

## **'Even Edgar Wallace may be discovered...': The fiction policy of an English public library in the 1930s**

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Reading Sheffield, our oral history community project, looks at people's reading in the city in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, and has led to research about how the public library service of the period supported residents' reading. This paper looks at an aspect of that: the fiction policy of Sheffield Libraries in the 1930s. It draws on the city records and the professional writings of the librarians involved.

In the late 1930s, Sheffield Libraries began to include in their annual reports the novels (and non-fiction) most in demand, measured by the number of reservations. The clear winner for some years was Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*, published in 1936 and madly hyped by Hollywood. Occasionally, classics like *Jane Eyre*, *Pickwick Papers* and *Les Misérables* featured. Much more likely were novels by the popular authors of the period, such as A J Cronin, Francis Brett Young, Pearl S Buck, Daphne Du Maurier, Howard Spring and – unsurprising in Yorkshire – Winifred Holtby and J B Priestley. Yorkshire accounted too for a novel few will ever have heard of – *Portrait in Steel* by Leonora Thornton. Set in Sheffield – 'steel' in the title is a giveaway – this was a great success in 1938-39.

With the exception of *Portrait in Steel*, which was much lauded in the local press, most of the authors mentioned would have been in demand in libraries across the country. Their popularity was no doubt aided by, for example, a radio adaptation of *Les Misérables* on the BBC National Programme in early 1939 and the film of *South Riding* in 1938.

But how did the library service in Sheffield view them and the other novels on its shelves?

To understand this, it is worth looking at the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, when public libraries started. Those who oversaw the new public libraries often mistrusted public tastes. This no doubt has roots in the very Victorian aim for libraries – that is, to improve the behaviour and attitudes of the working class. Libraries were seen by many 19<sup>th</sup> century social reformers as a way to combat vice among the lower orders. It made sense then that libraries should offer only weighty and improving works. But the

public often had other ideas. In the 1850s, librarians in both Manchester and Salford complained that their poorly educated borrowers preferred novels and romances to serious literature, non-fiction and practical works; and in 1879, J Taylor Kay, the librarian of Owen's College Manchester (now the University of Manchester) thundered to the Library Association: '...undoubtedly novels are the most dangerous literature of the age: they dissipate the attention; they appeal to the lazy feelings; sensation and novelty are all that are required from them ... better would it be that these lending libraries should cease to exist than that they should disseminate evil influences'.

A wonder then that fiction was found in any library. But not everyone felt this way. Liverpool Libraries, for example, acknowledged the greater moral purpose but took the longer view: 'Works of amusement form about one half of all the books read. Far from regretting this result, the committee feel it their duty to render this portion of the library more attractive still, being of the opinion that the love of reading in any form must tend to counteract the propensity to low and degrading pursuits, and that in order to inspire a thirst for knowledge, the first step is to cultivate a taste for reading in some direction.'

Public libraries were still worrying at this eighty years later in the 1920s and '30s. In 1929, for example, librarian Eva Daniels lamented in the journal, *The Library Assistant*: 'Like the adult public, the children are passionately addicted to what is commonly called "tripe"'. Sheffield Libraries inclined more to the Liverpool view by this time, as we shall see.

Sheffield's public library was a local pioneer - the first in Yorkshire. It opened in 1856, only six years after the Public Libraries Act. The library did well enough at first, opening branches and increasing custom, if under-funded and not always well-organised. But by 1920 an independent report commissioned by a rather embarrassed council noted: poor staff morale and professional skills; lack of money; dated systems; unsafe, cramped and filthy premises; and inadequate and badly-chosen stock generally in very poor condition. It could not have been a pleasant experience to look for a book when the dust on shelves was reportedly inches thick. Borrowing was falling and many people preferred the various twopenny libraries and similar across the city (where of course there was no concern about the value or otherwise of novels).

The newly-appointed city librarian, Richard J Gordon, set about reforming the service and, when he left in 1927, his deputy, Joseph P Lamb, continued and extended the work until by the 1950s, Sheffield's service was nationally recognised. These two men were relatively young and keen to experiment with the latest ideas and techniques and they were backed by their committee chairman. Looking at their writings, it seems clear that their starting point was the educational potential of the library, but they also believed that the library was for everyone and so did not scorn

popular books. Their success may be seen most obviously in the rise in the annual issue: 90,000 in 1920; 365,000 in 1925-26; 3,640,000 in 1932-33; and 3,750,000 in 1945-46 (this last admittedly affected by the war).

When J P Lamb took over in 1927, he had already noted the impact of publicity on the success of a book on his shelves. He set up what he described as 'extensive tests' to gauge patterns of interest in books, both 'scholarly' and 'popular'. From these he concluded that the great majority of readers did not come looking for a particular book (although some might have been looking for a genre or familiar author). What people wanted was 'a book, preferably an attractive one', Lamb said. They browsed, chose 'at random' and rarely used the complex classification system. It is helpful to remember here that as late as the 1920s Sheffield was still using the closed access system, where borrowers chose from catalogues and their choices were delivered by assistants. Browsing among the books themselves, most necessarily newly bought, must have been a pleasure.

Lamb used these lessons in building or refurbishing various branch libraries and the new Central Library which opened in 1934. In professional journals, he described libraries where the emphasis was on informality (relatively speaking, one assumes); better use of space; modern and welcoming decor and comfortable furniture; accessible shelving; and, above all, colourful displays and posters advertising books. These were all intended to give Sheffield people the sense that the library was theirs, not a remote institution.

