is desirable that every librarian should be acquainted with foreign languages ; he need not know them thoroughly, but have a smattering of as many as possible. Certainly he needs enough Latin to be able to read the title-pages of books in the language. A great deal of knowledge of Latin is not necessary, as the title pages follow certain common forms. You can acquire that amount of knowledge about Latin

books, and also about French and German books, without studying the grammar. It is not at all necessary that you should learn grammar to be able to read a language. For practical purposes, it always seems to me that we begin at the wrong end. The only way of learning a language is by reading a book in it. I know that this is very unscientific; but as I grow old, I find an intolerable aversion to turning to a dictionary and looking out a word. So when I read a book in a foreign language, if I do not know the words, I go on until I do; and there comes a time when the meaning of a continually recurring word becomes clear. I have discovered that one can read with little trouble in a foreign language, of which one knows nothing, by using a little common sense and starting first of all with a Bible, or a book which is familiar to one. In this way it is possible without any very great expenditure of time to gain a workable knowledge of foreign languages, enough at all events for your purposes.

Then, of course, it is important that you should know what are the best books on any particular subject. By best I mean those which are most complete, which deal most thoroughly with the subject.

Now, I am afraid that if in science the latest book is very often the most thorough, that is not the case in any other branch of literature. If you want thorough knowledge about any other subject than science, I am afraid you must go back one or two centuries to find it; you are not likely to find it in many of the books that have been produced in this century. That is a misfortune, of course, but it is a sober fact. I do not mean to say that you do not find very lucid ideas, or very admirable criticism; but generally a student does not go in search of ideas; he can supply them himself; he wants facts. Of course, in modern times we have ruled out facts; books are dull that deal in facts, and a history that has too many facts is not read. Readers want brilliant statements, an interpretation of all the motives that weighed with the people represented; they want a lively and dramatic representation of a past time. But the student wishes to know what actually did occur. It becomes exceedingly difficult to find this from modern books. I am afraid that you generally have to go to a book that was written about the middle of last century. Therefore, in great branches of knowledge it is desirable to know where the most accurate records of actual facts are to be obtained. Even nowadays there are men who want to know for the sake of knowing, not

for the sake of examination. When a man who really wants to know comes and asks your help, of course he is the person to whom your sympathies ought to go out at once, and you ought to be exceedingly sorry if you cannot put him on the right way, because I regret to say that nowadays a real desire to know is by no means necessarily accompanied by an acquaintance with the sources of knowledge. Now, it is just in that point that the function of the librarian rests. It may be that a man who wants knowledge for some real purpose may come before you once every two years, and when he comes it is good if you are able to put him in the way of discovering what he requires to know. You can feel that you have done an action quite out of proportion to all the other actions you have performed for a long time.

It is well to deal very carefully even with the superior knowledge that you soon will acquire if you follow my precepts. It is well to deal very carefully and tenderly with enquirers; I am afraid when enquirers first come, if you probe them when they ask very out-of-the-way questions, or want to know about an out-of-the-way book, you will very often find a very superficial purpose behind. They simply require the information that they may bowl over some one in a Debating Society next Monday evening. I get curious letters very often—Bishops always do. I get a letter sometimes asking for a very out-of-the-way piece of information from a man who obviously is not an educated man. I write back and ask him why he wants to know about this remote historical fact. It generally is because something was said at his Debating Society, and he wants to hit some adversary on the head with my superior knowledge. The questions submitted are very often those that cannot possibly be answered “yes” or “no,” but would require a trained mind and a good deal of research to give an exact answer; but, of course, people do not perceive that.

Two pupils were once discussing an eminent tutor for examination, and one said to the other, “Well, if you go to the ordinary fellow he tells you what one man says and what another man says, and what opinions are held upon the subject, but if you go to So and So he tells you what the thing is.” You will observe that that conception of knowledge is a very common one at the present day, and that people continually will come to you, neither knowing what the nature of the evidence is, nor how such a point is to be determined. Still, however humble may be the motive from which the desire for knowledge comes, I

would implore you always to foster it. Remember that a librarian has a greater and a higher educational opportunity than almost anybody else ; that he really can lead people on continually. There is nothing so delightful as to see growing up in anybody's mind a real conception of what knowledge is. So comparatively few people know what it is to know, that it is a privilege to be able to give to anybody even the faintest conception of what it is to know ; and not to repeat the remarks made in the morning newspapers as if it were their own thoughts, but really to think and for once exercise an independent judgment upon some point, for the object simply of getting to the truth and not for the object of contradicting some one else.

Now, to foster in any way whatever that capacity for knowledge or even the conception of what knowledge is, is a very high privilege to anybody who can in any degree take any part in it. Therefore I would say, feel very much ashamed if you cannot answer any question, however foolish, that is asked you about books, and be so much ashamed that you will set to work at once to discover the answer and are determined that you will not be caught tripping on that point again. I have used libraries at various times in my life. There was a time, strange as it may seem, when I was able to read a book ; that has faded into the dim past ; but I look back with pleasure and delight upon the time when I was able to read a book. There are no people who stand forward in my reminiscences evoking such feelings of gratitude as the librarians who helped me in my endeavours to discover things very often in a hurry, and who placed their knowledge at my disposal. I would only assure you that you do gain an amount of gratitude which you ought to be proud to enjoy.

I should very much hope that some day or other you will have the privilege of being addressed on that subject by the librarian who has done more than anybody else to spread knowledge in England, and who has earned the gratitude of more people than almost any one else in this country ; I mean Dr. Richard Garnett. If you want to know the attitude and temper of mind that a librarian ought to have towards his books, towards the subjects that they contain, and towards the people who come to use the library over which he presides, you ask Dr. Garnett to give you, as he can do with simplicity and force, the result of his own experience and the motives which have actuated him through his long and honourable career.

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