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Libraries Past and Present

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LIBRARIES PAST AND PRESENT.

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CLASS OF '99.

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The time has come in the history of education when the value of good books is beginning to be appreciated. Among the ancients, only the educated few were able to read and the rest of the world was limited to conversation; now only the educated few are able to converse while everybody, except the illiterate, reads. In reading, as in life itself, there are two roads to travel; the downward, which leads to destruction, and the upward, which leads to everlasting happiness and peace. Carlyle has used these strong words, "Readers are not aware of the fact, but a fact it is of daily increasing magnitude, and already of terrible importance to readers, that their first, grand necessity in reading is to be vigilantly, conscientiously select; and to know everywhere that books, like human souls, are actually divided into what we may call sheep and goats-- the latter put inexorably on the left hand of the judge; and tending, every goat of them, at all moments, whither we know, and much to be avoided, and if possible ignored by all sane creatures." Is it not our duty, then, to place good reading in the hands of our fellow men? People are coming to believe that the library should be as important a factor in education as the church or school. "The simplest figure cannot be bounded by

less than three lines; no more can the triangle of great educational work now well begun, be complete without the church as a basis, the school as one side, the library the other."

Libraries may be said to have had three periods of development the ancient, medieval, and modern. The history of the ancient period is in part legendary. The earliest literature of which there is any trustworthy knowledge appears to be that of the Chaldeans. Their books consisted of baked clay tablets on which the cuneiform characters were imprinted with a stylus. The largest collections have been found in the royal palaces of Sennacherib and Assurbanipal, and contain chiefly records of campaigns and invocations to the gods; though some works on agriculture, irrigation and astrology have been deciphered. The literature of Egypt probably ranks next to that of the Chaldeans in point of antiquity. Its earliest writings were mostly theological and were preserved on papyrus, prepared from a reed peculiar to the Nile region. Egyptian literature reached its height during the reign of Ptolemy II and comprised works on mathematics, astronomy, medicine, law and rhetoric. But intellectually the Egyptians cannot compare with the European races which rose a little later. By far the richest productions of antiquity were those of the Greeks. While Athens was the seat of culture, poets, historians and philosophers flourished,

and it is to this period that we owe the writings of Homer, Plato, Xenophon, Aeschylus and Sophocles. As books were expensive, few large collections existed, and the earliest record of a library, dedicated to the public, is that bequeathed to the Athenians by Pisistratus 527 B. C. After the conquest of Greece by the Romans, this library was transferred to Alexandria and formed the nucleus of the famous Alexandrian library which was of so great value to later students. Now that Rome had obtained the supremacy of the world the growth of public libraries was checked. The Romans were preeminently warriors, striving to enlarge their borders, and it was not until 250 B. C. that much attention was given to literature. The Latin writers were chiefly historians and orators, and the names of Cicero, Virgil and Caesar are familiar to us. Many public and private libraries existed but were of little value to students.

Of the libraries of antiquity, only a single one, the Imperial Library of Constantinople, continued in existence as late as the Middle Ages. The history of the mediæval period is one of destruction rather than construction. Many valuable collections of manuscripts were confiscated and many more were preserved only by the vigilance of scholars who hid them in the monasteries, thus keeping them from the hands of the destroyer. With the renaissance came the

revival of literature and it is from this time that we date the modern period.

In the fourteenth century, the foundations of a library, destined to become the largest in the world and now known as the Bibliothèque Nationale, were laid at Paris. At the present time, it numbers nearly two hundred thousand manuscripts and between three and four million books. In 1802 Sir Thomas Bodley opened a library of a different sort at Oxford. It contains four hundred thousand volumes and its department of Oriental manuscripts is perhaps superior to that of any other library in Europe. About a hundred years later the Imperial Library at St. Petersburg was founded and has become the third largest in the world. The British Museum dates from 1753 and contains books in every department of literature. It ranks in importance next to the Bibliothèque Nationale, which it exceeds in systematic arrangement. Among the largest libraries of the United States is the Congressional Library at Washington, numbering six hundred and eighty thousand volumes. Some of the most valuable collections of books, especially on scientific subjects, are found at our institutions of learning. No libraries, however, have achieved greater fame or been more admirably conducted than those which are supported from the public funds of some of our great cities or by private benefactions.

