

## A Paradise for Readers? *The Extraordinary Proliferation of Public Libraries in Colonial New Zealand*

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This paper reports on a project that attempted to chart the growth and coverage of 'public' libraries in colonial New Zealand and to estimate their influence on reading.<sup>1</sup> This project was part of research, supported by the Marsden Fund, into reading habits in colonial New Zealand and how they were related to the sources of reading materials, including bookshops, commercial circulating libraries, public lending libraries and newspapers. The colonial 'public' libraries examined by the project were unlike the free public libraries developing in North America and Britain during the nineteenth century; they were with some minor exceptions user-pay subscription libraries managed by their subscribers and subsidized by the provinces and later by central government, and bearing such titles as mechanics' institute, literary institute, athenaeum, mutual improvement society, or public library.

A cursory examination of the two main published statistical sources, the five-yearly national *Census of Population* which included from 1873 a census of libraries<sup>2</sup>, and the annual returns presented to Parliament and published in the *Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives* on the payment of subsidies to public libraries under the Public Libraries Subsidies Act of 1877,<sup>3</sup> revealed substantial discrepancies. The Census up to 1916 claimed to cover all libraries but regularly noted that most were public libraries. It was only in 1916 that a breakdown of the kinds of libraries covered was provided; in that year of the 505 libraries 404 were public libraries, that is 80%. The other major groupings were clubs (34), commercial circulating libraries (16) and private etc. (33). In earlier years the proportion of public libraries was probably higher, in 1873 of the order of 90% or more. In that 1916 Census year the number of public libraries listed in the *Appendices* as receiving a subsidy was only 236, but this was because eligibility had been reduced in that year to libraries in centres with a population of less than 1,000. The under-representation of public libraries in the Census is very obvious in other years; between 1873 and 1911, based on 90% of all libraries being public, it was in excess of 30% (See Table 2).

Eligibility for a subsidy was restricted to libraries, as defined by the Public Libraries Subsidies Act of 1877, which were maintained or partly maintained by

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voluntary subscriptions or library rates, with an annual income of not less than £2<sup>4</sup> and which were not under the control of an association, society or club whose membership was composed of a section of the community only, and not more than one library in the same town (effectively borough).<sup>5</sup> The subsidy records do not include, apart from the occasional entry in the early years, the libraries maintained by churches, private clubs, working men's clubs, YMCAs, railway workshops, etc. However, the definition was elastic enough to encompass any organisation controlled by its members, whether incorporated or not, set up with the sole purpose of running a library for its members. But such libraries, if they were within any borough, had to be open to the public free of all charges,<sup>6</sup> "Provided that no person not being a contributor of any sum not less than five shillings a year shall be entitled to take books out of any public library."<sup>7</sup>

In order to establish a more reliable count of the number of public libraries, as defined above, in the colonial period (1840-1907), a data base was established, initially recording all the libraries listed by name in the central government subsidy records from 1878 to 1929, supplemented by the records of subsidies granted by the provincial governments before 1878, the full listing of public libraries by name in the *Census* of 1938 (the first time the names were published), plus details drawn from all the published histories of libraries held by the Alexander Turnbull Library and a scan of all the histories of local government and the local histories in the Turnbull, supplemented by information from the work on public libraries in the Auckland Province by Glenda Northey and Otago-Southland provinces by Keith Maslen. The data base includes the name of the library, the Education Board district, the date at which the library enters the public records, the subscription income, total income, subsidy paid by local or central governments, and where available the number of members and volumes held, and the last date at which the library was recorded as functioning, all up to 1938.<sup>8</sup>

Altogether 769 public libraries were identified as existing for at least one year between 1840 and 1914.<sup>9</sup> (See Table 1). This is an extraordinary number for such a small population that had grown from a few thousands in 1840 to just over one million by 1914. In the thirty-four years between 1840 and 1874<sup>10</sup> a total of 263 public libraries were founded, and in the thirty-nine years between 1875 and 1914, 506 were founded. These figures represent the number of libraries founded in the two periods. For the period 1840-1874 the number founded is also the number that existed; for the later period the number founded plus the number of survivors from the earlier period equals the number that existed. A good 249 of the 263 (that is 95%) survived into the later period. By 1908, when the number of public libraries reached its highest point according to the subsidy records (437), there was hardly a population centre in New Zealand that lacked its public library.

The nearest Census, that of 1906, recorded a total of 313 libraries (underreporting public libraries by over 30%) spread across 200 local authorities (103 boroughs and 97 counties). From the Census figures, in several small sparsely settled counties there was one library for around 500 people; in some medium sized counties with one or two small boroughs there was a library for some 1,200 people; and in the big counties with several major boroughs it was closer to one for 10,000.<sup>11</sup>

Using the total of all libraries (313) in the Census of 1906 there was a library for every 2,838 people. Based on the more accurate totals from the subsidy records (422) there was a public library for every 2,105 people. From the Census figures the library/population ratio in the nineteenth century ranged between 1:1,860 in 1873 to 1:2,314 in 1896. Using the subsidy records for public libraries only, the range for the same period was between 1:1,529 in 1878 to 1:2,608 in 1898.<sup>12</sup> (See Table 2).

