1 Libraries and the Diffusion of Knowledge

"We meet to provide for the diffusion of a knowledge of good books and for enlarging the means of public access to them." So said Charles Coffin Jewett, librarian of the Smithsonian Institution, to the 1853 library convention in New York City, the first to be held in this country. His sentence, now so redolent of nineteenth-century propriety and refinement, nonetheless contained two of the most fundamental principles of the American educative philosophy: the diffusion of knowledge and the enlargement of access to knowledge and information. That these two ideas became commingled in our times in another catchphrase, equalization of educational opportunity, is part of the American record of over three centuries.

The beginnings of this ideology were certainly not perceived by the founders of this country with any degree of clarity. Colonial education was at best a potpourri of dame schools, writing or the so-called English schools, Latin grammar schools, and private-venture schools where lads could learn such skills as navigation and surveying. Law and medicine depended upon apprentice training rather than education, and the colonial colleges either addressed the needs of future clergymen or supplied humanistic education similar to that of the English university.

At its outset colonial education was permeated by religion. Surely it was no mere accident that among the first books introduced into the colonies were a copy of St. Augustine's "Citty of God," which was sent to Virginia, and the sundry collection, comprising "2 dussen & ten Catechismes," which found its way in a 1629 shipment to Salem. Colonial education, colonial printing, and colonial book collection all attest to the newly found freedom of religious conviction, and it was within this framework, that of the expression of one's own conscience, that American educational philosophy was born.

That narrow sectarian aims were not, however, the only purpose of such a philosophy is evidenced early in colonial history, as exemplified by the words of the Anglican divine George Berkeley, who, in making his benefaction of 900 volumes to the newly formed Yale College, stated that it was his intent to "shed a copious light in that remote wilder-

ness." The contribution of an Anglican bishop to an essentially Congregationalist college was, in the opinion of one of his contemporaries, a pursuit of the furtherance not only of religion but of learning in general, "a common benefit," not narrowly confined within the dimensions of an establishment church.

Even before the founding of the Republic, the Northwest Ordinance in encouraging the development of schools added the word "knowledge" to compose a trinity of goals ("religion, morality, and knowledge") held essential to the conduct of government and to the happiness of men. Jefferson offered a bill for the "More General Diffusion of Knowledge," and in his Farewell Address, President Washington called for the promotion of "institutions for the general diffusion of knowledge." Influenced by the currents of the Enlightenment, the founding fathers bespoke a learning that was to be distinct from sectarian and denominational education.

Far from the fear that the federal government would exercise control of education, early leaders of the Republic busied themselves with schemes for public schooling. Nevertheless, they did not make a total commitment to universal public education. For the most part, their concerns were suggested in two divergent ways: a plan for a national university and education for the poor. It remained for the workingmen and mechanics of the 1820s and 1830s to spearhead a movement for universal public education. Aided by the reformers, their cry for common schools did not go unheeded; and the period of the 1830s witnessed a shift from the essentially private, voluntary, and charitable tutorial efforts of America's first century to the systematic development of public schools controlled by state boards of education.

Library development followed a similar pattern. The subscription libraries known throughout the colonial era and the days of the early Republic eventually gave way to the newly created mechanics' and apprentices' libraries and tax-supported public libraries. These found support in the same movement that was then promoting public education. Utilitarian knowledge, with its direct relation to vocational skills and

training, also affected these developments. In urging the cause of books and libraries in one of his public reports, Horace Mann enjoined any of his readers to "read such a work as that of Dick *On the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge,* and he will be able to form some idea how intimately the private, personal happiness of a people is connected with its intelligence." Henry Barnard, perhaps, summarized best the utilitarian, moralistic, and social values of the nineteenth-century library awakening: "The farmer, mechanic, manufacturer, and in fine, all the inhabitants of a district, of both sexes, and in every condition and employment of life, should have books which will shed light and dignity on their several vocations, help them better to understand the history and condition of the world and the country in which they live, their own nature, and their relations and duties to society, themselves, and their Creator."[1]

It is small wonder that in addressing such a claim hardly a decade later Jewett, in his speech at the 1853 convention, opined that "the diffusion of knowledge" would relate only to "good" books. The interesting point he raised was the enlargement of access; within his terms of reference, the phrase was probably no more than a recognition that many Americans resided in communities that had libraries with a scant book supply or none at all. Accessibility, however, was the theme not only of Jewett's remarks but also those of other conferees. The Reverend Samuel Osgood, the delegate from the Providence Athenaeum, expatiated on the need for every town to have its own public or, in his phrase, "popular" library. And the Reverend Gorham D. Abbott from New York presented a resolution to promote a plan for the "extension of well-selected public libraries, of 1,000, 5,000 and 10,000 volumes, throughout the towns and villages," recognizing that such a matter was "of the greatest importance to the future welfare of our country."

