

## A Note on Training of Assistants.

I HAVE recently been studying the whole question of the evolution of the modern librarian on somewhat unusual lines, and have arrived at certain conclusions by the Darwinian process of enquiring backwards. My first conclusion is that, before we insist too strongly and persistently on the necessity for the technical and literary education of our assistants, we must educate committees into recognising the urgent need for properly-trained, fairly-accomplished and capable librarians. In other words, it is advisable to create the market as well as to improve the commodity. It is largely owing to the indifference of committees that more than one half of the librarians of the United Kingdom are men and women who have had no special training of any kind, and whose interest in the work is bounded by its power of furnishing a genteel means of livelihood. There was some excuse for committees making appointments of unqualified persons up to 1877, when only eighty-six libraries existed, most of them small and unable to turn out competent librarians. But after 1877, when the Library Association began to emerge from its long clothes, and became successively "shortened," then promoted to knickerbockers, and finally to trousers, there was less and less excuse for the appointment of stickit ministers, lame schoolmasters, and masterless men of various sorts. Nevertheless, committees have gone on making sentimental appointments as if there were no old-established libraries existing as training schools from which to select experienced officers. No doubt every stickit minister, or schoolmaster, or journalist, is a heaven-born librarian, in need of no practical training; and as the majority of committees evidently think so, the result is that, as I have found by actual scrutiny, the trained librarian is in a hopeless minority. This is not very encouraging for the assistant who desires by force of his qualifications and attainments to reach the full charge of a library with a sufficient stipend. But it is, I think, a strong reason why the education of the library committee should be considered as well as that of the assistant. Another conclusion to which I have been driven is that there is no absolute need for so much special training in library work, if we consider for a moment the sort of methods which are used by a majority of the public libraries in the kingdom. In support of this statement let me again "drop into" history. With the exception of the late Mr. Edward Edwards, and one or two living men, whom I need not name, all the librarians of the earlier years of the movement were of the heaven-born variety. They had neither training nor tradition to guide them, and the result was that they made progress by "dead reckoning" and "rule of thumb" instead of by more systematic and scientific methods. Their pupils improved upon this primitive practice, chiefly by reducing every process to the most automatic and mechanical lines, in order to save work to themselves and obtain greater leisure, not to aid readers, but to cultivate billiards and the higher social amenities. Thus have grown up numerical classification schemes, easy alphabetical cataloguing, and mechanical systems of public service. Well, then, I ask in all seriousness, what there is in these predominant methods which any person of ordinary intelligence cannot master in a week?

Our scheme of examination includes test questions on minute classification which no one uses, and on advanced cataloguing methods which are never seen in ordinary public libraries. We demand a knowledge of

architectural design as applied to libraries, and of the legal basis on which they are established ; not to speak of bibliography, literature and languages. In short, we require our probationers to know all about literature and library methods of the most advanced type, in order that they may be able to manage institutions which have been organised almost universally on the crudest and baldest mechanical lines. I am not condemning the Association's examination scheme, because I was partly responsible for its present shape, but I cannot help drawing attention to our examination requirements on the one hand, and to those of public libraries on the other. It really amounts to this. We are training our assistants for a high grade of work not recognised by library committees, who in most cases prefer to appoint officers devoid of such special training. These outsiders adopt the simple rule of thumb methods which experience had shown their predecessors to be the easiest to apply and work ; and the result is that most of the librarians and libraries in the country are just the reverse of what our examination scheme would lead strangers to believe. So far from being a body of scholarly and highly-trained specialists, we are a lot of automatic deadheads, living on the inventive genius of a few original thinkers. Inevitably I am thus led to my conclusion, which is that so long as merely mechanical schemes prevail, committees will not be got to understand that there is anything special about the craft of librarian. I, for one, cannot blame them, when I look around upon elementary methods which suggest nothing so much as the classification devices of the humble, necessary pawnbroker, or the purse-proud, less-necessary brewer !

It is much easier to make flippant remarks about obvious shortcomings than to propose efficient remedies for them. I feel this difficulty the more because I am conscious of even larger questions being involved in the matter than can be argued with propriety now. I venture, however, to suggest that the Association might take upon itself to circularize library committees touching the necessity of preliminary examinations for posts on their staffs, and giving the outline of a general knowledge scheme. This, if made public, would certainly stimulate competition in different localities, and insidiously, as it were, spread the belief all round, that librarianship meant more than the power to enforce fines or to juggle with red and blue numbers. When we have convinced committees that we are somebody, let us then proceed to the concurrent education of librarians and assistants in the most thorough and systematic manner.

In conclusion may I point out that among the 330 and odd places which have adopted the Libraries Acts, only 100 can afford salaries which enable the recipients to make sure of one hot meat dinner once a week, and a change of linen at least once a fortnight ! But even in this miserable 100 of respectable posts, the heaven-born librarian is in a majority, and the anxious young assistant who is desirous of bettering himself may as well know that, by reason of their Olympian descent, these gentlemen are immortal !

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