Australasian comparisons for public libraries published in T.A. Coghlan's *Statistical Account of Australia and New Zealand* between 1891 and 1903-4 reveal that in New Zealand the number of libraries for the population was well above the Australasian average, and above all of the Australian colonies.<sup>13</sup> Figures from Victoria, the richest of the Australian colonies with a generous subsidy scheme, compiled by Askew and Hubber,<sup>14</sup> give a ratio of 1:54,000 in 1861, 1:17,135 in 1866, 1:3,921 in 1886 and 1:2,718 in 1896, all well below the New Zealand figures. Haynes McMullan estimates that New England, which had the highest density of public libraries in the United States through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, achieved at its highest point only about 1:5,000.<sup>15</sup> The density in Britain in the nineteenth century was well below this figure.

But this remarkable proliferation across a thinly settled countryside created weaknesses. The instability of these libraries is evidenced by the proportion, just 56%, that survived until 1929, the last year of the subsidies (See Table 1).

There are several factors contributing to this instability. New Zealand's population was very mobile during the settlement period, and there are several examples of a library losing up to half its subscribers in a year, especially in the mining settlements and the settlements of railway and road construction workers. A large library could survive sudden dips in its subscription income, but for a small one a reduction in the purchase of new books could lead to a further loss of dissatisfied subscribers. The central government subsidies varied with the state of the economy, and in some years the subsidy was discontinued. No subsidies were paid in 1879-81, 1887-97, 1909, 1915, 1917, and 1921-3, and the total available varied between £6,000 and £2,000 in any one year. For the smaller libraries the subsidy was a significant proportion of the total income with most of it being spent on book purchases. For the larger libraries with a building and a paid librarian the propor-

tion of the annual income spend on books, newspapers and periodicals was quite low, often less than a third, and they could absorb a sudden change in the subsidy. There are strong links between the subsidies and the formation dates of libraries, and their collapse. In the provincial government period, with generous and consistent subsidies from some provinces,<sup>16</sup> the formation rate was very high during the five-year period 1870-74; 51 in Auckland (of the 59 founded between 1840 and 1874); 52 in North Canterbury<sup>17</sup> (of the 66 founded between 1840 and 1874); 23 in Otago, and another 30 in the five-year period 1865-1869 (53 of the 64 between 1840 and 1874). When subsidies were withdrawn between 1887-97 during the depression, 78 libraries went out of existence (10%) and 68 (9%) went into recess, a total of 146 (19% of those in existence 1840-1914).

The major factor determining the stability of a library was its size, and especially the amount of its income (See Table 4). Some 73% had a total income (subscriptions, government subsidy, and other fund raising activities) between £2-25 a year; 21% had a total income between £2-10. Only 27% had an income of £26 or more, with only 4% with an income above £100. That is almost three quarters of the libraries existing between 1840 and 1914 were operating at close to subsistence level. Most such low income libraries were housed in the local school or a private dwelling, paid no rent, carried no insurance, had no paid staff, and spent almost all their income on books, periodicals and newspapers.

It is difficult to estimate just how much stock a library could purchase for £10. There was a steady decline in the general level of prices during the latter half of the nineteenth century both in New Zealand and Britain, with a rise in the twentieth. British book prices seem to have fallen during the century, but there were marked variations in the proportions of high and low priced books<sup>18</sup> and in the prices of cheap reprints. A book first published at 6s could be reprinted a year later at 2s, and later at 1s or even 6d. Because of the free trade in books between 1852 and 1899 booksellers were offering retail discounts of between 1d and 3d in the shilling and unregulated discounts to libraries anywhere between 10% and 50%.<sup>19</sup> Libraries in New Zealand, if they imported directly from Britain, would be paying shipping costs. Local bookshops appear to have been retailing for a few pence above the London price to cover freight costs.

At one extreme, if the subscribers of a New Zealand library insisted on having the latest novels at any cost and paid the full retail price of 31s 6d they could buy six new three-decker novels for £10. If they managed to buy at the standard discounted price offered to British circulating libraries (15s) they could have thirteen three-deckers. If they waited a year and bought the cheap 6s reprint at the full retail price they could have 33 novels; at a 10% discount 37; at a 50% discount, 66. Or at the other extreme if they could wait a little longer they could buy the

three-deckers discarded by Mudie's Circulating Library in London<sup>20</sup> at anywhere between 9s and 2s 6d. At 9s they could have 22, and 2s 6d, 80 titles. The Christchurch Mechanics' Institute wrote to its London agent, Stanford, in September 1872 thus: "... the Committee require second hand books of the current literature of the day from Mudies or other similar libraries to the extent of five pounds in all."<sup>21</sup> In 1864 the United Circulating Libraries in Britain advertised job lots of second hand novels for between 2s and 4s a title in the *New Zealander*.<sup>22</sup> Towards the end of the century most of the smaller public libraries in New Zealand were buying fiction only. In 1913 when the Department of Education conducted a survey it found 123 (of 408) were buying only fiction, and that 89% of the purchases of all except the eleven major libraries consisted of fiction.

