A Plea for a Closer Connection between Public Libraries and other Public Educational Institutions.¹

IT is not my fault that I have to throw myself into the breach this evening and help to fill up the programme with something of my own. When a Secretary reads a paper it is generally to be regarded as a *dernier ressort*, and I trust the fact that a non-public library man finds an opening to talk about public libraries will give such an impetus to the more lethargic members of the Association that you will have no need to listen to me again for a very long time.

We have been hearing a good deal of late of the connection between libraries and education, but though much has been said, the real need, from my point of view, has not yet been touched upon. Most of those who have dealt, and dealt very ably, with the subject seem to think that the proper development of a library is to end in a sort of "omnium gatherum" of technical classes, lectures, and books; and, no doubt, if our forefathers had been far-seeing enough to have established national education on a broad and comprehensive basis, we should have had such institutions instead of libraries, pure and simple. If Parliament itself had been sufficiently educated, and the people had been willing to find the money, no doubt it would have been a grand thing to have established in every community such comprehensive institutions as that which has been established at Nottingham and developed out of the Library at Wolverhampton, but we have travelled by a different road and we cannot go back. It seems to me peculiarly characteristic of the English that the forces of progress should be marching in isolated companies, bound for the same goal, but along different roads. And it is only when these diverging roads begin to converge and come within sight of the goal that these independent companies recognise each other, and perhaps before the end, join forces. In the recent talks on this subject, both

¹ Read at a Monthly Meeting of the Library Association, January 8th, 1894.

at Oxford and elsewhere, we have had Carlyle regularly trotted out, and his somewhat hasty description of a library as a "People's University" much enlarged upon, but I cannot help thinking that we are guilty of something like humbug, when we tell the horny-handed that they are enjoying a university, when they have only a library; or when we tell them that the useful but somewhat dreary looking building in the east end is a "palace." The thoughtful working man who has been through Windsor Castle or Buckingham Palace, and who knows that one swallow does not make a summer, nor one princess* make a palace, gently veils one of his eyes when he is told that Mr. Besant's dream in the Mile End Road is a palace; and an intelligent artisan who has enjoyed University Extension Lectures and been present at a Summer School in Oxford will not deny a mild scepticism when he hears of the "University" of Clerkenwell over which Principal James Duff Brown so ably presides.

I am a firm believer in the gospel of the cobbler sticking to his last, and I believe that a library which is a library pure and simple, is for its purpose a more efficient machine than a hybrid institution where, at one hour of the day, the principal is wrestling with the organisation of technical classes, and at another, trying to order aright his catalogue and other *true* library work. But no good University exists that has not a library, and so *I should like to see the public libraries aim at becoming, not "people's universities" in themselves, but essential and invaluable parts of a university.* A hundred years hence, when our descendants shall spend the sums they now lavish on battleships and Tommy Atkins, upon the intellectual development of the race, no doubt fully equipped people's universities will spring up all over the land, but although we may not hope to enter into such an inheritance, we might at least do something to realise it in a tentative way, if we could draw together into a harmonious working scheme the various educational agencies of the day.

At Nottingham it has so fallen out that the local college and the public library are under one authority and they have wisely brought them together, so that under one roof is to be found a true people's university, save in the matter of degree granting, fully equipped in every branch of education likely to be of use to the good folks of that enterprising town.

* Since this paper was read even the "one princess" has abdicated. ED.

There the library, while fulfilling admirably all the needs of the people as a public library, is also an integral part of the college machinery, and the students of the technical classes regard the library as their own, just as a student in any of our ancient universities regards the university library.

In course of time, libraries, as well as other educational agencies, will no doubt, be placed under one Government department; and while I admit that there may be many objections to this, it will bring with it one very great advantage, viz., a concentration of energy and a more economical management all round. At the present time much money and much labour is wasted in consequence of different people, in different places doing the same thing over and over again, which under a central organisation could be done in one place, by one, for all. But in the meantime, I think public libraries could do much to secure some of the benefits, without any of the disadvantages, by a voluntary co-operation with other educational institutions.

To take that which lies nearest my hand, I would propose that the librarians of London should meet together and divide London among them, and make, as it were, a sort of industrial map. One library, the nearest, would undertake to supply the technical literature useful for the leather-dressers of Bermondsey, another would concentrate its energies on the metal-workers of Clerkenwell. Chelsea would cater for the arts, and so on. I may be wrong in detail, but it does not affect the principle I am hinting at, when I say that a book on leather-dressing would be absolutely wasted at St. Martin-in-the-Fields. In this way each library would come to be regarded as a special one, which, while providing the general and catholic library supplies for the ordinary reader, would concentrate its energies on those technical subjects which belonged to its district.

The next step in my programme would be for each public librarian to invite the professors and masters of the educational institutions in his neighbourhood to confer with him, and to arrange a practical working scheme, by which the students of the district should be led to regard the library as a place for study and for help in the subjects being dealt with, from time to time, by their lecturers. The lecturers would furnish the librarian, from term to term, with his syllabuses, and the librarian would collect together for the use of the students all that his library contained on the different subjects, and if important books were wanting, they should be procured. Where possible an earnest effort should be made to

set apart a special room for the use of students, and in this should be suspended subject-lists of books and articles to guide the student in his reading. I do not think such a plan would add really very much to the work of the already over-worked and under-paid librarian. In the preparation of the lists he would be cordially assisted by the lecturers; and I believe, that as a matter of fact, he would find that the doing of this work systematically and periodically would, in the long run, even prove a saving of time, as it would render unnecessary the many desultory enquiries that are made at the desk by students, in libraries where no attempt is made to meet their needs.

I did not mean to write a "paper," and you will freely admit that I have not done so, my object being rather to set forth a text which might be profitably discussed by those more competent to deal with it than myself.

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