

## Librarianship as a Profession for Women.

By MISS RICHARDSON,

*Assistant in the St. Helen's Public Library.*

NOW that women are entering as competitors in almost every field of labour formerly looked upon as belonging exclusively to the sterner sex, it may not be uninteresting to hear a little about library work as a profession for women.

In the first place, let us look for a moment at the mere routine work which goes on in every free library, and which is done for the most part by the assistants,—I refer to the labelling, repairing and issuing of books. The first two will in all probability be done more quickly and neatly by a girl than a boy; and as regards the issuing of books, there is an advantage in having at least one female assistant, as many of the lady borrowers prefer to be attended to by one of their own sex. In those libraries which have separate reading-rooms for ladies, it is also essential that a female assistant should look after the room and attend to the renewal of the papers and periodicals placed there.

But to proceed to the real work of a librarian, that which is done for the most part behind the scenes, such as choosing new books, classifying and cataloguing them, attending to correspondence, and the numerous other duties which are comprised in a librarian's work. Here, too, a woman will be as much at home as a man, and will make the institution under her charge a success.

In America, women are taking their places in this ever-

widening sphere of labour, and proving that they can do work of this kind quite as well as their brothers. There they have more opportunities of getting a fair trial than we in England possess, for library committees are convinced that librarianship is a profession eminently suited to earnest women of education and refinement, and give them every encouragement accordingly.

The Library School at Albany seems to be doing a good work in training and sending out women ready to labour for the uplifting of those in the towns where their lot is cast, and that good may be done amongst the readers, especially young readers, cannot be denied.

Now that so much more education is considered necessary for every station in life, libraries will soon be found in every town in the kingdom, and this will open up a vast field of labour for both men and women. It is only lately that librarianship has been included amongst the professions at all, and it depends mainly on librarians themselves whether their work is recognised by the outside public or not.

A paper was read at the second annual meeting of the Library Association, held in Manchester in 1879, by the late Alderman Thomas Baker, who was then chairman of the libraries' committee, on "The Employment of Young Women as Assistants in Free Public Libraries." Mr. Baker said he believed the plan was first tried in the Manchester libraries, and had proved a success. At that time they were only employed as assistants; but since then ladies have held the position of librarians in the branches of the Manchester library, who have, doubtless, in the first place, served in the capacity of assistant in one of the libraries under the corporation.

A girl who enters a library as assistant, and intends to make the work her life-work, if we may so call it, neglects no opportunity of learning as much as possible of the technical part of librarianship, and at the same time tries to improve herself in general knowledge. There is not much time for very deep study of any subject, for the hours in a library are usually very long; but a librarian, male or female, who is always on the alert to find out the books which will be most useful to borrowers and persons who come to seek information of various kinds, will make the institution under his or her charge more popular and flourishing than one who is very learned in any one subject, and, perhaps, oblivious of the fact that the visitors to a

library do not all incline to the same study as himself, but expect a little attention to their needs and wants from the librarian. At the same time one can never know enough, and must be ever ready for fresh ideas, and prepared to learn as much as possible.

Women are employed in many of the great American libraries, and even hold the post of chief librarian in some of them. There, however, they are specially trained at the Library School, and are put on an equality with men, and so obtain the same advantages. Some go in for cataloguing as a speciality; this is suited to the quiet, shy women, who, though fully qualified for the work, prefer to do that part of it which may be accomplished away from public view. Others, who do not shine in cataloguing, are well fitted to meet and aid those who come to consult the books under their charge. Some combine both qualities, and are fitted to take control of a library. In England women are not yet admitted into the old and large reference libraries which are scattered over the country, nor into the libraries connected with our colleges, but they are gradually making their way as librarians in the public libraries which are springing up in many of our provincial towns. In this position they must have an all-round knowledge of library work, and be able to help the readers and borrowers in their search for works on special subjects, or even to direct the reading of those who are unable to make a wise choice for themselves.