An analysis of a bookseller's two priced lists of new and second-hand serious non-fiction (with the odd fiction classic such as *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and *Baron Munchausen*) published in the *Nelson Examiner* in 1845 and 1860 produces an average price of 4s 3d in 1845 and 11s 10d in 1860. The 1860 list includes several high-priced multi-volume calf-bound titles of interest to the serious collector and unlikely to grace the shelves of impoverished small public libraries.<sup>23</sup>

In 1854 William Lyon was advertising twenty volumes of the Universal Library, cheap reprints of standard fiction and non-fiction out of copyright, at 1s 6d and 2s a title.<sup>24</sup>

In 1874, during the period of the highest formation rate for public libraries, George Chapman, the Auckland bookseller and printer, issued a 40 page list of new books available for sale, most of them with a retail price.<sup>25</sup> Standard novels by currently popular authors were available at 6s, 3s 6d and 3s; cheaper reprints of most of these authors were priced at 2s 6d, 2s, and 1s 6d; Black's Waverley Novels and the American Library of Thrilling Romance and Adventure (60 titles) at 9d. There was a six and a half page list of the Cottage Library, cheap reprints of older fiction and non-fiction, at 1s 6d. The American Library of Popular Humour and Fun included Mark Twain at 1s 6d and 2s 6d and Louisa May Alcott at 1s 6d. Wordsworth's Poetical Works were available at 4s 6d, 3s, 2s and 1s 6d; Boswell's Life of Johnson at 10s and 4s 6d, Gibbon's Decline and Fall in 3 volumes for 12s. Weale's popular series of manuals for trades, occupations and professions, a standard feature of most public and commercial circulating libraries, ranged from 6s to 1s 6d, with the odd title, such as Woodward's Shells, Recent and Fossil at 7s 6d and a Hebrew Dictionary in two volumes at 15s. In 1884 the Wellington bookseller and printer, Lyon and Blair, was issuing monthly lists of "New novels," "New books and new editions" and "New annual volumes," with novels mostly at 2s, with a few at as much as 7s 6d, the odd one at 9d and novels by American authors at 1s 3d.<sup>26</sup>

The Dunedin Athenaeum was buying new books in 1867 at an average of 7s 6d, reducing to 3s 6d in 1896 as the proportion of popular fiction increased. The Lawrence Athenaeum bought well-bound standard works through the Otago Education Board in 1868 at an average of 4s 8d, the Napier Athenaeum was paying an average of 6s 6d in 1869, and the Port Victoria Library an average of 6s a volume in 1873-4.

It seems likely that a library buying a mixture of new and second hand hard-backs at the best price it could negotiate could be paying as little as 3s a title, while if it bought only the cheap paper-back reprints, it could be paying around 1s 6d. For £10 a library could afford between sixty-six and one hundred twenty titles a year. Most of the smaller libraries were in a weak negotiating position, lacked the skills to bargain with London booksellers and libraries, and seem to have bought most of their stock from local booksellers at slightly inflated prices with small discounts (10% or less). A not untypical approach was that of the Lower Matakana Public Library in 1888, just after the suspension of the central government subsidy, when its subscription income was about £2 10s. The "Chairman instructed committee to strike out most expensive books from list supplied by George Chapman, [the Auckland bookseller] and order remainder from the bookseller who would supply them at the lowest price."<sup>27</sup>

Most of the small libraries with a total income from subscriptions and subsidies of around £10 in the 1880s were being subsidised at about 2:1 (roughly £6 14s in subsidies for £3 7s in subscriptions), and with such a subscription income would have about thirteen subscribers at 5s per year.<sup>28</sup> If it is assumed that the total income was available for book purchases (no accommodation, salary, heating, etc. costs) then these thirteen subscribers, if they purchased slightly older fiction at the best price available, would have had somewhere in excess of sixty-six new titles a year, or a new book every five and a half days.<sup>29</sup> On the other hand if they bought thirteen three-decker novels at 15s a title, they would have one new novel a month. These very crude estimates go a long way towards explaining why so many institutions, which would seem to be operating at subsistence levels by modern library standards, managed to survive so long. Such small libraries, and 21% of the grand total of all public libraries known to exist between 1840 and 1914 had a total income between £2 and £10, were no better than government subsidised fiction reading clubs, and many managed to hold on to a tiny but dedicated membership for over sixty years.

When it comes to estimating the size of the bookstock and membership there are major problems. The published central government subsidy records<sup>30</sup> have only monetary values — income from subscriptions and fund raising activities and the government subsidy. For the period up to 1876 some of the provincial

subsidy records provide bookstock and membership but they are for a limited period.<sup>31</sup> The Census records provide numbers of volumes and subscribers for all libraries (between 80% and 90% were public libraries) but they under-report the smaller public libraries, by as much as 50% in one year. From an analysis of the Census figures for all libraries for the period 1873 to 1896<sup>32</sup> estimates for the percentage of subscribers/members to the total population and the population over fifteen years of age, and the numbers of volumes per head for the total population and population over fifteen years can be derived (See Table 2). Subscribers/members ranged between 3.1% and 2.3% of the total population, and between 5.36% and 3.85% of the population over fifteen. If it is assumed that one subscriber/member shared his books with two other family members then somewhere between 7% and 10% of the total population were readers of library materials, or somewhere between 11% and 16% of the population over fifteen years. These are very conservative percentages; if one takes into account the large size of the average colonial family and the under-representation of the small public libraries these figures could well be doubled. Askew and Hubber estimate that Australian public libraries in the colonial period rarely reached more than about 7% of the total population, and more probably reached only about 3%.<sup>33</sup> The number of volumes<sup>34</sup> per head of total population and for the population over fifteen years is given in Table 3. A comparison with Askew and Hubber's analysis for Victorian public libraries<sup>35</sup> between 1871 and 1901 shows they had fewer books per head of total population, varying between 1:5.74 and 1:1.98, for a population some four times larger, of 764,000 in 1871 to 1,210,000 in 1901.

