

Fiction, Public Libraries & the Reading Public in Colonial New Zealand

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This is the first of a series of articles based on an extended study of the relationships between reading and the 'public' libraries in colonial New Zealand.¹ Two quotations, one from the literature of librarianship, the other from the literature of colonial reading habits, provide a framework for this preliminary analysis of 'public' libraries and the reading of fiction.

In his 1940 presidential address to the New Zealand Library Association, John Barr reflecting on his thirty years of experience as librarian of the Auckland Public Library during which time he argued tirelessly, up to then without success, to persuade Auckland's councillors, and anyone else who would listen, to abolish the then mandatory subscription for all borrowing for home reading and to adopt the British free public lending system. Since it opened in 1880, Auckland, like practically all other New Zealand municipalities until the late 1930s, provided a free service for reading *in situ* but insisted that borrowing for home use was a privilege, an optional extra for a free public library, for which one should pay. Barr had served his apprenticeship in libraries in Scotland and was deeply puzzled by the different value system in New Zealand's libraries. "The purpose of a public library is to provide for the informational and recreational needs of the community ... the primary purpose ... is the diffusion of knowledge." He concluded that in New Zealand "the emphasis has been placed on the recreational at the expense of the informational." New Zealand had diverged from the British (and American) ideal of providing enlightenment and Barr, after thirty years, had come to this conclusion about why New Zealand was different, "That when the idea of lending out books was first considered in New Zealand the people who were interested thought only in terms of reading as an entertainment, and the authorities decided that entertainment should be paid for as all other kinds of entertainment were paid for."²

The second quotation comes from the final chapter of Dulcie Gillespie-Needham's doctoral thesis, a monumental examination of reading in colonial New Zealand. "The story is a simple one: New Zealanders in the 19th century showed a growing preference for prose fiction and they did not discriminate in their reading. It did not matter whether they belonged to town or country, working or middle class, the trend was much the same. ... Victorians like Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin believed that though the progress of democratic institu-

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tions was a levelling up process, its result, inversely, was a levelling down. This is only too aptly illustrated in the popular reading of New Zealanders during the nineteenth century."³

This article explores the space between these two quotations, about the public library narrowly conceived for almost one hundred years by New Zealand society as a purveyor of entertainment, and the downward spiral of reading over the first sixty years or more of settlement into the indiscriminating consumption of fiction, and attempts to tease out the relationships between them and some other major themes in the history of reading and the history of public libraries. It introduces some theories being developed in the research project which could have powerful explanatory powers for the intellectual and social history of the colonial period and which may provide useful diagnostic tools for examining some current issues in our cultural and intellectual history.

The readers who came to New Zealand from 1840 were different kinds of readers from their grandparents and very different from those who had arrived in the North American colonies in the seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries. Our immigrant readers were the products of the reading revolution of the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, a revolution that had transformed both reading styles and the materials being read. The change, which affected the majority of readers, was from intensive reading, deliberate and reverential, of a small number of texts, mostly religious, with high levels of reading aloud in groups and high levels of memorisation, to extensive, or promiscuous reading, what James Russell Lowell characterized as a "loose indolence of reading, which relaxes the muscular fibre of the mind,"⁴ covering a wide range of subjects for instruction, information and private entertainment, and of formats — not just books, but large quantities of newspapers and magazines — and this new way of reading was independent of social class.⁵

Such a reading revolution, spread right through society, was one of the essential conditions of modernity, when a cumulating fund of knowledge, increasingly derived from printed matter, became as much a part of daily life as food, shelter and clothing. This extensive reading style, fully integrated into daily life, is caught neatly by J.E. Tinne in his description of life in New Zealand in 1873 when he writes that existence on a sheep station could be agreeable if a man had "a good horse, comfortable house and food, and all the latest English magazines and papers."⁶ Reading had already become a necessity of life for most of our immigrants before they set foot in New Zealand. William J. Gilmore, in his painstaking social reconstruction *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life* (1998), chronicles the transition to modernity in rural Vermont between the 1780s and the 1830s and from the world of intensive reading to the new age of extensive reading, and directly challenges one of the major tenets of modernisation theory, namely that

the development of the integrated print communication environment characteristic of modernity is dependent on mass urbanisation. Vermont transformed itself, with a little help from the outside world, into a modern, commercial, industrial and print intensive economy while still remaining essentially a rural society.