Here I may just mention that women have acquired rather a bad reputation for being slow in coming to a decision, and when asked to give an opinion on a disputed point or to recommend the best book on a certain subject, they hesitate, are not quite sure, and so on. This is a fault to which many women are prone, and one which must be cured if they are to work on the same level as men. If a woman means to get on in library work, she must learn to be self-reliant, and to make up her mind at once when a decision is to be made. It must be owned, however, that this reproach is not so much deserved as it was some years ago. Girls are now taught on the same principles as boys in many cases, and instead of being made *fine ladies* are taught business habits from childhood, and left to use their own judgment in various matters. This sort of education is bearing fruit already, and the girls who have had this advantage are readier to compete for the same work as their brothers

than those who have been brought up in the old-fashioned way. A woman may have as solid an education as a man, and use it as a means of earning a livelihood, and still be a womanly woman.

The wider the education possessed by a librarian the more successful the work is likely to prove, and now that librarianship is being found to be as well suited to the capacity of woman as man, there will be keen rivalry between the sexes, for our colleges, Girton and Newnham amongst the number, are sending out year by year women who are well taught, self-reliant, and ready to work to the best of their ability in whatever calling they have chosen. That of librarianship will be, I think, one which will commend itself to many as a means of helping others in the search after knowledge, and will also be found an agreeable employment. Miss Black, who was one of the first two librarians at the People's Palace, London, formerly of Newnham College, Cambridge, passed the graduation examinations, and would have obtained the degree had she been a man. Miss James, the late librarian, had three ladies as assistants, two of whom studied at Newnham College, and the other at Lady Margaret Hall, Oxford. All these ladies have found the work most attractive, and, to quote their own expressed opinions, they think there is at present no occupation more suited to women who are fairly well educated, and possess a real love of books. It ought not to be taken up as a mere pastime however, for nothing can be done in this work without earnestness, interest and thoroughness, also devotion to books. At Blackpool, Bridgwater, Darlaston, Darwen, Glossop, Nantwich, Poole, Fleetwood, Middleton, Northwich, Sittingbourne, Willenhall, Carnarvon, Galashiels, Hawick, Selkirk, and Widnes, ladies fill the office of librarian. At Peel Park Library and Regent Road, Salford, and at two or three of the branch libraries at Manchester, ladies are employed as librarians. In addition to the above named towns, the following libraries employ female assistants, viz.:—Battersea, Clerkenwell, Westminster and Chelsea, London; Aberdeen, Derby, Doncaster, Edinburgh, Oldham, Nottingham, Paisley, Sheffield, Glasgow (Stirling's Library, Baillie Institution), Bradford, Bristol, Manchester, Liverpool, and St. Helens, and the three lady librarians at Blackpool, Salford, and Widnes have female assistants.

But to be a successful librarian, a woman must have a practical training in all the work connected with a library; and to get this it is necessary that she should become, in the first place, an assistant to some librarian, who will teach her the technicalities of his craft.

England has not as yet found it necessary to establish a special college for the training of librarians, such as is in successful operation in the United States, but still something has been done, and the L.A.U.K. examinations of library assistants is a step in the right direction; and, doubtless, before long, all applicants for the post of librarian will have to produce certificates from this body. As women prove their capability for this kind of work, better appointments than those they now fill will be thrown open to them; and they will be engaged in the higher positions in our great libraries, and will so work and use their talents that their influence will be felt by many in towns other than those in which their work lies. But that time has not yet come; they must, at present, be content to wield their sway over the libraries which are so quickly springing up around us, and let their work, by its quality and usefulness, prove them fit for still better things.

Another hindrance to the employment of women in libraries is, that many enter the field, not with the view of making it a life-work, but merely as a means to an end. They think it a pleasant sort of work, but do not intend to remain at it. Now, the best work cannot be done, unless it is felt to be the work on which one's life is to be spent, and few or no women will remain in a library after marriage, for instance. But if their work is to be a real work, this must not be an obstacle. Let the work be done during the time they are engaged in it—be it long or short,—in such a manner, that when they leave it, it has not to be done over again by the next comer, but is as perfect as it is possible to make it.

At present, the employment of women as librarians is in its infancy, but is sure to prove a success; for girls who make up their minds to embrace the library profession as their life-work will work patiently and well, and will lose no opportunity of learning all that will aid them in their duties, and will show that, given the same opportunities as boys, they will do equally as well in this as in many other professions, and may, perhaps, excel some of them.

In conclusion, I would just remark that we do not wish to supplant our male friends in this work, but only ask that fair opportunities may be given to those of our sex who are anxious and willing to become labourers in this field of public work.

