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OCCASIONAL PAPERS No. 3

The Creed of a Librarian

— no politics, no religion, no morals —

D. J. FOSKETT

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**INDIAN INSTITUTE OF
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D. J. FOSKETT

LONDON

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THE CREED OF A LIBRARIAN :
NO POLITICS, NO RELIGION, NO MORALS

D. J. FOSKETT

If you look at any issue of *Library Science Abstracts*, you will find that the first section is headed "History and Philosophy of Librarianship", and if you look in the indexes you will find a number of references under the heading "Librarianship : Philosophy". If you look at the abstracts themselves, however, you will find it very difficult to discover precisely what this philosophy is, for the articles abstracted consist of ponderous platitudes, pious hopes, complaints and criticisms, and, very occasionally, a quest for normative principles by whose light we can illuminate our practice. This confusion reflects the actual state of affairs in our profession. It is true that the English tend to fight shy of introducing philosophy into practical everyday matters, and that we distrust anyone who talks about the theory of a professional activity. Many librarians have maintained that we must not start dreaming about a professional philosophy, because it would interfere with our efficiency. It reminds one of the kindly woman consoling her neighbour on the occasion of some catastrophe : "You must take it philosophically ; don't think about it".

My theme this evening is that such a negative creed leads to a negative attitude to professional activity. Whatever may be said to the contrary by the pragmatists, the practical chaps who have no time for theoretical stuff, philosophy is quite basic to any kind of systematic outlook on life, and in particular to a professional outlook. The point of a *professional* outlook is that one's attitude towards the body of knowledge and technique that constitute professional equipment is coloured by a sense of purpose ; and that the putting in order of that knowledge, in the professional mind, is inspired and directed by the end for which it is acquired. If we say we have no philosophy, it may be that we deceive ourselves, that we are unable or unwilling to call our system of knowledge a philosophical system. But if indeed we have no philosophy, then we are depriving ourselves of the guiding light of reason, and we live only a day-to-day existence, lurching from crisis to crisis, and lacking the driving force of an inner conviction of the value of our work.

It is true, of course, that before one can construct a system one

needs the structural elements, the practical experience, and to this extent one must never undervalue the daily round. But the daily round is not an end in itself ; if it were, we should have no history, because no one would have been driven to perpetuate his thoughts and works, and it is by the perpetuation of the thoughts and works of great men—the Golden Chain, as Professor Irwin has called it—that we have what we call our civilisation. From individual experiences we try to establish universal truths ; we may never succeed, but there must always be something to strive for and someone to pick up the torch. Newton said that if he had been able to see farther than most men, it was because he stood on the shoulders of giants ; and George Leigh Mallory is reputed to have answered the question, why had he climbed Everest, with the simple but complete answer, "Because it is there."

Of all the manifestations of librarians' lack of philosophy, perhaps the most striking is the profound absence of a sense of continuity. The history of libraries and of librarianship hardly exists as a study, except at Professor Irwin's own school. And while librarians are supposed to be instrumental in the transmission of knowledge, most of those who write are poor advertisements for their own trade, for they zealously refrain from building on each others work, as one can see from the lack of references to sources, in our professional publications. Indeed, I have lately seen a librarian of some eminence quoted as saying that he hates those who write for the professional press ; if he extended this hatred to all professional writing, then his own job would be on the level of the circulating library—and it may well be that that is what he wants.

Now if I am urging that we should adopt a more positive approach to our work, and that we should look for, and write about, some normative principles which would stimulate thought and illuminate action ; if I am criticising my professional colleagues for a negative attitude to the making of systems, and the exchange of professional knowledge ; how is it, then, that I have chosen for my own title a phrase that is no more than a collection of negatives, a backing-away from those specific realms of thought in which I might expect to find just that stimulation that appears to be so notably wanting. Well, the title is not of my own making. It was used, before the war, at the School of Librarianship at University College, London, in a memorable lecture given by J. D. Cowley, and I chose it because the formulation of a professional creed must be bound up with professional education. Through education we form attitudes of mind towards our work—particularly, I may say, in a university school where the passing

of an examination is second in importance to the course of study. Through education, we do more than merely amass a store of factual information about friskets, tympanis, stuff, corporate authors, distributed relatives, and the lives of women not connected with a special subject. It is in the formation of an attitude of mind that we can distinguish between education and mere training.

