

Public libraries and the influence of IFLA, 1930 - 1960,
with special reference to Lionel McColvin's
chairmanship of the Public Libraries Section.

by

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The aim of the International Federation of Library Associations is to promote international co-operation in the field of librarianship and bibliography.¹ Serious international co-operation in our profession began only at the beginning of this century, and it was the period of reconstruction after the war of 1914-18 which led to the founding of IFLA in 1927 as the "Comité international des bibliothèques". This seems to have been the direct result of an international conference in Prague in 1926, and of the 50th anniversary meetings of the American and British Library Associations, in 1926 and 1927 respectively. The first session of IFLA then took place in Rome in 1928 and there the Italian delegation issued an invitation to hold an international congress in Rome, Florence and Venice in 1929. These were the first two of a series of annual sessions from 1928 to 1939, and from 1947 to 1967, of which three were large congresses.

Although national and university librarians have at times dominated the activities of IFLA, the great role of public libraries in the world was recognized from the beginning. It was at Stockholm at the session of 1930 that a Committee on Public Libraries made its first report.² The initiative in forming the Committee had been taken at the Conference of the World Association for Adult Education at Cambridge, at which a resolution was passed requesting IFLA to appoint a Committee on Public Libraries. Its first chairman was Mr. Carl H. Milan of Chicago, who announced in 1930 the need for a comparative basis of library statistics, and for the international study of public library methods, service and training, including service to children and to hospital patients.

The next step took place at the session at Cheltenham in the following year, 1931,³ when the International Institute of Intellectual Co-operation of Paris (the forerunner of UNESCO) intervened. The Institute had been asked by the International Labour Office in Geneva to investigate the use of public libraries for leisure. At this same meeting Mr. W.W. Bishop

remarked that in the experience of the New York Public Library the increase of the number of readers always coincided with the increase of unemployment! M. Henri Lemaître, honorary librarian at the Bibliothèque nationale, Paris, had undertaken to produce a report which would be sent to the International Labour Office; the next year at Berne M. Lemaître presented his preliminary document⁵ to IFLA, containing reports on the public library service in Austria, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Japan, Latvia, Mexico, Poland and Sweden. He indicated amongst other things the importance of appointing librarians with professional training. The report was ultimately published in Paris in 1933⁶, and carried the authority of the Library Experts Committee of the League of Nations, the parent body of the International Institute of Intellectual Co-operation. Almost simultaneously an international work on public libraries by the Librarian of St. Louis Public Libraries was published in the U.S.A.⁷

In 1935 IFLA held its second full congress of librarians, this time at Madrid and Barcelona. Among the resolutions of this Congress were several recommending that public libraries throughout the world should be given ample financial support, so that they could fulfil their important cultural purpose. It was emphasized that rural areas could be served best by close co-ordination with the public library services of the cities. A whole volume of the Proceedings of the 2nd Congress was devoted to public libraries.¹⁰

The following year the League of Nations published another work on public libraries¹¹ emphasizing their important social and intellectual role.

At its meeting in 1937 the Public Libraries Sub-committee decided to turn to the study of reading habits¹² and a programme was proposed by Herr W. Schuster of Berlin, which would consist of a full-scale investigation to ascertain 1. which general subject (history, social sciences, technology, etc.) had attracted most readers in the last year; 2. the proportion between imaginative and scientific literature; 3. in which languages books were read; 4. the five most demanded works. Herr Schuster announced that the Institut für Leser und Schrifttumskunde in Leipzig would undertake the practical work of the investigation.

The next year, 1938, it was proposed by the Sub-committee on Public Libraries¹³ that this investigation should be undertaken jointly by the Leipzig Institute, the University of London School of Librarianship, and the Graduate Library School of the University of Chicago.

At the meeting at Amsterdam¹⁴ in July 1939, Herr Schuster reported on the progress of the investigation, but alas! it was at this session that the President of IFLA, Monsieur Godet, Director of the Swiss National Library, gave his frank and solemn warning¹⁵ on "la division du monde", on the choice between "l'état ou l'individu, la nation ou l'humanité". He warned the librarians gathered there in the name of IFLA that if the state were the supreme principle, to which all were subordinated, then intellectual life could not survive. And indeed two months later the Second World War was a reality, and international library co-operation was suspended for eight long years of suffering, during and two years after the war.

In 1947 IFLA met again, this time in Oslo, Norway, where a Norwegian President, Mr. Munthe, was elected to succeed Monsieur Godet. Relations with the newly-founded UNESCO, the successor of the International Institute of Intellectual Co-operation, were already established, and the Sub-committee on Public Libraries, in its first post-war report¹⁶, recorded a recommendation that IFLA in co-operation with UNESCO should take all possible steps to encourage the establishment of public libraries in countries as yet without them, in order to give free access for all to educational and informational materials. This resolution was clearly framed as a measure to support democracy, and to ensure that people's opinions, and decisions were based on reliable information and not on prejudices or propaganda. This report of the Sub-committee "rested (as stated in its final paragraph) on three assumptions:

1. That most people are educable;
2. That the judgements of the common man are generally sound when based on facts and on honestly expressed opinions; and
3. that the public library has a mission of great significance in making facts and opinions easily accessible to everybody".

In 1948¹⁷ the Sub-committee went further, and recommended that governments "should make obligatory the establishment of central libraries to supply books to rural districts as well as the establishment of children's and school libraries".