Why should there have been such an extraordinary proliferation, over such a short span of time, of public book-lending institutions in colonial New Zealand? A standard explanation, first offered in 1844 and often repeated, was the very nature of colonial life, coupled in New Zealand's case, with the superior nature of the colonists.

A well-conducted Colonist is of necessity a reading man; debarred from the more frivolous amusements of the mother country, he has no other resource but in books, or the debasing influence of the tavern—the bane and antidote of Colonial life. None but they who have resided in a new Colony can appreciate the value of a new book; and we are happy to bear testimony, that in no colony is literature more appreciated than in New Zealand: as might be expected from the very superior class of men who have migrated to our favourite Colony.<sup>36</sup>

Colonial life, it has been argued, was different because the settlers, migrating from old societies rich in economic, social and cultural institutions to new lands totally lacking in such institutions, sought to replicate them in as short a time as

possible. As well, those who emigrated were likely to be more adventurous and adaptive, and more committed to self-improvement, than those who stayed behind, and they had greater freedom in the creation of institutions suited to their needs because tradition, in a new country, weighed far more lightly. It was also argued that loss of the close knit structures of kinship that had been left behind provided strong incentives for the creation of local voluntary community organisations, such as churches, friendly societies, clubs, sports teams, and libraries, to serve as partial replacements. Libraries fulfilled an important role as social centres, and in the eyes of legislators, useful instruments of social control for unruly colonial youth.<sup>37</sup> Colonial life in the Australian colonies also produced a proliferation of similar book-lending institutions over much the same time period, and a similar pattern of subsidies by central government, and a lack of interest by local government. A remarkably similar development in North America at the same time, not in a colonial society of settlement, but in the new communities that boomed on the Californian goldfields from 1849 to 1865, points up the two elements in common: first, the rapid formation of new communities in new lands, and second, the time period, that is the mid-nineteenth century. Ray Held notes that "Within a decade of the gold discovery there was no inhabited part of California that had not experienced attempts by some of its residents to form library associations" (cooperative enterprises for lending books to their members and funded by subscriptions) and that "the attempt to create and support a book-centred organisation was a normal development, a natural phase of community life."<sup>38</sup> These social libraries, modelled on the form which had developed in New England in the eighteenth century, bloomed during the gold rush period between 1849 and 1865 and rapidly faded away as the gold-field communities died. In the 1850s a concentration of a few hundred people was enough to initiate a social library, though it required three thousand or more to sustain one.<sup>39</sup> Haynes McMullen in his detailed statistical survey, *American Libraries Before 1876*, is clearly puzzled why libraries were being established in California at a rate higher than in any part of the United States then or previously, when the miners in California were "busily seeking their fortunes by mining or selling products to miners at high prices"<sup>40</sup> McMullen looked at all the statistical variables, noted that the most significant was the low percentage of women in the population, and raised the question "Could the abnormally low numbers of women have caused western men to turn to libraries?"<sup>41</sup> Held, in his final chapter, identifies ten factors that may explain why libraries developed the way they did in California between 1849 and 1878. These included such factors as economics, population, educational levels, leadership, local pride and self-improvement, but none provided fully satisfactory explanations. However, he notes under Self-improvement, that the social



aspects of self-improvement outweighed the educational, and that there was a strong emphasis on the library as a centre of rational amusement, especially in the gold rush social libraries. "The idea of the library as a pastime (and a wholesome pastime) was noted from the first and never ceased to have its appeal."<sup>42</sup> The one factor he did not consider was a change in reading habits, but then he was writing in 1963 before scholars identified and explored the reading revolution.

What needs to be explained is why, on the California goldfields and in the colonies in Australasia, these new communities went so far beyond the mark established by their parent societies in the formation of public libraries and established so many in the second half of the nineteenth century, and why they adopted a form, the social library, that was in decline in Britain and the rest of North America.

Miles Fairburn argues in *The Ideal Society and its Enemies* (177-187) that voluntary organisations were weak in colonial New Zealand, with high rates of failure and low coverage of the population, contributing to a society of lonely, atomized individuals with weak social bonding. He marshals impressive evidence on the low membership of churches, friendly societies, lodges, clubs, associations, and sports clubs compared with Britain and the Australian colonies at the same time. He includes the adult education institutions for working men, namely mechanics' institutes, literary institutes and athenaeums, as "death prone" most of which did not survive the 1880s, let alone the turn of the century and of which "by 1900 some 80<sup>43</sup> remained (10.4 for every 100,000 population)." If Fairburn is right about the fragility of the adult education institutions and all the other voluntary organisations, then public libraries, of which there were 349 receiving subsidies in 1900, are an outstanding exception.