Such an attitude is bound to be positive, even if, as I hope to show, it may be labelled in a negative way. A good example of such an attitude is to be found in the writings of Dr. Savage, whose latest article is called "The faith of a librarian". I am in full agreement with Dr. Savage's purpose, though I think that he sometimes tends, like some others I could name, to regard public libraries as the vessels of the Holy Grail to be sought by all our young Galahads, and special and even university libraries as rather feeble imitations often misdirected by remote and ineffectual dons or failed scientists who could not attain to the glory of Fellowship of the Library Association if they tried. This quirk of Savage's irritates me; not necessarily because the cap fits—after all I began my professional life in a public library, even if I have slipped backwards ever since. But Savage has so much to say that is vital, and penetrates to the heart of things, that it comes as a disappointment when it boils down to little more than book provision for minorities, or the complaint that if only industry had the sense to leave technical librarianship to the public libraries, all would be well, and we should have no more problems of information retrieval in science.

Nevertheless, we must cherish our philosophers, as we find them, and take their principles to our hearts. Next on my short list, and another public librarian, is Mr. Raymond Smith, who wrote all too rarely, and whose First Annual Lecture to the Reference and Special Libraries Section was significantly called "The compelled fitness". What, to my mind, distinguishes Mr. Raymond Smith is that he was able, in his lectures, to arrive at a synthesis that was valid for any kind of library; that is to say, he did not base his principles upon a mere administrative formula, but upon the function that libraries carry out, the purpose for which they are established, and which he identified as the implementation, through books and other data, of the policy of the organisation to which the library belongs. He showed that this basic function is common to all libraries, despite the different ways in which they may perform it.

Now this is a very different approach from that ponderous platitude about the right book, the right reader, and the right time;

or from the pious hope that the community naturally has the good sense to establish a library for itself because it is persuaded of the value of good literature—particularly for the lower classes. For one thing, it takes for granted that a library is part of a larger social whole—though you might not think so from the sayings of some of the “My library is my work of art” school of librarians. Next, it underlines the fact that much reading is purposive—and you may remember that Matthew Arnold's true disciples of culture were people who read with purpose. You might say, indeed, that all reading is purposive when it is undertaken for an identified reason ; and this would include the reading of works of light entertainment. This is where we can draw a line between that sort of recreational reading, and the sort that is undertaken for no identified reason but merely because the reader finds it easier to let his eye rove over words and pictures than to exercise his mind in thought.

To the extent that we actually need to draw this line—and I am convinced of the need myself—we are faced with a decision of some importance. As librarians, we are the guardians—not the owners, but the guardians—of knowledge. If we have a contribution to make to the progress of our civilisation, then we must seek after the truth, because this is what prevails and ensures that civilisation does progress. On the other hand, as is often said, who are we to decide what people shall read, who are librarians that they set themselves up as censors ? Dr. Savage opens his faith with these words : “All knowledge open to all men everywhere, according to their need (of which they are the judges), and whatever their means”, but he goes on immediately to make the case for *good* books—not quackery, not pornography, not the “pink-sugar romances of surgeons and nurses” that appear in books as on television. If we are to resolve the dilemma between the quest for truth and the desire for absolute freedom, we must have a philosophy, an attitude of mind according to which one action will be right and another wrong. If we have this, we can make our decisions with confidence ; for although we may not have the right to censor, to tell people what they shall not read, we do have the right of our office, the right to decide what shall be in our libraries and what shall not. To my mind, not nearly enough attention is paid to this point, but this does not diminish its validity. We grant to the conductor of a symphony orchestra the right not to play the latest popular songs at his concerts.

What, then, are the bases of a librarian's philosophy ? I believe that we must look towards the ideas of Mr. Raymond Smith, the idea

that a library is part of a social organisation, and that librarianship is a social process inextricably bound up with the life of a community ; a librarian is not some uninterested functionary standing guard over a collection of objects that might as well be bricks, or red and blue rags, in the manner of Mr. John Lewis in the public library of the town of Aberdarcy. Librarianship is a social process in the same sense as education, and the philosophy of education has been advanced by thinkers—philosophers and educators—who say what they wanted to achieve and tried to work out how it might be done. Probably no child has ever been educated precisely in the way of Plato or Rousseau ; yet the influence of such men has endured and will endure, because they were seekers after truth, that which has a lasting validity and is not simply an explanation of any particular set of circumstances.