And it was the next year, 1949, it will be remembered that UNESCO published its famous Manifesto in the form of a poster and a leaflet on "The Public Library, a living force of popular education", proclaiming the public library to be a creation of modern democracy, which demonstrated the faith of democracy in education.

It was at this time that Lionel R. McColvin began to be known, in the international library world, by his book "Public Library extension", published by UNESCO in 1950 in English and in French.¹⁸

In 1950 IFLA met once more in London,¹⁹ and the most important result of this meeting was the resolution requesting UNESCO to emphasize the need for close co-operation between public library services and educational services in the development of good reading habits; the resolution also requested UNESCO to hold rather soon a conference at which librarians and educators could study this question. This resulted in the "Malmö Seminar" of 1950.²⁰ Relations between IFLA and UNESCO were rather close at this time, and both organizations were actively interested in the development of public libraries.

In 1951, the year in which UNESCO formally opened its first pilot project public library at Delhi, IFLA met in Rome,²¹ and the Executive Board had invited Charles Nowell, President of the Library Associations, and Director of Manchester Public Libraries, to address the session on: "The Aims and problems of public libraries".²¹ This was an historic address, which summed up so much experience of the public library movement in Great Britain.

At the same session, Mr. R.L. Hornsen, Director of Danish Public Libraries, Copenhagen, presented his report on the differences in reading habits between readers in towns and in the country.²² This was the last year in which Hornsen was chairman of the Sub-committee.

In 1952 Lionel R. McColvin became Chairman of the Sub-committee,²³ and resolved to enquire into the basic factors which had favoured the

development of public libraries in some countries, and factors which had hindered such development in others; the nature and effects of State aid were also to be studied.

IFLA adopted new statutes in 1952, and the next year, 1953, the Sub-committee was re-named Public Libraries Section, and met at the newly-named Council of IFLA²⁴ (Conseil de la FIAB) at Vienna.

McColvin, as chairman, reported that the working paper on "The Development of Public Library Services" had been circulated to member-associations, and that 18 associations had appointed representatives to act as contacts with IFLA in the matter of public libraries. The working paper was to be considered carefully during the coming year; it was published in Libri²⁵ in 1954, and became known as "The Memorandum".

The IFLA Council met in 1954 at the end of September at Zagreb,²⁶ and by this time McColvin was able to report that the Memorandum had already been adopted by the Library Associations of Denmark, Sweden and Finland, whereas the Swiss and Dutch associations could not adopt it owing to the different conditions in these countries; in Switzerland many different bodies, apart from local authorities, were responsible for libraries, while Holland had separate Roman Catholic and Protestant libraries.

At the same session Mr. G.A. van Riemsdijk, Director of the Public Library, Amsterdam, presented his report on "The role of the public library in the supply of reading matter to the blind, and in the solution of problems connected with the talking book".²⁷

In 1955 IFLA held its third full-scale congress, this time at Brussels, where the Public Libraries Section also met. The Memorandum was presented to the Section in its final form, and was adopted by the Congress.²⁸

This statement of the principles of public library service, compiled under the chairmanship of McColvin, was to some extent an Anglo-Scandinavian statement, and serves as an authoritative document - much more detailed than the UNESCO Manifesto of 1950 - on public library policy. The main principles of the Memorandum may be summarized as follows:-

- A. The purpose of the public library service is to give full access to books to all.
- B. It must be a comprehensive, general service.
- C. It should be provided by the community as a whole, and

should be a 'free' service.

- D. Its provision should be the responsibility of government, and paid for out of local or state taxation.
- E. The service should be provided by the local authority, so as to look after the special interests of the locality, and to make the public feel that they are responsible for it, and partly control it.
- F. The responsible local authority should however, cover the fairly large area of a suitable natural region.
- G. The local public library service should also receive some aid from the State (central government), which is best administered by a State Libraries Department.
- H. To the local authorities legal powers must be given, and certain legal responsibilities imposed. The State must therefore adopt certain library laws.
- J. All public libraries should give to users free "open access" to adequate stocks of books, for reference and for borrowing. A "closed" lending library can exert little educational influence.
- K. Library staffs must be recruited from persons with a good general education, and a sufficient proportion of them must be professionally qualified as librarians, and have experience of public library work.
- L. The existence of a well-supported library association is essential, to invite those concerned with library development, and to co-ordinate experience, ideals and policies.
- M. It is essential for librarians, authorities and the public to understand that the library service is a natural, essential element in the life of any civilized progressive community; that it is one of the fundamental "human rights".

The next step taken under McColvin's chairmanship was the elaboration of standards of public library service, which could serve as an international recommendation. In 1956 at Munich²⁹ it was proposed to

draw up standards for library services, and also for library premises. This was discussed further in 1957 at Paris,³⁰ where it was decided to publish the standards of service finally in Libri.³¹ This Memorandum was discussed again and adopted by the Public Libraries Section at Madrid³² in 1958.

This was followed by the publication of the draft memorandum on "Standards for Library Premises"³³ in 1959, and it was to be adopted after circulation to, and comment by members,³⁴ in 1960.

It was at this point, however, that McColvin's mind suddenly became clouded, and his valuable help was unhappily denied to future sessions of IFLA. But, fortunately for IFLA and its members, he had already achieved some very great work for the Public Library Section: the report on "The Development of Public Library services", the statement on the principles of public library service, (the "Memorandum"), the standards for service, and the standards for premises - all mentioned above, and to which reference may be made with the aid of the bibliography below.

This was his great contribution to the work of IFLA and to its influence on public library development. McColvin succeeded in passing on the best of British experience to his colleagues beyond our shores.

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