Why should voluntary associations of readers be so prevalent in these newly formed societies in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and so persistent in New Zealand and Australia? Observers of colonial societies from de Tocqueville onwards have noted that the new settlers in isolated places "have arrived there since yesterday", arriving "with the customs, the ideas, the needs of civilization."<sup>44</sup> However the nature of that "civilization" and the needs engendered by it varied over time. British settlers when they arrived in early seventeenth century North America felt no compelling need for printing presses, newspapers or libraries, nor did those who arrived in New South Wales in 1788, but the New Zealand settlers from 1840 had all three on the ships bound for Wellington, Nelson, Canterbury and Otago.<sup>45</sup> What settlers saw as the necessities of civilized life depended on where their settlement intersected with the rising curve of modernity. New Zealand's European society was born modern. The British industrial revolution, which had

ushered in modernity, had already formed the characters and the needs of New Zealand's predominantly British settlers. The fully developed instruments of modernity that they brought to the foundation of the colony, including the commodification of land and labour, powerful centralised government, scientific agriculture, steam power, mechanical technology, railways, banks, insurance, the limited liability company and robust systems for registering and transferring land ownership, enabled them to transform New Zealand into a neo-Europe within fifty years. At the frontier in the 19<sup>th</sup> century "Instead of the school house, the church and the printing office being, as of old, the products of half a generation, they now take their places among the institutions of advancing civilization in a month and a year."<sup>46</sup>

The settlers' needs had been shaped by another manifestation of modernity, the reading revolution which began in the previous century, and for a significant number of them extensive reading of a wide range of printed materials had become a necessity of life.<sup>47</sup> This extensive reading style, as much a part of daily life as food, shelter and clothing, is neatly caught 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 "with a good horse, comfortable house and food, and all the latest English magazines and papers."<sup>48</sup> The mechanisms being developed in Britain and North America to meet the new demands for reading materials, the commercial subscription libraries and the municipally funded public libraries, were unsuited to rapidly expanding rural settlement. Commercial subscription libraries could survive in large towns, but could not meet the demands at the rapidly expanding frontiers of settlement. Municipal government was far too small and weak in Australasia and the California goldfields. The settlers had perforce to organise themselves to form societies, some legally incorporated but most informal and unincorporated, to share the costs of building small local collections of books, periodicals and newspapers to meet their insatiable demands, and they looked to existing models in the mechanics' institutes, athenaeums and literary societies of their homelands. These models, familiar and reassuring, soon proved to be inappropriate, and all of them soon shed their self-improvement roles and transformed themselves into lending libraries.<sup>49</sup>

The formation of the first lending libraries in Australasia was strongly influenced by the Enlightenment belief in the virtues of systematic reading for moral instruction, to free individuals from superstition, for self-improvement and social amelioration, and this is reflected in the stock of the libraries, including the commercial lending libraries, well into the 1860s, and in the public pronouncements of politicians, educators and newspaper editors on the educative role of libraries in colonial life. As the century progressed, while the number of libraries

increased, providing clear evidence of increased public virtue and intellectual improvement, to the bewilderment and consternation of politicians, educators and newspaper editors, the quality of their stock appeared to be in rapid decline, with fiction dominating new purchases and borrowing. Public pronouncements uniformly lamented the decline in reading standards. Sir Robert Stout, who wrote and spoke eloquently for almost half a century in praise of systematic reading for self-improvement, picks up both these trends in 1908.

In our country districts there are few places that have not a library. In the far North I found good libraries at Whangaroa, Russell, Mangonui and Kawakawa ... [however] The reading of serious books was not popular amongst our people ... In the hotels and boarding houses I have not seen a single young person reading a serious book. The newspaper is read, and occasionally a novel is perused ... Such newspapers have become a substitute for books.<sup>50</sup>

Not only extensive reading arrived with modernity, but also a new concept of leisure. "Even idleness is eager now,—eager for amusement; prone to excursion-trains, art-museums, periodical literature, and exciting novels; prone even to scientific theorizing, and cursory peeks through microscopes."<sup>51</sup> By the mid-century, just as the user-pays subscription public lending libraries began evolving on the goldfields of California and in the Australasian colonies, reading had established itself as an acceptable leisure activity for the literate and rapidly growing middle and working classes in Britain and North America.<sup>52</sup> Reading for leisure soon became reading for pleasure, for distraction and entertainment, and the first choice for leisure reading was the novel. The tide of the Enlightenment that ferried the first public libraries to the Australasian colonies was overtaken by and then overwhelmed by the commodification of leisure reading,<sup>53</sup> and it was the search for means of spreading the cost of a wide variety of expendable leisure reading that drove the evolution of the colonial public library in Australasia.