Can we say that we, as librarians, know what we want to achieve ? I think we can, in special libraries at least. It is in special libraries that we see most clearly the place of the active information service in the progress of knowledge, the library playing its part alongside the other members of the organisation, to promote the welfare of the organisation by implementing its policy through books. The tremendous advances made in special librarianship during the last twenty years are due to the necessity for extending the division of labour in modern research, so that those who organise the literature are the expert organisers, and not the users themselves. As users of books, we do not expect to have to print and bind them.

The same sense of purpose exists to some extent in university libraries, though with not the same urgency. I think this may be due to the lack of that very powerful industrial incentive, the urge to save money. A good library saves the time of an expensive scientist and so pays for itself. But, as we are all too painfully aware at this very moment, the logic of the situation does not impress the Lords of the Treasury with the same force as it impresses the captains of industry. The public libraries are even worse off, since, lacking a philosophy, they find some difficulty in refuting the charges still laid against them that they exist for the provision of entertainment—they only deal in books ! — and are therefore not vital to the welfare of the town. Of course, there are honourable exceptions, and not only in the big cities, but I have no doubt that it is still possible to become Chairman of a Library Committee without even entering a library, and I have personally met many librarians who play the part of John Lewis to perfection without needing to act.

Librarianship is a process, and like all processes is a dynamic continuum. University libraries grew up in association with scholars and secured the foundations of our civilisation by preserving its records, by rescuing from oblivion the thoughts and works of the men who made our history. Public libraries broadened the conception by making books available to all, by insisting that even those who could not afford to buy a single book were entitled to share in the knowledge that we have collected, that even the poor take part in the making of history, and are entitled to know that they take part. Public libraries also made a notable contribution to the art and science of librarianship by developing the techniques of organising books and libraries ; to such good effect, indeed, that the cry arose that librarians are mere technicians, and no longer scholars. Special libraries are now making their characteristic contribution by demonstrating the role of an information service in a research team working consciously towards a desired end ; and the refinement of techniques such as classification and indexing in order to provide a better service is being done mainly by special librarians. And, incidentally, such refining must go on ; after all, we no longer travel by horse and cart, nor use headphones to listen to the radio.

The most sustained attempt to work out a philosophy of librarianship is that of Dr. Ranganathan. Only Ranganathan has reduced the science to a few basic laws : Books are for use ; Every book its reader ; Every reader his book ; Save the time of the reader ; A library is a growing organism. He claims, with a good deal of justification, that all action can be referred to one or more of these laws. They express, in a few short phrases, the same philosophy as Raymond Smith, that knowledge increases, that people need knowledge, and that the function of the library is to see that they get it. Knowledge is found in books and all the other forms of record ; the people who need it are, or might be, the readers in a library. Let us look at each of these.

First, books and other publications. Whatever some hyper-aesthetes may say from time to time, someone who writes does so because he wishes to communicate his thoughts to others. The poet accepts the rigorous discipline of a highly complex set of symbols—language—because he has to cast his experience in a mould recognisable by others for what it is ; he does not always succeed, but that is his objective. Authors of books of information, and also of recreation, show more clearly that they have something to communicate, some message that in their opinion is worth hearing. They do

not know all those who read their books, and therefore society has produced a mechanism whereby their work can be brought before the public at large : the printing, publishing, bookselling and library network. A book can be read by more than one person, and therefore stores of books can be held in common. Society has become acutely aware of the value of the knowledge thus published, and has called for a further step : that of organising the flow of information from producer to user. Librarians are the key figures in this stage of the process, because they are the ones who deal directly with the reader. If they are to make each book do its work, they must know something of its contents and their place in the general field of knowledge. Books are for use.

Second, readers. If librarians are to provide readers with the sort of reading they want, clearly some close knowledge of readers is necessary. In special and university libraries, librarians quickly get to know their readers and their fields of study ; but in the public library this is not nearly so easy. This is why, all too often, we find the "work of art" theory. This theory appears to be held by those librarians who regard their libraries as a medium through which they may demonstrate, to the admiring world, their professional ability. We all know buildings which are monuments to the ability of their architects ; though, being functionally good for nothing, they are not quite the sort of monument one would care to have. The same with libraries ; the "balanced stock", the catalogue compiled strictly in accordance with the AA code, the vigorous championship of the Decimal Classification, the celebrity lecture—all are signs of the "work of art" theory put into practice. "This library", their message runs, "demonstrates the zeal and professional competence of its librarian, who has gone through all the trials and examinations appropriate to a Fellow of the Library Association (the certificate hangs framed in his office, where he can see it), and has created this masterpiece according to the very best practice". Such a librarian is a man of seniority ; he does not have time to meet the actual readers, because he is too busy in his office adding to his work of art. He does not read the professional press, because he has no need to, and he finds it dull ; and when he leaves for another post, his successor will doubtless, being an adherent of the same theory, remove all traces of him as quickly as possible.