Yet, even though accessibility to books for the majority of Americans was a persistent theme throughout that first convention, still another trend may be perceived within its deliberations. "Trend" is the wrong word; "personality" is more appropriate. The reference is to

Alexandre Vattemare, the French actor and ventriloquist. His idée fixe was international exchanges among governments, and his enthusiasm, or mania, had by 1853 brought 130 libraries and institutions within his operations. Regretfully, he was unable to attend this first American library conference, but his letter to the attendees and its attached tables constituted one-eighth of the convention's final proceedings.

Vattemare's dream was to open the windows of libraries to the world by filling their coffers with the official documents of foreign powers and the duplicate volumes housed in their collections. In the United States, the nascent collections of government departments, the residence of the President, the Supreme Court, the Library of Congress, and collegiate and civic libraries were all beneficiaries of his systematic intergovernmental exchanges. ". . . His Excellency the Baron de Korff, Counsellor of State, and Director of the Imperial Library of St. Petersburg, acknowledging the receipt of the Natural History of the State of New York, informs me that, after mature consideration, convinced of the important services our system of exchange is likely to render, he sends me the list of a series of most valuable duplicates of *incunabula* in the Imperial Library, to be placed at my disposal."[2] So wrote Vattemare to this provincial group of librarians assembled in New York, a city which that very year had achieved its rail connections all the way to Chicago. The ether of that first conference must have been heady with the perfume of those imperial libraries desirous of placing their *incunabula* at M. Vattemare's disposal. Surely it is understandable why the librarian of the Smithsonian could anticipate not only a diffusion of knowledge but also an enlargement of access. In a nation that had rejected the titles of the aristocracy, the conjuncture of his Excellency, the Baron, with the flora and fauna of New York State must have seemed a phenomenon both rare and flattering.

In the tapestry of this first librarians' meeting there was a distinctive warp and woof. Each was spun from a differing concept of American intellectual life; the one, a belief in the democratization of knowledge, which was best evident in the passionate plea for "popular" libraries;

the other, which in calling the conferees' attention to the lack of a truly significant research library in the nation and to the need for a universal catalog of all books housed in American libraries, embraced the concern of bibliographical organization and development for the cause of scholarship.

In a sense, the two threads reflect, on the one hand, the fervor of Jacksonian democracy, which had incited the early nineteenth-century's labor leaders and educational reformers to press for common schools, and the older Jeffersonian tradition, on the other, which committed the state to educate its youth for only a few years and then recommended differentiated educational schemes so that some children and young people were to ascend the ladder of higher learning, while others were to be trained for vocations.

At the time of the 1853 convention, these two ideologies were often at odds with each other; indeed, they are still unresolved. Certainly, Jewett himself was aware of the Congressional dichotomy evident in the discussions over the uses of the Smithson bequest. As Merle Curti has pointed out in his analysis of the 1846 Congressional debate, one Congressional faction argued for the creation of a notable research library similar to the British Museum. Another called for an institution to train teachers and for the circulation of books and tracts on utilitarian subjects. If knowledge were to be diffused, argued Robert Dale Owen, Congressman from Indiana, such a process must be done "among men" and not for the benefit of "scholars and students alone."

The delegates at the 1853 conference, however, may have seen no discrepancy in their goals. At mid-century, America welcomed a pluralism of educational means. If any one word can be said to characterize the conduct of American education in the nineteenth century, it would have to be diversity. There were many holes in that sieve through which knowledge was to be diffused: schoolhouse, college, the press, the "civilizing and godlike influences" of the new industrialism.

Yet, this diversity was invariably to be quelled, as education became

more and more synonomous with public schooling. As Lawrence Cremin has astutely perceived, it was Horace Mann's generation that not only built the modern state-administered public school systems but also organized "public libraries and lyceums, founded mechanical institutes and agricultural societies, invented penny newspapers and dime novels, and created the popular political parties we know today." This pluralism was inevitably quenched in the twentieth century as John Dewey preached his gospel of the centricity of the public school in educating the nation's youth. Dewey's "decision was a fateful one," according to Cremin, "for American educational theory; for while it doubtless infused popular schooling with new vitality and high purpose, it effectively removed the agencies of informal education from the purview of public educators."

There were other and perhaps more serious outcomes of the Deweyian philosophy. The fervent belief that libraries would serve as agencies for the self-education of countless young Americans was often expressed in mid-nineteenth-century America. "No one can doubt," wrote the trustees of the Boston Public Library in their 1852 report, "that books will continue to be, as they now are, the great vehicle of imparting and acquiring knowledge and carrying on the work of education." It was this basic assumption that Dewey unmistakenly whittled down. "While books and conversation can do much," he wrote in *Democracy and Education*, "these agencies are usually relied upon too exclusively." Or compare his definition of the two meanings of the word "learning."