These things perhaps sound obvious to us now, used as we generally are to bright, welcoming, informal spaces (at least as long as our public libraries remain open in these austere times). But in the 1930s this was revolutionary stuff, particularly in a city where not so long before the libraries had been dirty, unsafe and short of books. The impact can be seen in the story told by a Reading Sheffield interviewee of her mother in the 1940s: '... for some reason she decided to join the library, the big library in town ... Because my mother was quite timid and I thought at first she wouldn't be allowed in that one, you know, and then of course once she got there, there were more books than she could ... and it was free as well.'

Lamb then took things a stage further. An analysis of borrowers showed that most people wanted the same types of books – they 'read along mass lines', he said in 1930, and they were irritated when 'their' books were out on loan. 'From this it was deduced', Lamb wrote, 'that the provision of quantities of popular fiction would attract to the libraries numbers of non-readers. Small trial stocks of this type of fiction, heavily duplicated to meet mass demand, were provided, and there was an immediate response from the public.' Could this be a way,' he wondered, 'to bring in the 83% of the

population which ignored libraries, and ... lead them, if not to literature, at least to books of information?’

So copies of books by Edgar Wallace, Sapper, Ethel M Dell, Rafael Sabatini and others were purchased in fifties of each title. Standard text books in all subjects were also bought in bulk and heavily borrowed books were ‘duplicated to saturation point’. Posters were put up to attract attention and displays mixing popular fiction and related non-fiction were set up and regularly changed. So, for example, Edgar Wallace’s adventure stories might be displayed side by side with non-fiction about the countries in which the adventures were set.

The results were apparently ‘impressive ... even astonishingly good’. Issues increased by 300,000 over the year and borrowers by almost 12,000. Demand for ‘books of information’ also rose. In one branch library, a third of the local population joined up (far higher than the city average) and book issues easily outnumbered the population.

All this was backed with publicity and events. Lamb invited novelists, playwrights, critics, academics and others to give lectures. Among those who came were: Bertrand Russell, Phyllis Bentley; Ethel Mannin; Vera Brittain; Val Gielgud; St John Ervine; Desmond McCarthy; and Laurence Binyon; and reading lists were distributed for their talks. Audiences varied between 250 and 500 on average. Lamb and his colleagues also often spoke on literary or local subjects at smaller gatherings. Exhibitions and ‘book discussion circles’ – a cross between a lecture and a book group? - were set up in libraries across the city. The next generation of library borrowers was also catered for: small libraries were set up in schools; at the age of 11, schoolchildren were given special tours to learn how to use a library; and there were regular story hours, plays, story-writing competitions and talks. For example, in 1936-37, 220 stories were told 441 times to 11,547 children.

There was, inevitably, criticism of the bulk purchases of fiction. William Berwick Sayers, Croydon’s much respected chief librarian, sarcastically wrote: ‘I do not say that this is wrong. It may be that the library authorities of the future will maintain that the business of the library is to supply what the public wants to read irrespective of quality in much the same way that cinema proprietors supply films.’ J P Lamb, always formidable, replied that the ratio of fiction to total stock in Sheffield was 40 per cent and that he also stocked a ‘reasonable range of ... every standard author’.

This gave Lamb the opportunity to enter the long-running argument about the value of fiction: ‘It is futile to argue [about] popular fiction; the only possible line of cleavage is [its] total abolition ..., and none of us has the courage to face that. The novel is still growing in importance, and not all the shades Mr Sayers can summon from the library Valhalla, however frantically they gibber, can reverse

the present practice. Nor can any of us decide what is “worth while” fiction and what is rubbish in the eyes of the public. ... We are therefore left to continue ... providing a mixed grill of fiction in the belief that having attracted novel readers ... we are given the opportunity of leading them to better reading, or at least to informative books. ... There is a great deal of hypocritical nonsense written and spoken by librarians about the place of popular fiction in libraries. ... Either we admit [them] or ... exclude them rigorously, and face the wrath of a dope-ridden public ... We cannot have it both ways, although library journals are full of articles by optimists who seem to believe the contrary.’ The Liverpool librarian of the 1850s would have sympathised.

Joseph Lamb returned to the subject of fiction in libraries one further time. In his annual report for 1936-37, we find a lengthy argument for the value of fiction of all kinds. A survey in the Central Library found that about 40 per cent of the fiction borrowed was ‘classic and standard’ and the rest ‘semi-standard and popular’. Authors like Winifred Holtby, H E Bates and Walter Greenwood, all described as possessing ‘considerable literary gifts’, were included in the semi-standard or popular category, alongside the writers of action and problem stories. There was a place for all, Lamb clearly felt. ‘Prose fiction today’, he wrote, ‘provides one of the most common means by which social, political, religious and other ideas are given to the people.’ And the likes of action stories had a ‘definite, if limited, place in the library organisation. They give mental refreshment to highly intelligent and well-read library borrowers, they are “introductory readers” to [new borrowers] and ... “escape” literature to [the] mentally and physically jaded.’ ‘There is a good deal to be said’, Lamb concluded (tongue-in-cheek, one feels), ‘for a well-known lecturer’s remarks ... that “even Edgar Wallace may be ... hailed by a literary critic of 100 years hence as having possessed gifts of characterisation, humour and literary skill”’. This has yet to happen, but the broad church that was Sheffield Libraries in the 1930s seems the model preferred by many people, no matter how much the shades in the library Valhalla gibbered.

Note: The material on libraries in Sheffield is taken from the records in Sheffield Local History Library. 19<sup>th</sup> public library history is drawn from Kelly’s *A History of Public Libraries in Great Britain, 1845-1965* (London, Library Association, 197).