



THE ROYAL BANK OF CANADA MONTHLY LETTER

HEAD OFFICE: MONTREAL, NOVEMBER 1955

The Public Library

MILLIONS of people have discovered books in the past thirty years. Books have become as commonplace on news-stands as magazines were, and public libraries have expanded in number and in service. We do not approach books, as our grandfathers did, gingerly and only occasionally.

That is not to say everyone in Canada has all the reading facilities he needs or wants. Many communities, and not only in rural districts, are short of local library services.

A woman from New Brunswick told the *Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences* (the so-called "Massey Commission on Culture"): "Too many of us have thousand dollar kitchens and ten dollar libraries." She went on to say that it was difficult to persuade municipalities to pay any part of the cost.

A lack of library service has implications for business, industry and national material development. Students are graduating from our universities in science, engineering, business administration, medicine, and the other faculties. While taking their courses they had at their finger-tips great collections of books to answer their questions, spur investigation and stimulate their minds. Now, engaging in practical work, they find themselves remote from well-stocked shelves.

Not all our lamentation should be for technical people, great as their need is. To understand what is going on the world today requires knowledge that can be found only in books, and we all wish to have the right background against which to judge current events. The public library gives us who are within reach of it a select society of all the centuries to which we are admitted for the asking, without the expense of building our own shelves of books.

Canada's libraries

There were eighty free public libraries in urban centres of more than 10,000 population in 1954, and 26 regional libraries. The largest number in any province was that in Ontario, 42 urban and 14 regional.

These two classes — urban and regional libraries — represent the bulk of public library service in Canada, about 65 per cent of the total number of volumes and 83 per cent of the circulation. The urban libraries, serving five and a half million people, contained 5,466,887 volumes, of which 509,000 were added in 1954. There were 1,230,657 registered borrowers, the circulation was 23,190,793 volumes, and the libraries were staffed by 1,454 full-time staff members of whom 563 had degrees or equivalent diplomas in library science. Current expenditures amounted to \$6,773,239, or \$1.30 per capita of the population served.

Our greatest library problem is service for rural people, but according to the Canadian Library Association the rural situation is more promising than it was a few years ago. In some provinces, regional library systems have made considerable progress. One of the first was established in the Lower Fraser Valley of British Columbia in 1929. By 1954 there were 26 regional libraries, serving 1,648,000 people. Their volumes totalled 814,373.

Smallness of library service is mainly a financial problem. It is true that books are relatively cheap, but the expenditure is in competition with a mass of goods and services clamouring for our pennies. Today's \$2.50 to \$5 book is cheap when compared with the price paid by the Countess of Anjou in the tenth century for a volume of sermons by a German monk: two hundred sheep, one load of wheat, one load of rye, and one load of millet. But she did not have hundreds of advertisements importuning her to buy other goods.

Library services

While the principal business of a library is to make books available to the public by circulation or for reference within the library, many other services have attached themselves to municipal public libraries.

In more than one locality the public library has come to be recognized as the centre of the community, around which revolve the studies and interests of the people. A meeting room has become an important feature of the branch library.

Some libraries provide services that are extensions of their main job: movie films, film strips, phonograph records, and paintings or prints. They bring to their platforms speakers on subjects ranging from the rearing of a child to the planning of a municipal centre, and display lists of books for follow-up study.

City libraries commonly have special collections of books for business men, craftsmen and industrial workers, though, as a bulletin issued by the Newark public library laments: "To the frustration of librarians, there are still some impractical business men who would rather be caught pilfering the poor-box than reading a book."

Practical people have found that a visit to the public library can save them money and time and effort. By searching the literature of their business they make sure that someone else hasn't already done the same work, and they gather data to make their calculations and their planning easier.

There is a true classic story about a librarian in Pennsylvania who was told by the chief chemist of a rolling mill about an experiment that had solved a problem at a cost of \$10,000. The librarian told him: "The Germans made the same experiment four years ago and got the same results. We have their complete report."

Service to children

Most libraries have children's sections, and many libraries have specially-qualified librarians who rouse the children's interest in books and lead them through the fascinating experiences that open up to the reading person. It is not enough, these libraries believe, to prohibit crime comics: positive action is needed. Good books, with interest equalling that of the "comics", must be made available under the guidance of an understanding librarian.

A long stride forward was taken in 1948, when children's librarians and book publishers in Toronto put on a sample "book week". From that experiment

grew Young Canada's Book Week, a national event sponsored by the Canadian Association of Children's Librarians. The aim is that all our children, wherever they live, whatever their circumstances, may have easy access to the best in children's literature.