In New Zealand we can see the playing out of a very different scenario, that of European settlers coming into a rural wilderness devoid of print apart from religious texts in Maori, and a society that remained substantially rural and dependent on small farmers in the early colonial period.⁷ These settlers, most of whom had already been converted by the reading revolution into believing in reading as a necessity of life, attempted to create, from scratch, and in a great hurry, the institutions to support their extensive reading habits. These habits required large numbers of books, periodicals and newspapers, many of them to be read but once (and then cursorily), and for most people a common pool of reading matter which could be drawn upon for current use, even if they had to pay, was sufficient and appealing.

In Britain and North America, as the reading revolution progressed, entrepreneurs moved to create commercial pools of reading matter, groups of readers banded together to create social libraries and, with the growth of democratic control of local government, communities increasingly invested in public libraries to meet the needs of their citizens. Lending libraries developed slowly in Europe and North America as the reading revolution unfolded and the historian of early American colonial libraries, Jesse Shera, takes it for granted that public libraries are one of the grace notes of settlement societies, established only after the society is stable, has begun to generate wealth, and has a well-established infrastructure of education, transport, and effective local government.⁸ If one adopted the North American colonial timescale outlined by Shera, New Zealand would have been ready to develop its first public libraries sometime in the 1920s. In fact, in this settler society, reading had become such a necessity of life that public libraries came out on the first ships to Wellington, Nelson, New Plymouth, Canterbury and Otago, and there were public libraries of sorts in all the main centres of settlement within five years, and by 1880 hardly any rural settlement or locality lacked a public lending library. Within 40 years of settlement New Zealand had more public lending libraries per head of population than any other country in the world. In 1880 there were 354 public lending libraries for a population of 490,000, one for every 1400 people. If one counts only the adult population (over 15) it is one library for every 800 adults. At the same time in Victoria, the best of the Australian colonies, there was one public library for 4,284 people, and this figure was far better than for Britain at the same date.

Overseas commentators and local investigators have all marvelled at the extraordinarily rapid proliferation of lending libraries in New Zealand. Thus

Gillespie-Needham: "One may question how a society busy with practical concerns, showing evidence of unsteady economic growth, and with a population far from wealthy, could find a place for libraries ... At this juncture we may note the apparent paradox that while New Zealanders were actively engaged with the practical exercise of achieving material prosperity they were also rapidly developed an institution like the library, which to all appearances, suggests an interest in the things of the mind."⁹

She clearly had problems, as others have had, in reconciling the crude realities of colonising a wilderness with the proliferation of public libraries. Also Glenda Northey, writing in 1998 in her study of the spread of public libraries in the Auckland province: "The primary aim of this thesis has been to reveal, how, when and where, and more importantly why, so many libraries developed in the Auckland province between 1842 and 1919 ... The difficulty was locating and analysing data which explained why settlers established libraries so early in the history of the province."¹⁰

Local government in New Zealand, where it existed in the colonial period, was too weak to provide the institutions necessary to meet the insistent demand for communal pools of reading matter; central government, though stronger, had no tradition in the Old World of providing such a service, and commercial interests would only provide where markets were strong enough, that is in the larger towns. Readers in New Zealand took the matter into their own hands from the very beginnings of settlement and created consumer-owned and controlled societies, social libraries as they were known in North America, by the hundreds, under the names of athenaeum, literary society, book club, mechanics' institute, or public library. As provincial government gave votes and voices to citizens, provincial assemblies (and later central government) voted subsidies to the creations of their readers. In Europe and North America such social libraries were transitional institutions, dying away as local government moved into the field. In New Zealand, and most of Australia, they became the dominant form and lasted (though they hardly flourished) for almost 100 years.

But these social libraries were a forced growth in the Antipodes, lacking deep roots in their communities. Most of them were small, financially unstable, susceptible to decline and sudden death, and of necessity finely tuned to the reading habits of their customers, who were also their owners. In the Auckland Education District I have identified over three hundred and twenty libraries that existed at some time between 1878 and 1937. The maximum operating in any one year was only one hundred and twelve. In Wellington, some forty-five, with a maximum existing in one year of twenty-two. Some twenty percent died within five years, and less than half lasted thirty years. They were, however, the dominant form, specifically recognised by the library legislation, and propped up by government

subsidies. Municipal libraries, controlled and financed by local governments, when they finally emerged in the 1880s, took them and not the British and American free public libraries as models for their lending departments. Auckland was the first municipality to adopt the Public Libraries Act of 1869, but not until 1880, and only a handful of towns had adopted the Act and levied a library rate by 1900, but all of them were charging their citizens for the privilege of borrowing for home use because the law of 1877 mandated that although a public library had to provide free entry for all, it also had to charge a subscription for lending of no less than 5 shillings per annum.