Such librarians lack the very basic professional sense, and can never learn it because they have no contact with their readers. They do not know anything of the ways in which the need for knowledge arises, nor how their libraries fail to meet the need once arisen.

Bringing readers and their material together requires a sound knowledge of both, but basically it remains a matter of organisation. If a library had only fifty books, it would hardly require a detailed system of classification by which to arrange them. But our present situation has progressed so far beyond this that it has become urgently and vitally necessary for librarians to have good methods. Knowledge of the literature of a subject is knowledge of a special kind, and the ability to impose on that literature a system of discipline that brings it all into line with the needs of readers is not easy to acquire. Nor can it be casually transplanted. Painful though it may be to acknowledge it, what is good for Manchester readers may be in the worst possible interests of those in Stoke Newington. The necessity for good techniques such as modern classification and indexing systems does not mean that techniques are ends in themselves. If the AA code instructs us to catalogue the Crowther Report under the main heading "Great Britain. Education, Ministry of. Central Advisory Council for Education (England)", then the Code, in Mr. Bumble's expressive phrase, is an ass. Techniques are good only in so far as they provide efficient means for readers to get at their material. This is why the staff of the *British National Bibliography* constantly complain of the AA code and the Decimal Classification—both belong to the age of the horseless carriage and should be preceded by a man carrying a red flag.

It is the library's function, then, to serve as a store of information from which each reader can draw as he requires. It is an automatic memory, and relieves the reader of the necessity of remembering everything he has ever learnt. A store needs a key; the librarian and his professional techniques provide it. When a reader consults a library, at that moment he is the centre of the world of knowledge, and this brings me to the point of my title. During reference service, the librarian ought virtually to vanish as an individual person, except in so far as his personality sheds light on the working of the library. He must be the reader's *alter ego*, immersed in his politics, his religion, his morals. He must have the ability to participate in the reader's enthusiasms and to devote himself wholly and wholeheartedly to whatever cause the reader has at the time of the enquiry. He must put himself in the reader's shoes. If he succeeds in doing this, he will not only bring his whole energy to bear on the pursuit of any particular problem, but he will also try to look ahead, to correlate the new information pouring daily into the library with the known requirements of its users.

Now every library has many users. But this does not mean that

what I have said is an impossible ideal. It means that a good librarian must be able, as a professional, to undergo rapid, chameleon-like, changes as one enquirer follows another. If he has no politics, no religion, and no morals, he can have all politics, all religions and all morals. An enthusiastic association with one reader after another requires the dual capacity of total involvement with each reader and of remaining objective as an individual. A librarian does not have to be converted, as a person, to the views of each reader in turn. I believe that this kind of objective involvement is what James Joyce had in mind when he said that what he required of his readers was that they should devote their whole lives to the study of his works. He did not mean that they should do nothing else, but that every incident in their lives should be remembered in relation to his works. The same sort of thing applies to librarians: every document they see should be examined in relation to the interests of their readers.

We do not, however, have to accept our readers' views, and the ability to maintain our objectivity gives us a strength and power that should be a characteristic feature of good librarians. If we can become enthusiastically involved with the programme of a particular reader, and still remain outside the narrow limits of his special interest, we can very often bring to bear a keener sense of perspective than he has himself. One of the most useful functions the librarian can perform to-day is that of taking a broad view, of seeing those factors that are common to many fields, of widening the horizon of the reader, and assisting the cross-fertilisation of ideas that is now recognised as a valuable counter to over-specialisation.

To achieve such an intensity of involvement without being personally committed obviously requires a liberal allowance of the qualities of sympathy, understanding and tact. It also requires what appears to be the contradiction of what I have been maintaining. I believe it to be absolutely necessary that, as a person, a librarian should have very strong convictions, that he should be not only deeply involved but also, if possible, personally committed to a particular view in politics, religion and morals. There is no inconsistency in this. On the contrary, if, as a person, a librarian fails to reach a position of some dedication, how can he enter into a sympathetic association with his readers? It is no easy thing to put aside, as it were, our own selves while we lend support to another. We are apt to feel indignant if interrupted by a reader needing assistance. If then, we have no conception of his feelings about his work, how can we expect to be of any use to him? If we have never done any research

ourselves, how can we offer any worthwhile assistance to the research worker ?

