

PUBLIC LIBRARY STATISTICS.



ON the occasion of the annual meeting of the Library Association at Buxton in 1896 the writer read a paper on this subject pointing out the inadequacy of the prevailing method of recording library statistics. It was then urged that to give a simple statement of the number of volumes issued in the various classes into which a library might be divided was frequently misleading, and at the best presented but an incomplete record of the facts of the circulation. It was contended that unless some account is taken of the length of time a volume is retained by a borrower a full statement of the case is not obtained.

Complaints are frequently heard that our public libraries are little else than 'free fiction depots,' as one writer has been pleased to dub them. Librarians have endeavoured to reduce the output of fiction to a minimum by various devices calculated to wean the confirmed novel-reader from his tastes in this direction. Some are of opinion that the fiction issues may be greatly decreased by allowing borrowers direct access to the shelves of the library, the idea being that if the desired novel is not in, a book of biography or travel may attract the reader. Others holding this view, while fearing to trust the readers inside the counter, have placed thereon a case with a number of non-fictional books attractively displayed. Others, again, grant additional tickets not available for borrowing novels. All this is done with the view of reducing the percentage of fiction in their annual reports. Far too much, I think, is made of this fiction bogey. Undoubtedly novels are taken out by borrowers

in greater numbers than books in other classes of literature; but this is inevitable from the nature of the case. It does not necessarily follow that a greater portion of the readers' time is occupied in fiction reading.

Public library statistics, I take it, are compiled with the view of showing the use that is being made of the various sections of the library in connection with which they are issued. To state simply that one hundred volumes have been issued, fifty of which were novels and the remaining fifty distributed amongst the various classes other than novels into which the library may happen to be divided, gives but a very imperfect account of the amount of reading actually done and the time occupied in doing it.

From time to time attempts have been made to estimate the relative popularity of various writers, novelists for the most part, and appeals have been made to the statistics furnished in the annual reports of our public libraries. Some have maintained that Scott, Thackeray, and Dickens are quite neglected in the wild rush to obtain copies of the latest 'popular' novel which is selling in its thousands, while others take a more hopeful view of the case. Any attempt to estimate the relative popularity of different writers is attended with numerous difficulties. The number of one writer's works as compared with those of his more prolific neighbour, the number of copies of each work in the library, and the relative length of the different works, are points that have often been lost sight of in making up the comparison. In no case, as far as I am aware, has the length of time the volumes are retained by those who borrow them been considered a factor in the result. In compiling statistics for the paper read at Buxton I was struck with the fact that, taking the number of times issued as a criterion of popularity, such books as 'The Manxman' and 'The Raiders' (the demand for which was then at its height) were credited with little more than one half of the popularity that was shown in the case of the novels of such a writer as Mrs. Henry Wood. This, of

course, was accounted for by the fact that the book which was 'all the rage' was bespoken for weeks in advance, and each borrower retained the book for the full fortnight to which he was entitled, in many cases no doubt passing the book on to a friend or two in the interval. It thus became apparent that some fuller method of stating the circulation was needed in order to bring out the true proportion of use that was being made of the volumes in the library. The real test of the popularity or otherwise of a particular writer was reduced to the question whether or not his works when available to the public were continually out, or lay on the shelves unasked for. In order to bring out the relative length of time occupied in reading books in the various classes I kept a record during four weeks of the number of days each book returned to the library during that period had been retained by its borrower. The time allowed for reading each book was fourteen clear days, with the right of extension of loan provided no other borrower called for the book. Note was taken of all such extensions of loan, the number of days' use being calculated from the date of first issue. I drew up three tabular statements of the information thus obtained. The first table gives the number of volumes returned and the number of days the same were retained.

TABLE NO. I.—NUMBER OF VOLS. RETURNED AND
DAYS RETAINED.

| Class. | Vols. | Days. |
|----------------------------------|-------|--------|
| Fiction | 7,161 | 70,088 |
| History | 247 | 2,960 |
| Biography | 304 | 3,615 |
| Travels | 382 | 4,034 |
| Science | 367 | 4,331 |
| Useful Arts | 236 | 3,111 |
| Fine Arts | 171 | 1,967 |
| General Literature | 339 | 3,958 |
| Philology and Ancient Classics . | 141 | 2,230 |

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| Class. | Vols. | Days. |
|-------------------------------|--------|---------|
| Theology | 167 | 2,210 |
| Sociology | 140 | 1,552 |
| Poetry | 159 | 1,839 |
| Philosophy | 38 | 557 |
| Magazines | 1,324 | 17,531 |
| Juvenile Literature | 2,301 | 19,039 |
| Total | 13,477 | 139,022 |

The second table is somewhat more interesting. It gives the average number of days the volumes were retained in the various classes.

TABLE II.—AVERAGE NUMBER OF DAYS RETAINED.

| Class. | Average Days. |
|--|---------------|
| Fiction | 9.8 |
| History | 12 |
| Biography | 11.9 |
| Travels | 10.6 |
| Science | 11.8 |
| Useful Arts | 13.2 |
| Fine Arts | 11.5 |
| General Literature | 11.7 |
| Philology and Ancient Classics | 15.8 |
| Theology | 13.2 |
| Sociology | 11.1 |
| Poetry | 11.6 |
| Philosophy | 14.7 |
| Magazines | 13.2 |
| Juvenile Literature | 8.3 |
| General average | 10.3 |

These figures show that 10.3 days was the average length of time for a book to be retained. It appeared that books of fiction and juvenile literature fell consider-

ably below that average, being 9.8 and 8.3 days respectively. All other classes were above the average, Philology and Ancient Classics having the highest average, viz., 15.8 days. Philosophy came next in order with 14.7 days; then there was a group of three classes, Useful Arts, Theology, and Magazines (bound volumes only), with 13.2 days each to their credit. This was followed by a series descending one point at a time, viz.: History, 12; Biography, 11.9; Science, 11.8; General Literature, 11.7; Poetry, 11.6; and Fine Arts, 11.5. Sociology gave 11.1 and the rear was brought up by Travels, 10.6, just a little above the total average. All this, of course, was largely what might have been expected. It does not take a boy long to devour a book by Ballantyne, or Verne, or Henty, nor the practised novel reader of the gentler sex to find out from the last chapter of a novel 'whether she got him' or not; while a philological text book or a translation of Livy will be used every day for weeks on end. Yet, by the method of stating circulation by volumes issued only, the work of fiction would appear to have the same amount of use, issue for issue, as the translation of the classic or the work on philosophy.