Children's librarians have been successful in getting good books written. They found that the supply of books to gratify the spontaneous interest of boys and girls was far too limited in variety and in quality. Progressive publishers have responded to appeals for new titles and for reprints of old books in modern format. These, and other books, are displayed in special sections by many libraries, arranged according to the age of children. Bulletin boards attract attention to new books, suggest reading lists for high school clubs, and so forth.

Making material available

A library is not a collection of books made after a fixed pattern, but an offering of reading matter suited to the bookish needs of its community.

Intelligent book selection is the prime need. Books must offer materials of knowledge, they must be the expression of human life, they must stimulate individual development, and they must enlarge and clarify mass intelligence.

Demand is a controlling factor in selection of books, but demand is greatly influenced by supply. If acquisition of books is based solely upon the already demonstrated popularity of books, the librarian is not taking his proper place in the van of his community's development. The librarian who is just a little ahead of his patrons' demands is playing a constructive role. Says H. E. Haines in *Living with Books*: "Let the basis of selection be positive, not negative. If the best that can be said for a book is that it will do no harm, there is no valid reason for its selection; every book should be of actual service to somebody, in inspiration or information or recreation."

Having collected books, how is the librarian to make them available to the public? There are some who say that, having placed books on the library shelves, the librarian has discharged his responsibility, but this is not the prevailing view. Up-to-date librarianship calls upon display, advertising and publicity to make the public aware of what the shelves hold, and upon methods of listing that make books easy to find.

Libraries have, in addition to books, what they call "vertical files", in which are deposited leaflets, booklets, mimeographed reports, and so forth, that may, in the opinion of the librarian, be of use to patrons. This

Monthly Letter, for example, is sent to every public library in Canada, and at the year's end we supply a vertical file containing the year's issues, complete with index.

The librarian

Librarians must know their books and how to care for them; they must know their patrons and how to serve them. They are classed with the minister and the school-teacher as community leaders and public servants.

The librarian presides over materials that enshrine the wisdom of the past and furnish the understanding, knowledge and reason that can inform the mind and prepare the reader to meet the challenges of today. Says Christopher Morley's endearing character, Roger Mifflin, in *The Haunted Bookshop*: "I wish there could be an international peace conference of booksellers, for my own conviction is that the future happiness of the world depends in no small measure on them and on the librarians."

One finds only a few librarians whose chief pre-occupation is acquiring books and classifying them. It will not do to estimate the worth of a librarian by the number of books he issues or the per capita cost of circulation. His is a constructive profession. The true measure of his service is the extent to which he has made the great world of books a living, appealing, inspiring reality to those his library serves.

Librarianship is not an easy profession to master, and there is general agreement, voiced through the Royal Commission, that library training facilities in Canada are inadequate. More library schools and more opportunities for advanced training are needed.

No public library in the world could afford to buy every book, but selection requires caution and skill. It calls for competency, alertness to the needs of the community, courage, and willingness to assume responsibility for decisions. Much that tends toward implementing this high ideal has been done by the Canadian Library Association since its organization in 1946.

Using the library

Behind the library and the librarian is a philosophy, a feeling of purpose. Civilization, it has been said, is based essentially on three processes: the discovery of knowledge, the conservation of knowledge, and the transmission of knowledge. Viewed in one light, the public library is only a collection of books, but in the broader view it makes available the symbols that stand

for almost anything we know about the universe. It is more than a stockpile: it is a communication centre through which the custodian transmits knowledge to his world.

Absorbing and using what is proffered is not compulsory, but is a function of the reader's will to learn. Here are the best books, providing an education that is not formalized but is of the wider sort: the culture of mind and spirit. What capacities we develop by use of the library; what practical help we obtain in our jobs and in getting to understand human nature; what opportunities we uncover to enrich our lives: these are ours to take or leave.

Andrew Carnegie said: "I choose free libraries as the best agencies for improving the masses of the people, because they give nothing for nothing. They only help those who help themselves. They never pauperize."

Books instruct us without rods or formulas, without hard words and anger. If we approach them, we find them friendly; if we question them they give us the answers; even if we are ignorant, they do not laugh at us. In books we can find relief from trouble, rest after weariness, comfort in distress and guidance along a dimly-seen path. Books help us to see beyond our immediate task and to gain a sense of life as a whole.

