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L597: Libraries as Cultural Institutions
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Assignment 2: Libraries as Cultural Centers for Their Communities

D.W. Davies, Barbara Jones and Deanna Marcum address different aspects of the status of libraries as cultural centers, sometimes using different understandings of the term in order to do so. Davies provides a general overview of British and American libraries, as well as a more straight-forward perspective, tracing developments from the latter part of the nineteenth century into the late 1960's and focusing on statements made and programs offered more than on states of mind. Jones and Marcum analyze specific libraries in socio-historical and socio-economic context, examining the varied concerns and ideals that motivated the formation and development of those libraries at the turn of the twentieth century and into its early decades. Both Jones and Marcum situate their analyses in the context of other historical research that has (or has not) been done on libraries as social agencies and on librarians as actors in the complex tug-of-war between progressive and conservative values during their chosen time-period. The three works taken together provide important insights into the role of public libraries in the United States now, at the turn of the twenty-first century.

In Davies' chapter, a library hosting art and curiosity exhibits, which performs outreach to the community for education and recreation, equals a "cultural center". Particularly in Britain, early libraries were often housed together with museums, trade schools and/or general education centers in the lyceum tradition, thus making them "cultural centers" by reason of their association with other institutions established as

venues of “self-improvement”. Davies catalogs the different kinds of exhibits, classes, concerts, lectures, informal education services and recreational and meeting facilities that libraries have offered in this capacity, remarking on these programs not only as avenues of “improvement” for the public but as a means of drawing people to the library (whether or not one is trying to induce them to read). He concludes the chapter by outlining the ways in which library buildings reflect this desire to attract people to the library with varied services and technologies. Throughout, he seems somewhat bemused by the wide range of events that libraries have seen fit to host and promote, hinting that he wishes librarians would be more concerned with books and education than with doll displays, menageries, and staff lounges.

Barbara Jones’ study focuses on public libraries in the mining towns of Minnesota in the early twentieth century, in particular on the Buhl Public Library. Buhl provides Jones with a model of how the formation of public libraries responded to ideals of American life in the first decades of the twentieth century, in the turbulent context of industrialization, immigration, and unionization. The contemporary vision of the library as “a temple of culture to help immigrants realize the American dream through hard work and self-improvement” (56) was a strong motivator for the people of Buhl. Jones traces six ways in which this vision was expressed: in the physical space of the library, in its collections, in the role of the library trustees and the city government, in the library’s programming, in the library’s users, and finally in the library staff. All involved took pride in the library, which as a finely crafted \$60,000 building project for a town of only 2,000 represented a remarkable consensus of strong community support. The library was heavily used, leading the state of Minnesota for circulation per capita, thus testifying to

its ongoing value to the community. However, complex relations between the absentee mine barons, the progressive local government (which taxed the mines to finance schools and the library), IWW-supporting workers, and more conservative librarians who saw the edifying influence of the library as a means of stemming unionizing violence (rather than as a means of fueling change), combined to make that vision of the library as a palace of self-improvement mean rather different things to different people.

Deanna Marcum also examines a particular library at the turn of the twentieth century—in this case, a rural library in Hagerstown, Maryland. Marcum makes a cogent case for errors in historical scholarship regarding libraries, pointing out first that libraries have been overlooked by mainstream historians studying the dynamics of the progressive era, rural libraries even more so; and second that library history has tended to assume (wrongly) that rural libraries were in some kind of pastoral stasis, not affected by the massive changes rocking urban life and urban libraries. In the case of Hagerstown, the library was established by businessmen who were motivated by two major impulses: both to preserve the town's rural heritage even as their own commercial success brought closer ties to cities through transportation networks and population growth; and to modernize their town in imitation of the urban reformers who advocated the library as a beacon of civilization. The latter impulse led them to seek a professional librarian from New England, Mary Lemist Titcomb, despite local opposition to hiring an outsider: the need for the prestige of professionalism, itself a relatively new but potent concept, was too great. Marcum describes Titcomb's professional commitment to the standards and ideals of the American Library Association—standards driven by urban concerns that she would later abandon in favor of the actual needs of the people she served in rural Hagerstown.

Beyond telling the story of the Hagerstown public library, Marcum also relates the story of scholarly dialog concerning American libraries at the turn of the twentieth century in a welcome summary of those strains of thought. While John Shera and Sidney Ditzion, writing in the late 1940's, optimistically upheld the public library as a progressive force in American society, later scholars Michael Harris and Dee Garrison have illustrated the conservative aspect of reformist librarianship, working to assimilate newcomers and educate workers as good citizens supporting the status quo. Marcum sees this principle at work in Hagerstown as well. Her discussion of Wayne Wiegand's work elucidates the conflict that arose between the leadership of ALA, which was made up primarily of urban reformers from the Northeast who believed in the library as an institution for the education, assimilation and "improvement" (and, essentially, pacification) of the masses, especially immigrants; and the rural librarians of the Midwest, who found their patrons' needs drawing them more into the role of providing a community social center along with resources and guidance for recreational reading.

It is only fitting that Marcum's arguments regarding the changing role of the library in rural Hagerstown follow Jones' insights into the dynamics surrounding the meaning of the library in industrial small-town Buhl during a particularly painful period of the labor movement. Each of these libraries sprang from local community concerns, and changed over time in response to community needs. Marcum's and Jones' case studies provide an enlightening context for Davies' catalog of library activities, and for Davies' apparent attitude toward same. Both Jones and Marcum do well to point out the joining of humanitarian and conservative impulses in the reformist vision of the mission

of public libraries, and to discuss the ways in which those impulses have been interpreted in historical scholarship on the period.

I think it is safe to say that Wiegand's Midwestern ideal for libraries has become the ascendant conception in the United States: places for people to gather, as families and as individuals, to get information they need and materials they will enjoy. The twenty-first century American public library is a service institution in a consumer society, to a degree that was neither necessary nor possible one hundred years ago. The Northeast ideal remains with us, however, in two different senses. On the one hand, the perpetual argument over "what they want" vs. "what is good" that we inherited from our ancestors—reading as a form of intellectual and spiritual nutrition, about which people may need to be educated—will no doubt continue for many generations to come. On the other hand, progressive and even activist librarianship remains a vital part of the profession. Many of us choose librarianship because we are inspired by the potential of the library not only to provide good reads and free videos (which are important in their own right), but also to make a real difference in communities and in the lives of individuals. Literacy programs, storytelling, youth advisory boards, health information centers, job skills training, and public computing and Internet access all contribute to this aspect of the library's mission as a valuable, vibrant, and fully engaged component of its community.

Resources

Davies, D.W. 1982. "Libraries as Centers of Culture" in Public Librarianship: A Reader, ed. by Jane Robbins-Carter. Littleton, CO: Libraries Unlimited. pp. 98-109.
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Please pardon inexact citation of Marcum's sources.

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Garrison, Dee. 1979. Apostles of Culture: The Public Librarian and American Society, 1876-1920. New York: The Free Press.

Harris, Michael H. 1973. "The Purposes of the American Public Library: a Revisionist Interpretation." Library Journal 98: 2509-14.

Shera, Jesse H. 1949. Foundations of the Public Library: The Origins of the Public Library Movement in New England. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Wiegand, Wayne A. 1986. The Politics of an Emerging Profession: The American Library Association, 1876-1917. New York: Greenwood Press.