In the first stage of development, more attention was paid to amassing a creditable collection of books than to putting them to any practical use. Libraries were usually located in an out-of-the-way street, in a dark, damp, inconvenient building; the books were on shelves so high as to require a ladder, the unattractive ones put in the most conspicuous places; there were no catalogues, and it was impossible to gain desired information; the rooms were open only a few hours now and then and the crabbed librarian made the unfortunate seeker for knowledge "feel as unwelcome as the proverbial poor relation on a long visit." Recognizing the defects of this system, a hundred of the leading librarians took advantage of the Centennial to call a convention which discussed methods of improvement. From this humble beginning, the great library-reform movement may be said to date.

Since then rapid strides have been made until to-day the library is looked upon as a great university, in which education, begun in the public schools and colleges, may be carried to completion. Like other institutions of learning it is placed where it is most accessible to its patrons; the rooms are attractive, bright and well ventilated; the books are chosen with special reference to the demands of the community which is to be served; they are classified and arranged so that all available material on a certain subject may be

seen at a glance; the catalogues are so simple and complete as to tell instantly whether the book desired is in the building. The librarian feels that he is in the position of host and welcomes visitors of all classes and ages. He is the soul of the library, and the great need of the present day is to find experienced men and women who are willing to put their hearts and lives into the work with as distinct a consecration as a minister enters his profession. All selfish considerations of reputation, high salary and personal comfort must be put aside. The education needed is the best attainable; a college training to begin with, and the wider the additional reading and study the better, for here as in no other profession, every single item of information is of value. It is especially important to be acquainted with the languages, both ancient and modern. Familiarity with history and literature, and some knowledge of the sciences are essential. The librarian stands before the whole community as the keeper of books, as the living guide to their contents. To be successful, one needs good health, a quick, alert mind and ability to adapt oneself to all kinds of people, and especially habits of system and order. To meet the requirements of the public, schools of library economy have been established, where practical instruction is given by experienced librarians.

College bred men and women are preferred in this work for various reasons-- they are selected from the best material throughout the country; the college training has given them a wider culture and broader view with a considerable fund of information, all of which will be valuable working material; a four years course successfully completed, is the strongest guarantee of persistent purpose and mental and physical capacity for protracted intellectual effort; the training of the course enables the mind to act with a quick precision and steady application rarely found in one who has not had this thorough college drill.⁷ Success or failure of a library depends on the man or woman at its head and the demand for the good librarian is beyond the supply. This is a field where work will really tell. It is a growing field, a university education whose value has only begun to be realized and developed and whose methods are only partly formed.

Is not this profession worthy to be entered by any of our college graduates? Compare this work with that of the clergyman or teacher whose fields of usefulness are universally put in the first rank. The clergyman has before him for one or two hours a week perhaps a tenth of the people in his parish. Beyond this short time he is dependent on personal, parochial calls. He does a good work and a constant stream of beneficent influences proceeds from his daily life

and the direct efforts he puts forth. The teacher has a larger proportion of the community in the earlier years, but only for a few hours a day and only in the months when schools are in session. Just as she has become interested in a bright pupil and feels that here is an opportunity to develop a strong character, she is informed that the child is not coming to school any more but is to work in the factory or help at home. The librarian, however, may have for a congregation almost the entire community, regardless of denomination or political party. His services are continuous and in the wide-reaching influences of the library there is no vacation. If a bright child once becomes interested in reading, this interest is almost sure to continue through life. It is the privilege of the librarian to reach people who have never been in the habit of reading; to lead readers into new and more profitable fields and to create a taste for better books. This helps to build character. "Is it not true that the ideal librarian fills a pulpit where there is service every day with a large proportion of the community in the congregation? Is it not a school from which the classes graduate only with death?"