The colonial public library's evolution during the nineteenth century was towards a club for fiction readers. Comparisons between the printed catalogues of New Zealand public libraries and the commercial lending libraries show that their bookstocks were similar, and that they were both shifting strongly towards recreational fiction from the 1860s. Public libraries that passed under the control of local authorities offered only minor resistance to the tide. Their circulation departments, apart from the minor exceptions of Dunedin and Timaru in the early twentieth century, were funded by the subscriptions of members. Their fiction collections were similar to those of the independent public libraries despite the often declared unwillingness of elected councillors to provide penny dreadfuls on the rates. John Barr, a Scot trained in the values of the British free public

library movement, who headed the Auckland Public Library from 1913 and who argued tirelessly for forty years that public libraries were instruments for the diffusion of knowledge, concluded in 1940 that New Zealand was different in placing emphasis on the recreational at the expense of the informational. "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 entertainment ... and decided that that entertainment should be paid for as all other kinds of entertainment were paid for."<sup>54</sup>

The landscape of the Australasian colonies (and the California goldfields) was one in which subscription libraries were likely to flourish because of their flexibility, their ease of creation and the lack of entrenched competition. When in the middle of the nineteenth century the international reading climate changed, with the rapid rise of fiction as a commodity for a new recreational market, it was like a deluge of nutrient on this landscape. The subscription libraries, totally dependent for their existence on satisfying the needs of their subscribers, adapted quickly to absorb this nutrient. The few local authority public libraries then in existence almost choked on this new diet and devised numbers of stratagems to slow the tide. They believed they were in the enlightenment business of using the printed word to improve human behaviour while the subscription libraries were in whatever business their subscribers needed, and clearly it was now entertainment.

Ray Held comments that the rise of social libraries in early California was seemingly unaffected by adverse economic conditions or the lack of philanthropy (such an important factor in the eastern United States). In New Zealand the small size of the population base, the small numbers of subscribers, minimal incomes and collections, and economic depression were not effective impediments to the formation and survival of several hundred public libraries. The remarkable persistence of the public library at Maungakarama in North Auckland is worth noting for it is typical of well over a hundred similar institutions. The first settler arrived in 1858, a church was established in 1865, and a post office in 1866. The library was founded in 1878 with twenty-six members, falling to eight in 1880, ten in 1883, three between 1885 and 1905 (the members of the committee), and yet it was still in existence in 1938 when it had eighteen members and 2050 volumes. The total population was one hundred fifty-two in 1878 (17% of the population were subscribers), rising to three hundred forty-four in 1921 and falling to three hundred five in 1936 (6% of the population were subscribers). It was first granted a subsidy in 1882 when its subscription income was £2 7s 6d. and continued receiving the subsidy until 1929. It dropped out of the subsidy records between 1885 and 1897, effectively going into recess during the Long Depression of the 1880s, but appeared again in 1898 with an income of £7. It dropped out again between 1891 and 1902, almost certainly because its subscription income

fell below the qualifying figure of £2. In its best year, 1905, with three members it reported an income of £17, most of which would have come from fund-raising in an attempt to buy more new books to attract members. By 1912 income had fallen back to £3 10s.<sup>55</sup>

The contemporary wonder at this phenomenon was well caught by a commentator in 1890.

We may not be inclined to credit humanity with so much intellectual yearning; but it is only necessary to go through our thinly-populated country districts, and see the numerous attempts that have been made in these out-of-the-way corners of the colony to establish Public Libraries, in order to convince ourselves that intellectual desires are commoner than we might suppose. Poor, these libraries are; but when circumstances are taken into account,—the difficulties that country people labour under in selecting and procuring books, and the smallness of the funds at their disposal, —the wonder is not that these libraries are poor, but that they are there at all.<sup>56</sup>

In summary, New Zealand in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century appears, on the basis of the available statistics on its public libraries, to have been a paradise for readers. But if so it had its serpent, the insatiable appetite for popular fiction, and by 1900 Satan had clearly had his way with the colonial reader.

*Wellington, New Zealand*



**Table 1: Public Libraries in existence for at least one year, 1840-1914**

	No. of Libraries	Created 1840-1874	Created 1875-1914	Lasted less than 5 years	Lasted less than 21	Lasted more than 21	Existed 1929	Most creative period
North Island	330 (43%)	78 (24%)	252 (76%)	49 (15%)	105 (32%)	223 (68%)	192 (58%)	1870-4
South Island	439 (57%)	185 (42%)	254 (58%)	53 (12%)	153 (35%)	283 (64%)	236 (54%)	1870-4
New Zealand total	769 (100%)	263 (34%)	506 (66%)	102 (13%)	258 (34%)	506 (66%)	428 (56%)	1870-4

**Table 2: Libraries to Population and Members to Population, Census years 1873-1911**

Census Years	Population (1)	Population 15+ (2)	Total Libraries in Census (3)	Public Libraries Receiving Subsidies (4)	Public Libraries/Population (1:1)	Public Libraries/Population 15+ (2:1)	Library Members in Census (5)	Members/Population (5:1)	Total Libraries in Census/Population (1:3)
1873	299,514	175,479	161	n.a.					1,860
1878	414,412	239,444	187	271	1,529	884	12,092	2.9%	2,216
1881	489,933	282,107	225	354 (1882)	1,384	797	12,868	2.6%	2,177
1886	578,482	339,954	303	361	1,602	941	13,684	2.4%	1,969
1891	626,658	376,290	298	n.a.			14,489	2.3%	2,103
1896	703,360	448,209	304	285 (1898)	2,468	1,573	17,638	2.5%	2,314
1901	772,719	514,952	206	369	2,094	1,396	n.a.		3,751
1906	888,578	608,787	313	422	2,105	1,443	22,770	2.6%	2,839
1911	1,068,468	693,139	358	391	2,579	1,773	31,221	3.1%	2817

\* Incomplete. Some records were destroyed by fire. Population figures exclude Maori living in traditional communities.