> On the one hand, learning is the sum total of what is known, that is handed down by books and learned men. It is something external, an accumulation of cognitions as one might store material commodities in a warehouse. Truth exists ready-made somewhere. Study is then the process by which an individual draws on what is in storage. On the other hand, learning means something which the individual *does* when he studies. It is an active, personally conducted affair. The dualism here is between knowledge as something external, or, as it is often called, objective, and knowing as something purely internal, subjective, psychical.[3]

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In analyzing the essentially anti-intellectual biases of Dewey's thought, or more particularly those of his interpreters and followers, Richard Hofstadter has observed, ". . . there was very little place in Dewey's schoolroom for the contemplative or bookish child, for whom schooling as a social activity is not a thoroughly satisfactory procedure." In rejecting the overemphasis of curriculum based on past cultural performance, Dewey cautioned that such adherence would generate a reminiscent social spirit, making an individual feel more at home in the life of the past than in his own day. "A professedly cultural education," he warned, "is peculiarly exposed to this danger."

From the librarian's conference to the publication of *Democracy and Education* a time span of little more than a half century had elapsed. Yet in those sixty-odd years, the focus of public education had dramatically changed. Many of the pluralistic elements evident in nineteenth-century America, such as the lyceum, the mechanics' institutes, or the chautauqua had already been absorbed by other agencies or had simply disappeared. In holding to its faith as an instrument in the democratization of knowledge, only the public library seemed to survive in the twentieth century. Never quite giving up its original mandate, the public library, however, suffered a diminution of its clientele as the twentieth century moved toward its third quarter. Having become a primarily middle-class institution, it inevitably received an avalanche of criticism that it was not an agency responsive to the poor. Inspired by the New Frontier and the dream of the Great Society, it carried out its center-city outreach projects with genuine fervor, but these could not obscure the fact that the great city libraries, for the most part, were suffering from a downward spiral in usage and circulation. In addition, the lack of relevance of a print-oriented institution could not be concealed from a generation of new students who had begun their lives with a television set.

Having been crowded out of the educational mainstream, librarians noted, not without irony, that the educators themselves began to have second thoughts about the centricity of the public school in the learn-

ing process. As critics of the educational establishment, Paul Goodman, Jonathan Kozol, Ivan Illich, and John Holt are but a few of the writers and thinkers who began to call for a "deschooled" society. And the library, once considered the "crowning glory" of the public school system, began to be looked on as an "educational alternative," an acceptable phrase to some of public schooling's most profound critics.

Illich, the most visionary of the new thinkers, called for a network of "learning objects" to be staffed by personnel "more like custodians, museum guides, or reference librarians than teachers." Even the prestigious Carnegie Commission on Higher Education issued a report implying that the public library is one of the more likely, if not universally recognized, candidates for the renewal of faith in educational diversity.

It was within this ambivalent milieu that librarians uneasily celebrated the centenary of their own professional association, the American Library Association, which was founded in 1876. Much had transpired since Jewett's day: the nation was now possessed of a significant number of great research libraries, including that of the Congress itself; public libraries existed in all but the most rural and isolated parts of the country; and a large number of elementary and secondary schools maintained separate libraries. Yet there were besetting problems: in an inflated economy costs had risen grossly for resources, either in print or nonprint format; increased salaries caused the diversion of revenues from essential purchases of materials in a proliferating knowledge base; and a tax-weary society, alarmed at the increasing criticism of the failures of education, showed resistance toward funding the necessary economic support of schools and libraries.

Alarmed about the bareness of cupboards in their local and institutional settings, schoolmen and librarians raised their voices for greater largesse from the nation's largest tax collector, the federal government. Lost was the euphoria of the mid-sixties when education bill after education bill had successfully passed the Congress to be signed by the nation's first schoolteacher president. Blurred also were the distinctions between differing perceptions of the federal role in support of educa-

tion, that is, should the aid primarily benefit the institutions or the institution's clients, specifically the nation's students? At the institutional level, the college presidents, the school superintendents, and the librarians wanted increases in federal funds for general aid; at the governmental level, greater scrutiny was being paid to the direction of such funds toward a low-income clientele.

With great uneasiness the librarians had watched the continued downward trend of administration requests for the support of their programs. The Library Services and Construction Act, title I, had maintained a stasis from FY 1968 to FY 1970; in FY 1970, it plummeted by over $10,000,000. Decreases for both the college library program and the library training program were announced in FY 1970. From FY 1968 to FY 1969, the school library program was literally halved. In FY 1974, the other shoe dropped, and the budget of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare carried its summary statement that in FY 1974 "Federal support will be discontinued" for library programs. What had happened to the nobel rhetoric about the "diffusion of knowledge"? What, indeed?

Notes

1. Jesse H. Shera, *Foundations of the Public Library* (Hamden, Conn.: The Shoe String Press, Inc., 1965), p. 224.

2. George Burwell Utley, *The Librarians' Conference of 1853* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1951), pp. 170–171.

3. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1961), pp. 334–335.

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