The second theme of this article is the relationship between these 'public' libraries and the reading of fiction. The virtues of systematic reading, for moral instruction, to free individuals from superstition, for self-improvement and social amelioration, were articles of faith of the Enlightenment and its nineteenth century heirs, and in the reading revolution they saw the means of social salvation for the masses. The proponents of reading and public libraries in the nineteenth century had an unwavering conviction in the efficacy of the printed word to influence human behaviour. Sin, intemperance, poverty and bigotry were personal rather than social ills and the cure lay in reforming the individual through moral instruction. The problem of bad behaviour was essentially a cognitive problem. Through reading came understanding, and through understanding, change for the better. Reading, in theory, was a very serious business. Publishers and booksellers, participants in another increasingly serious, and profitable, business, detected, and then proceeded to feed and commodify, the soft underbelly of the reading revolution — reading for pleasure, for entertainment, for distraction. Prose fiction, the novel, was initially the overwhelming choice for recreational reading, soon to be followed by newspapers and periodicals.

In 1740 novels were but 2.6% of the stock of the Leipzig book fair; by 1800 they were 11.7%, and commercial lending libraries and reading societies had sprung up throughout Germany to disseminate them, characterised by critics as "brothels and houses of moral perdition" infecting all with the spiritual poison of entertainment reading. "For as long as the world has existed" thundered J.G. Heinzmann in 1795 "there has been no phenomena so remarkable as the reading of novels in Germany and the revolution in France. They have evolved more or less simultaneously, and it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that novels have been just as much the cause of unhappiness to people in secret as the terrible French revolution has been publicly."¹¹ Right-minded people roundly criticised the growing addiction to novel reading, especially among the lower orders who ought to be reading for enlightenment and self-improvement, but all in vain. By 1870 Anthony Trollope could write "We have become a novel-reading people from the Prime Minister down to the latest appointed scullery maid ... Poetry was also read and

history, biography, and the social and political news of the day. But all our other reading together hardly amounts to what we read in novels."¹²

In 1882, in the municipal libraries of Paris, fifty-five percent of the circulation was fiction; a survey of fiction in free lending libraries in Britain in 1890 noted fiction as varying between eighty-five percent of the gross issue in Sunderland to fifty-seven percent in Leeds and Bristol, and the 1927 *Report on Public Libraries in Britain* noted that in urban libraries fiction made up thirty-seven percent of the collections and seventy-eight percent of the issues, and in rural libraries sixty-two percent of the collections and seventy-five percent of the circulation.

Librarians such as John Barr, who were children of the Enlightenment, believing that the primary purpose of the public library was "the diffusion of knowledge" despaired of this flood of entertainment reading, compiled and published statistics and reports documenting the flood, and made sporadic attempts to curb it in their libraries through restricting or delaying the purchase of popular fiction. Social reformers and critics, leader writers and politicians joined in the swell of disapprobation. Research to date comparing the outcries against fiction reading in Europe, North America and New Zealand, indicate that criticisms of the provision of recreational reading by public libraries was relatively muted in New Zealand although they flared up from time to time in newspaper editorials, debates in municipal councils and Parliament, in library conferences, lectures and pamphlets. I suspect that this may be due to the fact that in New Zealand the readers of fiction had to pay to borrow for home use from their public library.

Fiction reading, on the statistics compiled by libraries and on anecdotal evidence, was higher in Australia than in Britain, and even higher in New Zealand. By 1855 the Auckland Mechanics' Institute was reporting that fifty-one percent of its issues were fiction; at the Motueka Literary Institute ninety-two percent of the issues were fiction in 1869/70; an 1879 survey of eleven libraries in Hawkes Bay showed that seven had over fifty percent fiction in their stock, one as high as 93.2%; in 1897 the Auckland and Wellington public libraries were issuing eighty-six percent fiction; in 1900 Kaitangata Athenaeum was issuing ninety percent fiction, Wanganui eighty-seven percent and Cust ninety-six percent. In 1913 the Education Department reported to Parliament that 81.5% of books purchased in the previous year by public libraries receiving central government subsidies were novels, and if the eleven major libraries were excluded the proportion rose to eighty-nine percent. Of the four-hundred and eight libraries surveyed, one hundred and twenty-three, or thirty percent, bought nothing but fiction. After more finger-wagging by the Department, two years later one hundred and ten out of three hundred and eighty, or twenty-nine percent were buying almost entirely fiction, and the overall figure for lending was 75.9% fiction, growing to 86.8% if the large libraries were excluded. An analysis of some thirty printed catalogues

provides further evidence of the rising percentage of fiction in the bookstock during the century, which seems to accelerate from the 1870s. Significantly, the few libraries after 1900 operating the British system of free lending had lower levels of fiction holdings and issues.