**Table 3: Volumes and Population, Census Years 1873-1911**

Date	Population (1)	Population 15+ (2)	Number of Libraries (3)	Volumes (4)	Population/Volumes (1:4)	Population 15+/Volumes (2:4)
1873	299,514	175,479	161	98,039	3.05	1.79
1878	414,412	239,444	187	173,021	2.39	1.38
1881	489,933	282,107	225	198,520	2.46	1.42
1886	578,482	339,954	303	292,108	1.98	1.16
1891	626,658	376,290	298	330,770	1.89	1.14
1896	703,360	448,209	304	409,604	1.72	1.09
1901	772,719	514,942	206*	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
1906	888,578	608,787	313	567,841	1.56	1.07
1911	1,008,468	693,139	358	863,878	1.17	0.80

\* Incomplete. Some records were destroyed by fire.

**Table 4: Total Income of Public Libraries, 1840-1914**

	Over £100	£51-100	£26-50	£11-25	£2-10	Totals
North Island	21 (6%)	14 (4%)	49 (15%)	173 (53%)	70 (21%)	327
South Island	13 (3%)	22 (5%)	83 (19%)	224 (51%)	93 (21%)	435
New Zealand	34 (4%)	36 (5%)	132 (17%)	397 (52%)	163 (21%)	762

The numbers of libraries is slightly less than the total of 769 identified for Table 1: income figures were not available for seven libraries.

*Endnotes*

<sup>1</sup> For an account of the development in New Zealand of a distinctive pattern of non-free public lending libraries, more akin to the 'social' libraries of North America in the eighteenth century, see the author's earlier studies: "Once Upon A Time in New Zealand: Library Aspirations and Colonial Reality in the Early Years of European Settlement," in *Stout Centre Review* 3 (March 1993), 3-8; "Legislating for Un-Free Public Libraries: the Paradox of New Zealand Public Library Legislation 1869-1877," in *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," in *Library History* 16 (May 2000), 13-23.

<sup>2</sup> The data published is scanty: initially the province, after the abolitions of the provinces the provincial district, county or borough, and the totals for the number of institutions, the number of members, and the volumes held. The original returns from institutions have not survived in National Archives.

<sup>3</sup> The data published consists of the Education Board district, the name of the library, its income, and the amount of the subsidy. None of the original returns from institutions for the nineteenth century have survived in National Archives.

<sup>4</sup> *New Zealand Gazette*, 20 September 1883.

<sup>5</sup> *NZ Gazette*, 13 November 1884.

<sup>6</sup> A handful of libraries in the boroughs, including the Athenaeums in Wellington and Dunedin, refused to allow free access to non-subscribers, and were not eligible to apply for subsidies. Some were excluded because their income was less than £2 or their subscription less than 5s. for borrowers.

<sup>7</sup> Public Libraries Subsidies Act 1877, s. 8.

<sup>8</sup> After 1938, with the founding of the Country Library Service, the domination of the 'public' (more properly 'social' subscription) libraries of the colonial period quickly came to an end with the widespread adoption of the Anglo-American model of the completely free, municipally-funded public library.

<sup>9</sup> Because the support changed substantially in 1916, when only those libraries serving a population of under 1000 were eligible for a subsidy and the amount voted was halved, the data was tabulated 1840-1914 and 1916-1938.

<sup>10</sup> The two periods are not equal in length, but 1874 (end of five-year period 1870-74) was the most convenient point for the division. The provinces ceased to exist from November 1876, and the responsibility for subsidies passed to the central government from 1877.

<sup>11</sup> In Otamatea, with 6 libraries for 2,921 population, 1:486; in Weber, with one library for 593 population, 1: 593; in Cheviot with one library for 1,605, 1:1,605; in Tuapeka with 5 libraries for 8,068 population and three small boroughs, 1:1,613.

<sup>12</sup> The subsidy records for 1898, when subsidies were resumed after a gap of eleven years, have the lowest count of public libraries since 1878.

<sup>13</sup> Coghlan used the Census figures for New Zealand, which substantially underestimate the number of public libraries, and the subsidy records for the Australian colonies, most of which slightly overestimate the numbers.

<sup>14</sup> "The Colonial Reader Observed: Reading in its Cultural Context," in *The Book in Australia*, edited by D.H. Borchardt and W. Kirsop (Melbourne: Australian Reference Publishers, 1988), 122

<sup>15</sup> "Prevalence of Libraries in the Northeastern States before 1876", in *Journal of Library History* 22 no.3 (Summer 1987): 312-337.

<sup>16</sup> Auckland from 1871, Nelson from 1855, Canterbury from 1870, and Otago from 1864.

<sup>17</sup> The Canterbury Province was particularly generous, with grants both for buildings and for bookstock, with £5,414 allocated in 1876. Auckland allocated its highest figure, £300, in 1874, but only for bookstock.