It is evident that librarianship, to be efficient, must be dedicated ; librarians must acquire an attitude of mind neither commonplace nor easy to come by. Moreover, such an attitude must extend beyond the actual reference service itself. Important as this is, and the core of our professional purpose, it depends for its success on systems of organisation, on classification, indexing and so on. No matter how agreeable we are, our readers will quickly lose faith in our competence if we cannot find the information they want. We not only have to store it in our libraries, we have to find it again. Furthermore, our systems must actively help us to achieve the broad view by reflecting the structure of knowledge and the intricate relationships that exist between all the phenomena of the world. These are what writers write about ; these are what readers look for in books. If we regard library techniques as tools for a particular purpose, and if we feel an inward compulsion towards fulfilling that purpose, we shall not rest satisfied with inferior tools. We shall not prate about broad classification, nor make such remarks as that which appeared quite recently : "the classification scheme must serve the needs of our users, not the enthusiasm of the classifier". I am almost at a loss to understand how such things can be said. Almost, but not quite. So long as we have librarians urging the value of the Decimal Classification for present use, we can be sure that there is great misunderstanding of why we classify. Classification is a fascinating study, but it is not, for librarians an end in itself ; the end is reference service, and an enthusiastic classifier has in mind only the use of classification to arrange subjects in a helpful order. That, of course, is why we reject the Decimal Classification. I do not think I am making too large a claim if I say that the Classification Research Group has had an impact around the world that is altogether astonishing if we consider its size—it has about a dozen active members—and its resources—it collects ten shillings a year from about two dozen people. The CRG persists because its members are not only deeply interested in their subject, but are also convinced of its value in information service ; they are powered by the consciousness of purpose.

To be able to evaluate systems, to assess their relevance to the purpose of librarianship, we require a professional education. The new syllabus is an improvement on the old in many ways ; one is the emphasis on quality rather than quantity. We shall, I hope, look less for the memorising of vast numbers of facts, which we could look up in our reference books anyway, and more for an attitude of mind

towards the profession, a sense of the purpose of librarianship. The Fellowship thesis means a dedicated study, not some trifling essay dashed off in two or three weeks, and it is here in particular that I look for the evidence of a professional philosophy, because only those who have a true sense of purpose will voluntarily undertake a task of this nature. They will have their reward, not only in the outward sign of the Fellowship diploma, but also in the knowledge that they have brought light into a dark place and made a contribution, however humble, to the record of civilisation.

It will be this type of librarian who honours his profession, because through exercising it he does service to the community. Though, as a librarian, he makes no attempt gratuitously to foist his own opinions on his readers, yet his actions have their own influence. For service to readers, reference service in action, the complete involvement with someone else's problem, is the very negation of the predatory society towards which we are rushing, where all the old truths have taken on a new, more terrible significance : where it is every man for himself and the devil take the hindmost, where the race does go to the strong, and the weak do go to the wall. True librarianship is an open challenge to such a philosophy, a demonstration that Man is not entirely red in tooth and claw ; and because of this, it is bound to be a formative factor of the highest importance in the shaping of the society of the future. We must cherish it.

This, then, is my philosophy. If it is old-fashioned to feel the fire of inspiration in one's belly, and to have faith in the life one has chosen, then I am old-fashioned, even quaint ; if it is square, then I am as the square on the hypotenuse of a right-angled triangle, which, as you know, is not only square itself, but also the sum of two other squares. Well, that may be. It brings me joy in my work, and, I like to think, satisfaction to the readers who use my library. It provides a touchstone for the testing of methods, and a driving force that never lets me sink into despondency and discontent ; no-one could ask for more. I remember that other Everyman, who was summoned by Death to take a pilgrimage, bringing with him a sure reckoning. He turned to Fellowship, Kindred, Goods, Knowledge, Strength, but none would keep him company, and in the end it was his Good Deeds, though lying faint and cold on the ground, who said :

Everyman, I will go with thee and be thy guide,

In thy most need to go by thy side.

And Everyman's answer is my answer too :

In good condition I am now in every thing,

And am whole content with this good thing.