In Britain and North America, free municipal lending libraries with their commitment to the enlightenment ideal of the diffusion of knowledge, and watched over by councillors elected by the ratepayers, the majority of whom were defenders of the spending of public money on wholesome educational reading for the masses, especially the kind of improving literature "necessary for young men perfecting themselves in their businesses or their trades,"¹³ but who balked at providing amusement on the rates in the form of the latest sensational novels and other ephemeral popular reading matter, provided a minor damper on the insatiable demand for current popular fiction. In New Zealand where that public library tradition had become marginalised, and the arena was almost completely filled by social libraries attuned to the reading demands of their owners/managers/readers, and where failure to meet those demands spelled financial disaster, this damper was lacking and our 'public' libraries, as a result, provide a much more accurate measure of the public demand for fiction reading. An analysis of the printed catalogues of three commercial lending libraries in the colonial period,¹⁴ which one could assume would accurately reflect popular demand, revealed book stocks duplicating almost exactly their social library competitors, with similar balances of fiction and non-fiction, biography, history, and other subject areas, and the same authors.

A result of this greater sensitivity of New Zealand's public libraries to market demand was that fiction increasingly crowded out all other kinds of library reading except for those two other new forms of recreational reading that bloomed during the nineteenth century, the newspaper and the periodical. As fiction crowded out history, biography, literature, description and travel, science and the social sciences, it inevitably crowded out books with New Zealand content. The total number of books relating to New Zealand increased dramatically between 1850 and 1900, but they were overwhelmingly non-fiction, so that the proportion of books on the library shelves published in New Zealand or published overseas relating to New Zealand actually fell from 1850 to 1900.¹⁵

Some of the other results of this strong focus of our colonial public libraries on providing entertainment rather than enlightenment are beginning to emerge and will be reported in future articles.

Endnotes

- ¹ Public libraries and reading, a five-year research project supported by the Marsden Fund. For earlier related work on the history of public libraries in New Zealand see "Once Upon a Time in New Zealand: Library Aspirations and Colonial Reality in the Early Years of European Settlement," *Stout Centre Review* 3 (March 1993): 3-8; "Legislating for Un-Free Public Libraries: the Paradox of New Zealand Public Library Legislation 1869-1877," *Libraries & Culture*, 33 no.2 (1998), 162-174; "Sordid Duplicity or Cross-Cultural; Misunderstanding? The Fate of Andrew Carnegie's Gifts for Free Public Libraries in New Zealand," *Library History* 16 (May 2000): 13-23.
- ² *Proceedings and Papers of the Twelfth Conference ...* (Wellington: NZLA, 1940), 17-21.
- ³ Dulcie Gillespie-Needham, "The Colonial and His Books: A Study of Reading in Nineteenth Century New Zealand." PhD thesis in English, Victoria University, 1971.
- ⁴ Quoted in J.S. Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 24.
- ⁵ For some extended studies of the reading revolution see Gilmore in David Hall, *Cultures of Print* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996); *A History of Reading in the West* (London: Polity, 1993).
- ⁶ J.E. Tinne, *The Wonderland of the Antipodes* (London: Sampson Low, 1873), 76-7
- ⁷ Miles Fairburn in his *Ideal Society and its Enemies* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1989) comments on the rapid expansion of the frontier between 1850 and 1880 and the lack of critical masses of population (183-4) and concludes that this substantially hindered the formation of voluntary organisations and hastened their demise.
- ⁸ Jesse Shera, *Foundations of the Public Library: The Origins of the Public Library Movement in New England, 1629-1855* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949).
- ⁹ Gillespie-Needham, 56.
- ¹⁰ Glenda Northey, "Accessible to All: Libraries in the Auckland Provincial Area, 1842-1919." MA thesis in History, University of Auckland, 1998, 129.
- ¹¹ J.G. Heinzman, *Appel an meine Nation: Uber die Pest der deutschen Literatur*. (Bern, 1795).
- ¹² Anthony Trollope, *Four Lectures*, ed. Morris L. Parish. (London, 1936), 108.
- ¹³ Editorial, *New Zealand Herald*, 15 August 1884.
- ¹⁴ Haselden's Commercial Circulating Library, Wellington, 1889; Upton's Select Circulating Library, Auckland, 1874; Wayte's Circulating Library, Auckland, 1868. These are the only ones surviving in libraries in New Zealand.
- ¹⁵ An analysis of the surviving printed catalogues (including supplements) of 41 public libraries show a fall from 1.5% in the 1850s (three in every 200) to less than 1% by 1900. Northey (126) notes that few titles published in New Zealand and advertised by Chapman in Auckland, 1873-4, were purchased by Auckland libraries.