Take, now, the third table which gives the relative percentages of the different classes by both methods and we shall see how the estimate is affected by the time measurement:

TABLE III.—PERCENTAGE OF CIRCULATION BY VOL'S.
AND DAYS.

| Class. | Vols. | Days. |
|-----------------------|-------|-------|
| Fiction | 53.1 | 50.4 |
| History | 1.8 | 2.2 |
| Biography | 2.3 | 2.6 |
| Travels | 2.8 | 2.9 |
| Science | 2.7 | 3.2 |
| Useful Arts | 1.8 | 2.3 |
| Fine Arts | 1.3 | 1.4 |

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| Class. | Vols. | Days. |
|--------------------------------------|-------|-------|
| General Literature | 2.5 | 2.8 |
| Philology and Ancient Classics . . . | 1 | 1.6 |
| Theology | 1.3 | 1.6 |
| Sociology | 1 | 1.2 |
| Poetry | 1.2 | 1.3 |
| Philosophy | .3 | .4 |
| Magazines | 9.8 | 12.4 |
| Juvenile Literature | 17.1 | 13.7 |

From this table we see that Fiction reading, as computed by issues, was 53.1 per cent. of the whole; as measured by time it was but 50.4 per cent. of the whole, that is to say, the percentage of Fiction was lowered 2.7 per cent., which is equal to the whole percentage of Science. Juvenile literature by volumes was 17.1 per cent., by days it was but 13.7 per cent.; while all other classes received a considerable increase in percentage by the time standard. The ratio between the classes for example of Juvenile Literature and Philology was shown in a much more favourable light. By the method of volumes the percentage of Juvenile Literature was 17.1 times that of Philology; by the method of days it was but 8.6 times as great. So the ratio between Fiction and Science, which by volumes was 19.7, by days was 15.7.

I have recently made an analysis of the reading done by borrowers in the library now under my charge, the results of which will bear out the value of the time estimate. I have examined the records of 1,000 consecutive borrowers who took out tickets during what may be called the height of the winter reading season. I find that of these 1,000 borrowers there were 15 who made no use whatever of their tickets, 11 took out only one volume, and 19 took only two volumes. The others may be grouped according to the class of books borrowed. We have thus: (1) Fiction readers who may be subdivided
12 into (a) those borrowing nothing but novels, (b) those

mixing their novels with bound magazines and juvenile books; then (2) there is the class whose reading is a mixture of fictional and non-fictional elements; (3) the class who never borrow a novel on any account; and (4) juvenile readers who may borrow from the Juvenile section only.

| Class. | No. of Borrowers. | Vols. borrowed during year. | Average no. to each Borrower. |
|--------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1 <i>a</i> . Fiction only. . . | 267 | 9,142 | 34.2 |
| 1 <i>b</i> . Fict. Magaz. Juv. | 98 | 3,737 | 38.5 |
| 2. Mixed reading . . | 423 | 11,437 | 27 |
| 3. No Fiction . . . | 84 | 1,547 | 18.4 |
| 4. Juvenile Readers . | 83 | 2,681 | 32.3 |

A further examination of the reading of the individual borrowers in the various classes brings out the fact that in class 1*a*, 51 borrowers each took out 50 novels or upwards. One borrower took out 178 novels while another borrowed 140. Three had over 90 each, 3 others over 80 each, 8 had over 70 each, 19 over 60, and 16 had over 50 each. These 51 borrowers were responsible for 3,498 issues of fiction. In class 1*b*, 30 out of the 99 borrowers were responsible for 1,982 issues, an average to each borrower of 66 volumes per annum. In class 2, 40 out of the 423 were responsible for 2,729 volumes, an average to each of over 68 volumes. Coming to the entirely non-fictional class, we find that one borrower took out 53 volumes, being the only one who reached 50. The average was a little over 18 volumes per reader per annum. To reduce these figures to terms of days. The library was open on 294 days. Dividing the number of days by the average number of books borrowed, we find that in the case of class 1*a*, the average time for a novel to be retained was $8\frac{1}{2}$ days. In class 1*b*, mixed fictional, the average is 7.6 days. Class 2 = 10.9 days, class 3 (no fiction) = 16 days, and juveniles = 9.1 days. These figures bear out

the result of the former experiment, and help to show that, as already stated, a great deal too much is made of the fiction bogey. The high percentage of fiction is largely caused by a section of the readers, comparatively few in numbers, but omnivorous in their tastes. They get through the fiction much more rapidly than works in other classes, volume for volume; and if it be supposed that the reading is continuous in both cases, it is unfair in giving statistics of issues to make it appear as if the majority of those using our public libraries are readers of fiction pure and simple. Taking classes 1 and 4 together, we have 448 readers, while classes 2 and 3 make 507 borrowers. The 448 novel readers borrowed 15,560 books, as against 12,984 borrowed by the 507 ordinary readers. The fewer number borrowed more books, but did not necessarily read more or use the library to a greater extent.

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