Education

There is an opportunity for broadening the place of the library in educational programmes. It is not enough that it be used as a tool to supply the information a student needs while in school. It should do more: it should contribute toward producing graduates who will continue to learn, building efficiently and well on the experience and knowledge of the past.

Teachers will find that their pupils benefit through the strengthening of a friendly alliance with the public library. A programme of real benefit requires that the library staff and the school faculty work together in determining where, in the various courses, the subject matter, the printed materials and the library facilities provide the best opportunity for giving the student the knowledge and experience he needs. Textbooks are devoted to the assertion of facts, with little or no invitation to question or debate. These may be supplemented by library reading that contains visions and stirs an explorative spirit.

It is generally accepted today that education continuing through life is necessary to our happiness, if not, indeed, to our survival. Herein is a wide opportunity for public libraries. Where, indeed, is adult education to be obtained, if not through books?

The concept of adult education was enunciated as the prime responsibility of the public library as early as 1850, and a quarter of a century later Melvil Dewey wrote: "The time was when a library was very like a museum, and a librarian was a mouser in musty books, and visitors looked with curious eyes at ancient tomes and manuscripts. The time is when a library is a school, and the librarian is in the highest sense a teacher."

Many a man has atoned for lack of higher education, and has "pulled himself up by his bootstraps" by reading. People who have no definite purpose like that in view find that in the library they can master enough of science and politics and psychology to enable them to understand what goes on in the world. They broaden their horizons, fill their minds usefully, and develop personality.

To embark with prospect of success on adult education one does not have to plan to read the ten or the hundred or the thousand "great" books. Reading is an individual thing, conditioned by one's background, one's opportunity and one's purpose.

At the same time, it is worth considering the verdict of history. When a book has lived and circulated widely over a period of twenty, fifty, or a hundred years, there is a presumption that there is something worth-while in it. The advice of Lord Chesterfield to his son was to speak of modern books without contempt, and of the ancients without idolatry; judge them all by their merits.

The reader

The person seeking real value for the time he gives to reading will ask at the library for books that contribute something in the way of information, culture or stimulation of interests. Personal taste and the whim of the moment will not interfere greatly with such a person's reading. He will realize that if he is to escape from the commonplace by gaining knowledge he needs to tackle new things, to savour the tang of adventure and discovery.

What more personal reward can a reader hope for besides the gaining of knowledge and insight and inspiration? Well, says Hamilton Mabie in *My Study Fire*: "Among his books a man laughs at his bonds and finds an open road out of every form of imprisonment." He may find escape in books, even from too much pleasure, as Holmes, tired of laughing at a musical comedy, turned to the reading of Marcus Aurelius. Intimate association with noble works is a splendid promoter of inward serenity.

Many people have been heard to say: "I love reading, but never have a minute for it." That is a matter of choice, governed by a sense of values. We find time for the things most vital to us.

Even half an hour of daily reading will bring a rich reward. Looking backward, we shall see that those half hours, retrieved perhaps in fragments from the grasp of daily routine, count for more than we ever thought possible.

How to read

Whatever mode of reading a man uses, he should start receptively and maintain a questioning attitude. He is reading not to find expression of his own ideas, but to gather those of the author.

It is good to vary one's reading. Anyone who wishes to start a course of rewarding reading might do worse than ask his librarian for Wells' *Outline of History*, Durant's *Story of Philosophy*, and Dr. Logan Clendenning's *The Human Body*. These have ample references to other works, leading the reader along delightful paths of exploration and gratifying discovery.

By making notes as you read you may transfer the wealth of the public library to your home. Extracts from books can build themselves up, after a few months, into a valuable reference file. Anthology construction is one of the most pleasant hobbies that a thinking person can possibly have.

Future of the library

Canadian libraries are on the up-grade today because our people have come to recognize them as key institutions in our cultural life. The public library is an adult school, a lifelong class.

The books it contains are the true levellers in civilization. They give to all who use them the society of the best and greatest of our race. They say to peasants the same as they say to kings.

The bookless man does not know his own loss. The books he has not read are the telescopes and reflectors and reverberators of our intellectual life, holding in themselves magical powers for giving the range of knowledge that belongs to a cultivated mind.

Whereas Spinoza possessed fewer than 60 volumes, and Kant collected only 300, any budding philosopher in Canada today has at his command hundreds of thousands of books, collected and sorted and made available by his public library: all the brave books, as they are called by Christopher Morley, that house the hopes and skills and gentlenesses and dreams of men and women through the ages.