- <sup>18</sup> See Simon Eliot, *Some Patterns and Trends in British Publishing 1800-1919* (London: Bibliographical Society, 1994), 59-77.
- <sup>19</sup> "One correspondent [of the Bookseller] complained of sales to public libraries at up to 50 per cent discount in 1862," quoted by F.A. Munby, *Publishing and Bookselling* (London: Cape, 1974), 243
- <sup>20</sup> See Guineveve L. Greist, *Mudie's Circulating Library and the Victorian Novel* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), 59. Naseby Athenaeum (18881-1893), Westland Institute (1889), Nelson Institute (1887), and Warkworth Public Library (1896) were among the libraries buying Mudie's discards.
- <sup>21</sup> Correspondence, accounts, reports, etc. Z Arch 29, box 1, Canterbury Public Library.
- <sup>22</sup> 21 October 1864.
- <sup>23</sup> 24 May 1845, 11 February 1860.
- <sup>24</sup> *Wellington Independent*, 29 April 1854.
- <sup>25</sup> Catalogue of Miscellaneous Books on Sale by G.T. Chapman, unpaginated, bound in the Turnbull's copy of *Chapman's New Zealand Almanac* 1874, and probably also issued as a separate, but not in Bagnall.
- <sup>26</sup> As advertising, between 13 and 16 pages wrapped around the text of the *Monthly Review of New Books and Contemporary Subjects*.
- <sup>27</sup> Minute Book, Lower Matakana Public Library, 26 June 1888, Warkworth District Museum.
- <sup>28</sup> Most libraries seem to have moved towards 5s by the 1880s, though some smaller ones were charging less to hold on to their subscribers.
- <sup>29</sup> In 1867 five members of the Lawrence Athenaeum were reading a book every five days, and in 1879 a local solicitor borrowed 192 books, one every 1.9 days.
- <sup>30</sup> The returns, which have not survived, provided a wealth of additional information on bookstock by broad subject groupings, circulation, annual additions, numbers of subscribers, etc. The occasional duplicate form has been preserved in the records of individual libraries.
- <sup>31</sup> Some 20 years for Nelson, 10 for Otago and 5 for Canterbury and Auckland.
- <sup>32</sup> The 1901 Census was incomplete due to some returns being destroyed by a fire.
- <sup>33</sup> *The Book in Australia*, 122. Hubber estimates that the membership of the Prahran Public Library in suburban Melbourne was between 4 and 8% of the total population between 1860 and 1895. *Books, Libraries and Readers in Colonial Australia* (Melbourne, 1985), 60.
- <sup>34</sup> The Census count of volumes included the substantial bookstock of the libraries of the General Assembly, the provincial assemblies, the scientific institutes and the universities.
- <sup>35</sup> *The Book in Australia*, 122.
- <sup>36</sup> "Review," *New Zealand Journal*, 6 July 1844.
- <sup>37</sup> These arguments are canvassed in Miles Fairburn's *The Ideal Society and its Enemies* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1989).
- <sup>38</sup> *Public Libraries in California 1849-1878* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), 11, 31-2. The Act in Reference to Library Associations 1863 provided simple procedures for the legal incorporation of these libraries, and provided the model for New Zealand's Public Libraries Powers Act 1875.
- <sup>39</sup> Held, 125.
- <sup>40</sup> Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 45-6.
- <sup>41</sup> McMullen, 46.
- <sup>42</sup> Held, 130.
- <sup>43</sup> Citing A.B. Thomson's *Adult Education in New Zealand* (1945).
- <sup>44</sup> Quoted in G.W. Pierson, *Tocqueville and Beaumont in America* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1938), 236-7.
- <sup>45</sup> See footnote 2, "Once upon a Time in New Zealand," and "The Two Histories of Printing in New Zealand," *BSANZ Bulletin* 25 nos 1 & 2 (2001).
- <sup>46</sup> Logan U.Reavis, 1867, cited by David Hamer in *New Towns in the New World* (NY: Columbia University Press, 1990), 98.

<sup>47</sup>There is a large body of literature on this subject. See in particular William J. Gibson's *Reading Becomes a Necessity of Life* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989) for the changes in reading in rural New England from 1780 to 1835, and J.E. Traue's "Fiction, Public Libraries and the Reading Public in Colonial New Zealand," *BSANZ Bulletin* (2004), in press.

<sup>48</sup>*The Wonderland of the Antipodes* (London: Sampson Low, 1873), 76-7.

<sup>49</sup>Sue Healy in her study of mechanics' institutes in Victoria notes that their educational role never got off the ground, that their informational roles had mostly gone by the 1880s and only the recreational role remained. *Books, Libraries and Readers in Colonial Australia* (Melbourne: Graduate School of Librarianship, Monash University, 1985), 44. The same point is made by Nadel in his *Australia's Colonial Culture* (1957), "amusement had finally ousted improvement," 126.

<sup>50</sup>*How and What to Read* (Auckland: The Book Exchange, 1908).

<sup>51</sup>George Eliot in *Adam Bede*, lamenting the death of traditional leisure.

<sup>52</sup>See David Hall, *Cultures of Print* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1996), 75.

<sup>53</sup>See, for example Janice Radway, chapter 4 of *A Feeling for Books* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

<sup>54</sup>*Proceedings and Papers of the Twelfth Conference ...* (Wellington: NZLA, 1940), 17-21.

<sup>55</sup>Glenda Northey, "Accessible to All: Libraries in the Auckland Provincial Area, 1842-1919," MA, University of Auckland, 1998, 90-94, and the subsidy records in the AJHR.

<sup>56</sup>Joshua Rutland, "A National Circulating Library," in *Monthly Review*, v. 2 no4 (April 1890), 206.